

Marriage and sexuality in twentieth-century Greece: from virginity to orgasm

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Our paper draws on research that was conducted in 2018-2019 at the University of Crete, as part of a joint project on the modern history of sexuality. Today, we explore the history of marital sexuality in twentieth-century Greece, focusing on the urban middle classes.¹ Although scholars acknowledge the central place of marriage in Greek society, as well as the inextricable link between sex and marriage even late in the twentieth century,² historians have studied more exceptional than mainstream sexual practices.³ Thus, we do not know much about the historical transformations of sex in marriage. Our research aims at filling this gap. We turn to medical, psychiatric and sexological writings, but also to marital correspondence and the communication of men and women with sexologists and mental health professionals, in an attempt to approach both ‘expert’ discourses on sex and the beliefs and experiences of individuals in the twentieth century.

I. From the nineteenth to the twentieth century: love or lust?

In the beginning of the century, in Greece, as in other countries of Europe and the USA, sex started to be considered an integral part of marriage in new ways. Intercourse came to be seen less as a marital necessity and an obligation primarily geared towards procreation and more as a source of *mutual* satisfaction, which was increasingly deemed important for a successful marriage, but also for a healthy life for men and women.⁴ While in the nineteenth century upper- and middle-class couples did not express freely their sexual desires and experiences in their correspondence,⁵ by the interwar period middle-class couples were combining the ideal of spiritual love with sensuality. The following passage, from a young man’s diary, addressed figuratively to his future wife, is quite indicative of this development, among many others that surface with minor variations in love letters of the period: “If you gave yourself to me, and I have asked for even more, it is because my beliefs on the subject

are well-known. Besides, the word ‘soul’, that we are searching to fall in love with, is something connected to the body, and not something spiritual”.⁶

The shift was part of broader trends during the first decades of the twentieth century. In literary works of women writers, for example, one could now decipher the importance of sexual experience, seen primarily as somatic pleasure.⁷ In the interwar years, the very first poems and novels with male and female homoerotic hints appeared.⁸ And, since the beginning of the twentieth century, a new generation of writers, mainly physicians and psychiatrists, took an interest in sexuality, some attempting to establish themselves as experts, following a larger European/Northern American trend at the turn of the century.⁹

The socioeconomic and cultural ground was ripe for changes in both professional discourses on sexuality and individual practices. To be sure, the hold of patriarchy, religion and conservatism remained strong, as did the unfaltering centrality of marriage in people’s lives.¹⁰ However, Greek society was also rapidly changing throughout the century, as emigration towards the US, the big influx of refugees from Asia Minor in the 1920s, and a broader trend of urbanization that intensified after World War II left their marks on mores and habits.¹¹ After World War II and the civil war (1946-1949), economic growth, consumerism and urbanization, led to changes in the lives of men and women and the relationships between them.¹² These transformations were uneven and fragmented, with significant differences along a variety of axes: urban and rural, educated and illiterate, men and women etc.

II. Marriage and sex: the ‘scientific’ point of view

Taking these changes, along with recent scientific developments, into account,¹³ new experts in sex since the early twentieth century were promoting a new concept of sexuality, emphasizing that the sexual instinct was an important determinant of human life and social relations for both men and women. For example, Nikolaos Drakoulides, a dermatologist specializing in venereal diseases, who published extensively on sexual issues, claimed in 1930: “The sexual instinct is the most powerful, but also the most important of all instincts and of all functions of the human organism”.¹⁴ It is no coincidence that Drakoulides later became interested in psychoanalysis, which made progress in post-war Greece, although still opposed by large segments of society, the Church and many psychiatrists. The psychoanalytic idea that civilization and the inhibition of the sexual instinct were responsible for

many mental disorders, mainly neuroses, influenced significantly expert attitudes towards marriage and sex.¹⁵

Changes were mostly manifested in the representations of female sexuality. Virginity remained up to the 1970s a prerequisite for marriage and a major source of anxiety for women, their paternal family and husbands. Women's letters to experts manifest their despair when their virginity was lost — which also shows that premarital sexual relations were actually quite common. However, medical texts and sexology treatises focused less on the moral aspects of virginity and more on its anatomical characteristics, and stressed that prolonged abstinence could cause sexual dysfunctions, namely 'impotence' for men and 'frigidity' for women.¹⁶ The solution was not premarital sex, but earlier marriage and sex education to make sure husbands and wives could enjoy sex.

Frigidity was another new concept. Although sexual passivity was perceived as normal for women up to the 1970s, 'frigidity' was constructed as a pathology, which along with 'impotence', was seen as a threat to a successful marriage. Sex experts claimed that the interest in 'frigidity' was itself a sign of shifting mentalities, since, as an anonymous psychoanalyst put it in 1951, "50 years ago it was considered almost natural and 'moral' for women not to participate too actively in sexual intercourse".¹⁷ Sexual pleasure in marriage, then, also became a prominent new issue for post-war sexologists. Irrespectively of their overall progressive or conservative attitude toward sexual matters, they all came to concede that mutual sexual pleasure was an important factor among others for the health, stability, well-being and happiness of the married couple. Some sexologists went even further, suggesting that "intercourse does not *always aim at procreation [...], but at love, at the reinforcement of pleasure and at the psychic and bodily connection of the couple, for the embellishment of married life.*"¹⁸ Letters sent to sex experts in the 1960s and 1970s highlight that by 1980 these scientific views and knowledge on sexuality had become common and had reached even remote areas.

III. Marital sexuality in 'psy' practice

The growing concern about marital sexuality, by both experts and laypersons, was also manifested in the ways that 'psy' professionals, that is psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts, together with their clients were discussing the latter's marital problems. In the Centre for Mental Health of Thessaloniki, a private

psychiatric service, founded in 1956, husbands and wives increasingly discussed sex with the male psychiatrist and the female social workers, who drew on psychoanalysis to interpret and handle their clients' grievances.

Husbands voiced mainly two types of complaints: they were uncertain of their wives' virginity and fidelity and were not sexually satisfied. Doubts about the wife's chastity¹⁹ reflected sex stereotypes, which valued women's purity and made men feel threatened by the sexuality of their wives. In the 1970s, men's insistence on virginity became less common, but fidelity persisted as a central concern of men, although some husbands became more willing to accept the paranoid nature of their jealousy and to put themselves to therapy.²⁰ In addition, often husbands complained about not having (enough) sex with their wives.²¹ Even 34-year-old Alex, who was very satisfied with his marriage and loved his wife, told the social worker in 1977 that his wife objected his "need to make love every day", because she was afraid of another pregnancy. Women's physical and mental ailments, as well as their desire to have no more children through abstinence, the safest and most common contraception method of the time, was not always accepted by husbands who longed for sexual satisfaction, yet without caring for contraception.²²

While married women with no sexual interest appeared repeatedly throughout the period, since the late 1960s, there also appeared married women who were eager to improve their sex life, asking for the Centre's help. Their problems included absence of sexual satisfaction, but also fear, disgust, dullness and guilt towards sex.²³ Women attributed these problems to their strict upbringing and lack of sexual education, but also to their uncaring or 'old-fashioned' husbands.²⁴ Increasingly in the 1970s wives were speaking more about their sex lives and were having more demands. 44-year-old Hara told the psychiatric social worker in 1974 that she had never been attracted to her husband and that he was never tender to her, not even during sex, twice a year: "he was acting completely mechanically, without caring about her satisfaction".²⁵ They presented sexual dissatisfaction as an important aspect of their marital disappointments. However, they continued to view sexual pleasure as a form and result of psychic contact, a way to 'feel' themselves and their husbands.²⁶

Professionals, both male psychiatrists and female social workers, generally acknowledged the importance of sexual difficulties in marriage, including female frigidity, but placed them in the frame of mental health issues, such as depression and neurosis.²⁷ Thus, they proposed a combination of medication, counselling and

psychotherapy to alleviate mental and bodily symptoms and enhance the couple's communication, advising spouses to compromise more and be accepting of each other. Therefore, mental health professionals, while addressing the sexual needs and distress of the spouses and considering mutual sexual satisfaction as a precondition for a successful marriage, viewed marital stability as a central aim of their intervention. On the other hand, they seemed to understand why some women had extramarital affairs. At a time when the still powerful double standard brought shame and social outcry to adulterous women much more than to men, mental health experts construed female infidelity as a response to "serious marital problems" and unsatisfied "needs of sex or tenderness".²⁸

Conclusions

Throughout the century marriage continued to be a central goal in people's lives, while experts persisted in considering marital sexuality, and especially sexuality within a stable and harmonious marriage, as the most 'healthy' and 'normal' form of sexual practice. However, marital aspirations of men and women and professional perceptions of marital sexuality underwent dramatic changes, sometimes in diverging ways. As times and mores were changing, public as well as private discourses increasingly saw sexuality as an integral part of personality, health and marriage. This brought forward its somatic aspect and allowed middle-class couples to start instilling more sensuality into conjugal love, as their love letters and their discussions/communication with experts testify. Marriage became more sexualized, leaving behind the nineteenth-century love/lust divide.

Within this context, women's sexual pleasure was gradually recognized as a precondition for a successful marital relationship, not only by physicians, sexologists and other experts, but also by married women themselves, yet not necessarily by their husbands. Female chastity did not wholly disappear from professionals, husbands' or wives' concerns. However, it gradually lost its primacy, as sexual intimacy and pleasure were becoming more widely accepted as preconditions of a healthy life and a happy marriage for both men and women.

All in all, we can detect a double transition in respect to the history of marital sexuality in twentieth-century Greece. On the one hand, while women's passivity in sex and their late 'sexual awakening' via male initiative and vigour were viewed throughout the century as part of their physiology,²⁹ by the 1970s these same features

were transformed into a medical and psychological problem to be addressed in order to save marriage. On the other hand, both scientific and lay perceptions of marital sexuality moved from the focus on male abstinence and female virginity to anxieties over the quality of marital sex, and especially toward married women's own quest for their orgasm.

¹ We use here the term 'middle classes' in a loose sense that includes the educated, more or less well off, professional urban dwellers. In the course of the twentieth century they diversify greatly.

² For the most part of the twentieth century, Greece had the lowest celibacy rates in Europe. Evthimios Papataxiarchis, "Shaping Modern Times in the Greek Family: A Comparative View of Gender and Kinship Transformations after 1974", in A. Dially and N. Maroniti (eds), *State, Society and Economy* (Athens: Metaichmio Publications, 2012), 230.

³ This is a general international trend, in the historiography of sexuality. See Victoria Harris, "Sex on the Margins: New Directions in the Historiography of Sexuality and Gender", *The Historical Journal* 54/4 (2010), 1086. For example, Pothiti Hantzaroula, "Public Discourses on Sexuality and Narratives of Sexual Violence of Domestic Servants in Greece (1880–1950)", *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 18/2 (2008), 283–310; Kostas Yannakopoulos, "Cultural Meanings of Loneliness: Kinship, Sexuality and (Homo)Sexual Identity in Contemporary Greece", *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 18/2 (2008), 265–282; Nikos Papadogiannis, *Militant around the clock? Youth Politics, Leisure and Sexuality in post-dictatorship Greece, 1974–1981*, Berghahn Books 2015.

⁴ Rachel Mesch, "Housewife or Harlot?: Sex and the Married Woman in Nineteenth-Century France", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18/1 (2009), 65–83; Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe. A Twentieth-Century History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011; Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (Penguin, 2006); George Robb, 'Marriage and Reproduction', in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. H. G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook, Palgrave Advances (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2006), 87–108; Chris Waters, 'Sexology', in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. H. G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook, Palgrave Advances (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2006), 41–63; Kate Fisher, 'Marriage and Companionate Ideals Since 1750', in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body* (London-New York: Routledge, 2013), 328–347. Marriage manuals and counselling centres were expanding in Europe and the USA, dispersing advice on sex technique and the relief of female frigidity.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of conjugal correspondences, and the spirituality of the emotion of romantic love in nineteenth-century Greece, see Dimitra Vassiliadou, *The Tropic of Writing: Family Ties and Emotions in Modern Greece, 1850–1930* (Athens: Gutenberg, 2018), 83–108.

⁶ Stefanos Doukas Diary, ELIA, *Digeni-Doukas Family Archive*, Athens, 15.10.1936.

⁷ Maria Nikolopoulou, "Female Sexuality and Writing in Literature and Art Journals (1900–1920)", http://www.eens.org/?page_id=1582, accessed 17.8.2019.

⁸ Dimitris Papanikolaou, "Those people made like me": *Queer Cavafy and the Poetics of Sexuality*, Patakis, Athens, 2014, 91–158; Dora Rozeti, *Her Lover*, edited by Christina Dounia, Metaichmio Publications, Athens, 2005.

⁹ Waters 2006, 43–50.

¹⁰ Efi Avdela, "'Corrupting and Uncontrollable Activities': Moral Panic about Youth in Post-Civil-War Greece", *Journal of Contemporary History* 43/1 (January 2008): 25–44. Idem, "Youth 'in moral danger': (re)conceptualizing delinquency in post-Civil-War Greece", *Social History* 42/1 (2017): 73–93.

¹¹ Thomas Gallant, *Modern Greece* (London: Arnold, 2001), 99, 145–150, 188–191.

¹² Women gradually gained access to political rights and a larger participation in professional life Greek women acquired political rights in 1952. See Dimitra Samiou, *Ta πολιτικά δικαιώματα των Ελληνίδων, 1864–1952* [Greek Women's Political Rights, 1864–1952] (Athens: Sakkoulas, 2013).

¹³ V. Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research*, New York: Basic Books, 1994, p. 124–132.

- ¹⁴ N. Drakoulides, *Η σεξουαλική διαπαιδαγώγησις* [Sexual Education] (Athens: Kontomaris, 1930), 3-4.
- ¹⁵ F. Skouras, *Σύγχρονος Ψυχιατρική* [Contemporary Psychiatry] (Athens: Karavias, 1952), 7-8, 57; D. Kouretas, 'Η Ψυχική Υγιεινή Στην Καθημερινή Ζωή' [Mental Hygiene in Everyday Life], *Κοινωνική Πρόνοια* 10 (1958): ανάτυπο.
- ¹⁶ Frigidity came to replace earlier notions with a more scientific hue, like 'anaphrodisia', used as late as the mid-twentieth century. *Τα αφροδίσια πάθη (Πρακτικά οδηγία και συμβουλαί - Προφυλάξεις και θεραπείαι)* [Venereal Diseases (Practical Instructions and Advice – Precautions and Therapies)] (Athens: Papadimitriou Bros, 1928), 28.
- ¹⁷ "The 'Frigid' Woman", *Η γυναίκα και το σπίτι* [Woman and Home], 44, 1951: 36.
- ¹⁸ G. Zouraris, *Σεξουαλική ζωή: Αννανισμός, αποχή, εγκράτεια, ακολασία και η εξασθένησις της ορμής* [Sexual Life: Onanism, Abstinence, Chastity, Debauchery and Weakening of Sexual Drive], 6th edition (Athens: Melissa, n.d.), 238.
- ¹⁹ For example, 25-year old Vangelis, who wanted to become a priest, had an arranged marriage but soon broke it, because, as he said to the social worker in 1968, "in his opinion his wife had not been 'virgin'". Although he had a doctor certify her virginity, he still was not convinced that she was 'pure'. Psychiatric Counselling Department of Thessaloniki (PCD), 31.
- ²⁰ PCD, 1174.
- ²¹ PCD, 1272.
- ²² Indeed, women who were not interested in sex commonly attributed their lack of sexual appetite to physical and mental troubles, such as headaches, fatigue, and stress, or to the serious difficulties with indifferent, unstable and violent husbands. These women were mainly concerned about how to alleviate their daily problems, handle difficult situations at home (PCD, 11) and not to have more children (PCD, 173).
- ²³ PCD, 114, 222, 1061, 1409, 1411.
- ²⁴ PCD, 222; PCD, 1061. In the course of the 1970s more women who talked about sexual dissatisfaction, complained about being in a submitted position. PCD, 1372.
- ²⁵ PCD, 1061.
- ²⁶ Only a small number of the Centre's female clients, and only at the end of the 1970s, viewed sex as the core of their troubles (PCD, 222).
- ²⁷ E. Lymperakis, 'Συζυγικά προβλήματα και νευρώσεις' [Marital problems and neuroses], 1964, Speeches for broad audiences, folder Office of volunteers, educational programme, 1958-1965, archive of the Centre for Mental Health and Research of Thessaloniki.
- ²⁸ PCD, 370. It is telling that far less women complained about their husbands' affairs than vice versa. Indeed, through their new sexual experiences, some women realized that they were not as sexually satisfied by their husbands as they previously thought. PCD, 1372.
- ²⁹ In Europe and the USA, the double standard was challenged only in the 1970s, when in many Western societies sex was becoming an autonomous activity of pleasure and expression, disentangled from marriage and reproduction, and women who expressed their sexuality in public and outside marriage became more socially acceptable. Cas Wouters, 'Balancing Sex and Love since the 1960s Sexual Revolution', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 1998, 187-214. Carlfred B. Broderick and Sandra S. Schrader, 'The History of Professional Marriage and Family Therapy', in *Handbook of Family Therapy*, ed. Alan S. Gurman and David P. Kniskern (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1981), 5-31.