

Sexual Interactions

The Social Construction of Atypical Sexual Behaviors

**Andreas G. Philaretou, Constantinos
N. Phellas & Stavros S. Karayanni**

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Table of Contents

Copyright Page	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Figures & Tables	xi
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgements	xvii
Introduction	xix
Chapter 1 The Social Construction of Homosexuality in Greek Cypriot Culture	1
Introduction	1
Sexuality in the Greek Cypriot Culture.....	3
Honor and Shame	5
The Greek Cypriot “Homosexual”	8
Language and Sexual Relations	10
The Passive Homosexual Man	11
Models of Greek Cypriot Male Homosexuality...	13
A: Masculine “Hetero”	14
B: Masculine “Hetero”-Feminine “Homo”	16
C: Masculine “Homo”-Feminine “Homo”	17

D: Masculine Gay	18
The Role of the Family	19
The Role of the Church.....	20
Conclusion	23
Greek Cypriot Homosexual Identity Formation ..	24

Chapter 2 Ethnicity and Gay Identity: A Qualitative Investigation of Anglo Cypriot Gay Men ...27

Introduction.....	27
Sexuality in Cypriot Culture	30
The Greek Cypriot Macho Man.....	32
Methodology	36
Participant Selection	36
The Interview Protocol.....	37
Data Analysis and Results.....	37
Demographic Information.....	39
Negotiation of Two Worlds	40
Sexual Stigma	41
Counterfeit Roles	42
Heterosexual Courting/Marriage.....	42
“Keeping Mum”	43
Disavowal.....	43

Covering.....	44
Remoteness	44
Implications for Family Relationships.....	44
Disclosure to the Family	45
Self-Definition of Identity.....	47
Sexual Identities.....	48
Greek Cypriot Cultural Identities.....	48
Combining Sexual and Cultural Identities	49
Choice of Community	50
Gay Community.....	50
Greek Cypriot Community.....	51
Conclusion	53

Chapter 3 Aphrodite’s Men: Nationalism, Masculinity, and Sexual Identity in the Republic of Cyprus59

Manhood, Hellenic Ideals, and Colonialism.....	59
Imperial Sex and the Council of Europe.....	62
Aphrodite and Colonial Sexuality	64
Tall Statues, Deep Closets	67
Sexuality and Turkish Stereotypes.....	72
Military Service and the Greek Cypriot Rectum.....	76

Religious Impression and Colonial Oppression.....	79
Capturing the Idea of Freedom	83
Conclusion	85

**Chapter 4 The Odyssey of Sexual Addiction:
Intrapersonal Perspectives89**

Introduction.....	89
Sexual Addiction.....	90
Methodology	92
Personifications of Sexual Addiction.....	94
Resource Investment	95
Sexual Manipulation	96
Sexual Thoughts, Desires, and Fantasies	97
Anger and Frustration	99
Conclusion and Discussion	99
The Role of the Sexual Crucible	100
Reconstructing Healthy Relationships	102

**Chapter 5 Getting Paid Getting Laid: Perspectives on
Sex Work and Cabaret Patronage103**

Introduction.....	103
The Greek Cypriot Male Cabaret Patron	103
The Eastern European Sex Worker	105

Theoretical Background.....	106
Sexuality and Economic Exchange.....	107
Labeling Theory.....	109
Research Design.....	110
The Cabaret of the Decades Past.....	113
The Present Day Cabaret.....	117
Greek Cypriot Male Cabaret Patronage.....	118
The Sex Trade industry.....	122
The Sex Work Traffickers.....	124
The Eastern European Sex Trade.....	125
The Case of a Donor Country: Ukraine.....	126
The Case of a Host Country: Greece.....	126
Interviews with Eastern European Sex Workers	128
Effects of Sex Trafficking.....	138
Conclusion.....	140
Discussion.....	140
Creating General Awareness.....	141
Raising Children Androgynously.....	142
Chapter 6 The Cybersex Labyrinth: Lost in High Tech Pornographic Cyberspace.....	145

The Present Study	145
Research Design and Methods.....	146
The Technological Aspects of Cybersex	146
Direct vs. Indirect Experience.....	147
Online Behavior	149
Experiential Ecommerce	150
Interactivity Level	151
User Control.....	152
Vividness.....	155
Customization	156
Personalization.....	156
Telepresence.....	157
Online Behavior and Sexual Experience.....	159
User Online Experience	160
Affective Internet Experience	161
Cognitive Internet Experience	161
Physical Experience	162
Relational Experience	162
The Flow Experience	163
User Internet Experience and Flow.....	167
The Social Psychological Aspects of Cybersex.....	167
Cybesexual Anxiety	167
Cybersex User Categories	169

Cybersex Addiction.....	170
Cybersex Accounts	173
Findings and Discussion	178
Conclusion	182
References	185
About the Authors.....	213

List of Figures & Tables

1. Figure 1. Four models of user-to-system interactivity
2. Figure 2. The four realms of Cybersex experience.
3. Table 1. Comparison of low and high interactivity levels.
4. Table 2. Interactivity user control continuum and classification.
5. Table 3. Flow experience characteristics.

Preface

Human sexual interactions may be defined as the multitude of ways by which we come to experience and express ourselves as sexual beings. Our self-awareness as males or females and our channeling of our sexual desires, fantasies, expectations, and actions towards animate or inanimate sexual stimuli gives rise to the social construction of our sexuality. Sexual interactions are an indispensable part of our self-concept, -image, and -esteem and lead to the generation of a powerful motivating force propelling us through the not-so-pleasant and at times even painful aspects of everyday life. It is important that such force be reckoned with in constructive ways if we are to experience joy and exhilaration and avoid unhappiness and even destructive practices.

Sexual interactions constitute a much contested and complex state of intrapersonal and interpersonal affairs replete with compulsions, anxieties, shame, and embarrassment. That's because unlike any other being in the animal kingdom, humans engage in sex not so much for reproductive purposes but mostly for the sake of personal enjoyment and physiological, emotional, and psychological satisfaction.

We all carry in our minds personalized images of the atypical (deviant) and the atypical individual (deviant person). To some, deviants are individuals who pose a direct threat to social functioning and fall under a more "hard core" categorization, such as criminals and terrorists, while to others the milder atypical categorization is used to include more "soft core" elements, such as "homosexuals," sex addicts, sex workers, and consumers of pornography. Regarding the etiology of atypical variations, we all claim to know the truth, or part of the truth, mainly revolving around the questions as to why "those" people behave "this or that" way. Explanations oftentimes include family dysfunction,

child abuse, genetic abnormalities, or sociocultural factors, especially poverty. Regardless of what kinds of behavior we consider atypical or what factors we ascribe to it, it is generally recognized that the atypical and the atypical person are socially constructed entities emerging out of a continuous process of interaction. The central question then becomes: How and why do acts become defined as atypical? This entails a historico-sociocultural analysis of those legislative and political processes that affect the evolution, modification, and enforcement of atypical categories. Of primary importance is, therefore, not so much the nature of the atypical category—be it a sexual or other violation of a norm of “acceptability”—but those who possess the power and resources not only to define what is atypical but also to apply the atypical label to a violator and make it stick.

Sexual interactions are socially constructed within a historical, social, and cultural milieu and are continually defined and redefined accordingly depending on the surrounding economic, political, moral, and religious social forces. Although the human capacity for sexual expression spans across a wide range of variations and permutations, it, nonetheless, is seriously confined, limited, and restricted to but a few “acceptable” forms. “Sexual acceptability” Western style is, in turn, determined by the prevailing white heterosexual standards of patriarchy and perpetrated through childhood masculine socialization and adolescent/adult machismo practices. The “sexual acceptability” standard of “missionary style” masculine heterosexuality becomes the yardstick against which all remaining sexual variations and interactions are compared with any deviations directly or indirectly punished by the visible and invisible agents of social control. This, then, becomes the starting point for the generation of sexual anxiety, addiction, and abuse with dire consequences in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural realm.

In this book, we, the authors, provide exemplifications of the negative consequences of the “sexual

acceptability” ethic in terms of ethnic “homosexual” stigmatized identities, relational and Cybersexual addiction, and sexual-economic exchange.

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Introduction

In chapter 1, Phellas explores some of the issues and raises a number of questions regarding the development and acceptance of male Greek Cypriot (GC) “homosexual” identity. Throughout his writings and provocative quotes, he provides invaluable insight into the intricacies and workings of the processual aspects of an ethnic gay identity. As the author notes, although “homosexual” behaviour is widely exhibited among GC men, gay identification is rarely enacted or aspired to amongst them.

The major issues that Phellas raises include: (a) exploring the social construction of the GC dialect as it relates to the sociocultural dimensions of homosexuality, (b) defining the multiplicity and permeability of the various boundaries drawn around differing definitions and forms of the “homosexual” experience, (c) inquiring into the nature of the circumstances and conditions under which it is socioculturally permissible for GC gay men to develop and show their intimacies, and (d) examining how GC homosexualities are linked to both the social construction of human sexual relations and the prevalent gender system.

Phellas concludes that Greek Cypriot (GC) gay men operate under the auspices of a patriarchal heterosexual machismo system defined by the dialectic of: women’s virtue/emancipation vs. subordination, collectivist/familial vs. individualistic, honour vs. shame, and secularity vs. religiosity. The defining principles of such dialecticism become of outmost importance in the understanding of the coming out process of GC gay men. The burden of possessing such a powerful secret takes a heavy toll on the intrapersonal well being and interpersonal relations of such men. For, upon such revelation, there will not only be mere disappointment for the son’s/best friend’s homosexuality, but more importantly, considerable risk that the

family/significant others will be considerably shamed and dishonoured.

In chapter 2, Phellas examines some of the key cultural concepts and relevant historical factors that come to shape the development of Anglo-Greek Cypriot gay identity. Accounts of sexual identity experiences provided by second generation Greek Cypriot (GC) and Turkish Cypriot gay men living in London are examined in light of this analysis to explore how these men negotiate the evolution of an Anglo GC gay identity. Twenty-eight self-identified second generation GC and Turkish Cypriot gay men living in London were recruited through various means, such as advertising in the gay press, writing to community service groups, gay groups, and professional organizations, as well as through “snowballing.” In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with these men and data were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Interviewee personal accounts demonstrate that their sexual identity: (a) does not always assume a primary role in their lives, (b) is dynamic in nature depending upon place and time, and (c) may be secondary to other identities as a viable source of their self-esteem. Most men indicated that the translation of their sexual desires and behaviors into a “political statement” supporting the social construction of a gay identity is difficult to internalize and enact due to being strongly resisted from the mainstream sociocultural environment. Instead, for most Anglo Greek and Turkish Cypriot gay men, a safer route to traverse is to socially construct their identity in terms of their relationships with their families, significant others, and occupational/community peers.

Research findings facilitate understanding of the complexity, contextual totality, and fluidity of Anglo Greek and Turkish Cypriot gay sexual and cultural identities, in addition to reinforcing the notion that they are also multiple, contested, and conflictual.

In chapter 3, Stavros Karayanni examines the intercrossings of gender, sexuality, and national politics by focusing on how masculinity has postured in Cyprus' postcolonial states (and statues) and how this posturing is reflected in the everyday sexual practices of Greek Cypriots (GCs). Throughout the chapter, the author highlights critical connections between hero worship in Cyprus, the legacy of British sexuality laws, and how both came to determine the masculine heterosexual signature of the nation as exemplified in an array of machismo practices.

Karayannis discusses sexual desire in terms of body memory and explores how sexual pleasure is imagined, generated, and sought after in an oppressive and damaging regime whereby the prevailing masculine ethos exists as a harsh and indifferent monarch sustained by generations of consenting Cypriots. Furthermore, as he points out, the GC Republic's anxious but insistent heterosexual posturing has obliterated the rights of sexual minorities and deferred necessary re-theorizations of nation, citizenship, sexuality, and identity. At times when these rights could not be overlooked, the author contends that they were, instead, completely trivialized and mocked with admonitions of self-righteousness.

In chapter 4, Philaretou utilizes explicit autoethnographic analysis to reflect the oppressive gender and sexual narratives that are structured in childhood socialization and activated in adult life in the form of codependent sexually addictive relationships. Autoethnographic case study methodologies constitute a well-established variant in the qualitative ethnographic research tradition whereby the researcher gains contextually rich insider experiential knowledge through his/her close association with the subject under study. This project utilized such methodology to assist in mapping out the developmental trajectory and social psychological dynamics of male sexual addiction in a co-dependent monogamous heterosexual relationship.

As the author contends, men who have been considerably and irreversibly influenced by patriarchal machismo ethic ideologies attempt to prove their masculine worth through sex. This invariably renders them susceptible to develop a compulsion/addiction towards such practices as prostitution, pornography, extramarital/casual sex, and co-dependent sexual relationships. Men's emotional and sexual emancipation can be brought about through reconstruction at both the micro social psychological and macro sociological levels. Disputing irrational machismo gender and sexual beliefs and catalyzing/amplifying the relational partners' emotional potentialities in a healthy sexual crucible constitute important strategic techniques to facilitate the male addicts' recovery from the mechanistic and anxiety evoking states of sexual addiction. Teaching male partners how to attain valuable interpersonal intimacy and sustain a monogamous committed relationship enables them to enjoy higher levels of psychological well being through the abandoning of their destructive sexually addictive practices.

The importance of this investigation lies in its analysis of the micro social-psychological origins and characteristics of sexual addiction. Through such an analysis, Philaretou attempts to provide valuable insight concerning its multifaceted nature thereby enabling both academic and lay audiences to learn more about this somewhat neglected and controversial topic. This investigation also constitutes a good example of the use of case study methodologies for generating social scientific knowledge.

In chapter 5, Philaretou provides an in-depth investigation of Eastern European (EE) female sex work in Greek-Cypriot (GC) cabarets. The author delves into the macro environmental contexts and micro intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that have contributed to the historical evolution of the cabaret sex industry in the Greek Cypriot Republic of Cyprus. Such industry has evolved from a place of family entertainment to one of economic and sexual exploitation of GC male cabaret patrons and EE sex workers

respectively. Various themes are explored, such as post Soviet economic deprivation, patriarchal machismo socialization, male sexual anxiety, and sexual addiction.

Female sexuality has been exploited in sexualized work environments, such as strip clubs, cabarets, and brothels, for centuries. Essentialist machismo practices, effectuated by patriarchal gender role socialization, help construct a mechanistic and limiting male sexual ethos that exploits female sexuality in such environments. A critical site for exploring the intercrossing of sexual and economic differentials is the cabaret where the ultimate patriarchal gender dynamics are acted out; whereby males and females utilize their financial assets and sexual appeal, respectively, to benefit and exploit each other.

In chapter 6, Philaretou explores the effects of Internet technology on human sexuality by delineating the intricacies and effects of such technology on individual and relational well being using ethnographic methodology.

In the past decade, the widespread and relatively inexpensive influx of high speed Internet technology has rendered the Cybersex pornographic industry a considerably profitable e-commerce business. Although most individuals utilize the Internet for occupational, educational, recreational, and shopping purposes, a sizable male minority exists who invest an inordinate amount of their time, money, and energy in the pursuit of Cybersex experiences with negative intrapersonal and interpersonal ramifications. Such men, victims of patriarchal sociocultural arrangements, are induced with exaggerated notions of a hypersexual masculinity, which negatively affects their sexual, psychological, and emotional lives. Abiding by the faulty ideational standards of limiting masculine scripts discourages such “male victims of patriarchy” from effective self-disclosure and emotional connectedness with their partners thus exacerbating inadequacies in the intimacy domain with possible manifestations in terms of male sexual anxiety and Cybersex addiction.

Chapter 1 The Social Construction of Homosexuality in Greek Cypriot Culture

Introduction

Cyprus has been described by anthropologists as a society largely based on kinship ties where marriage and family is considered to be the most important institution. Insofar as marriage leads to the reproduction of kinship—and kinship constitutes a fundamental principle and a powerful idiom of action—the latter socially constructs a complex of “honour and shame” values whereby all actions are oriented to prestige (Pitt-Rivers, 1965). Moreover, kinship embraces spheres of activity outside marriage and in structural-functionalist terms, it is the basis of the institutional domains of economics, politics, and religion (Loizos, & Papataxiarchis, 1991).

No analysis, however, of how Greek Cypriot men behave and operate would be complete without some examination of the Greek Cypriot cultural values. An appreciation is required of how Greek Cypriot men and women perceive the world, and how they regard their role within it. One needs to examine the meanings attached to homosexual behaviours so as to show the social organisation of sexual orientation in Greek Cypriot society. As Gagnon and Simon (1987) argue, although homosexual behaviours may well be universally observed, the meanings ascribed to them remain culturally specific. What meaning is attached to which behaviour highlights the ways societies multiple views of sexuality. It would be inaccurate to say that sexuality is shaped or defined through the idea of a “unitary society.” On the contrary, society is regarded as a fragmented kaleidoscope made up of diverse sets of relationships, institutions, and practices that in some cases brighten or darken the lives of the individuals within it (Foucault, 1979; Weeks, 1986).