
A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspective on Greek-American Gender Arrangements

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The language had three genders, it was true,
but only one that mattered.

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IN THIS PAPER¹ I SHALL FIRST DISCUSS PSYCHOLOGICAL MATERIAL regarding gender and then focus on issues regarding Greek ethnicity and gender, and finally, I will address some specific issues around the psychology of a particular type of Greek-American male. I do not expect to treat the subjects exhaustively, but I hope to shed new light on certain areas. I would like to approximate what Odysseus Elytis feels to be the poet's task—to provide drops of light into the darkness.

In any thoughtful discussion about Greek Americans and gender arrangements, we must begin with which Greek men and Greek women we are talking about. First-generation Greek immigrants? Gays and lesbians? Greek-American women trying to pair with American men? American women trying to pair with Greek men? Greek fathers and their American daughters? Levels of Greekness surely exist on a continuum, as do gender arrangements. Researchers in the field of Greek American Studies have a very hard time defining who is Greek American. It is easier defining who is Greek or who is American. Right? Wrong! Greeks in Greece or Americans in America also have considerable difficulty in defining themselves, their ethnicity, and their culture. And so is the case for gender. Do we refer to someone as a man if he has XY chromosomes? Is that enough? What if he has the chromosomes, but is bisexual? Obviously, these are not simple behavioral, biological, or social science questions. The reader may need

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meeting of the Greek-American Woman's Network and the Greek-American Behavioral Sciences Institute, New York City, December 4, 1992.

to judge the material that follows in accordance with her or his own definition of who is a Greek American? Various readings of the term "Greek American" can be quite valid and applicable to the discussion that follows.

To examine gender arrangements, we begin with a summary of the current psychological knowledge about what Carol Travis calls, "The mismeasure of woman." Travis² argues that there is a paradox of gender resulting from the continuing use of the male norm. Further, she believes that we understand gender differences as primarily coming from biology, personality, and the intrapsychic (which appear to be permanent), rather than life experiences, resources, and power (which change culturally and historically). I agree completely with the second part of her view. Life experiences, resources, and power are the primary source of gender differences, but I would modify her view that personality and the intrapsychic are permanent, inborn features, and secondary. Personality (and intrapsychic is included in my view of personality) is for the most part not a result of unfolding development but a result of parental character, which in turn is determined by the social and economic conditions of the culture. Thus, in my view, and the view of an increasing number of behavioral scientists, personality is not fixed at birth and is quite subject to change depending on the social context. Biology is given a secondary role in this viewpoint when studying gender differences.

The problem when we think about these issues is not the study of differences, of course people and the sexes differ. The problem is when one group is considered the norm with the others differing from it, thereby failing to measure up to the ideal, superior, dominant standards. The problem is further compounded when the dominant group uses the language of difference to justify its social position. Whenever someone tells you that they have measured differences between men and women, always ask, "Who is doing the measuring, and for what purpose?"

In psychology and other fields, there have typically been three approaches to gender differences. They share an assumption that the male is the human norm, and they place the female in various locations in orbit around him. The three approaches are: 1) Women are opposite and deficient; 2) Women are opposite and superior; and 3) Women are the same as men. With regard to the first approach to gender differences (women are opposite and deficient), let me quickly review some well-

² C. Travis, "The Mismeasure of Woman: Paradoxes and Perspectives in the Study of Gender," *Psychological Perspectives on Human Diversity in America*. Ed. J. D. Goodchilds (Washington, D.C., 1991), pp. 87-136. I follow Travis' treatment of gender arrangements quite closely at several points in this section.

supported and accepted research findings.

- Women have lower self-esteem than men.
- Women do not value their efforts as much as men do, even when they are doing the same work.
- Women are more likely than men to say they are "hurt" than to admit they are "angry."
- Women have more difficulty than men in developing a "separate sense of self."

Travis, like other feminist psychologists, finds that these are things to be concerned about. Most of us value high self-esteem, self-confidence, expression of true feelings, etc., but the problem with these findings is that they offer explanations in relation to the male norm. For example, instead of concluding that, "Women have lower self-esteem than men do," the same study could have concluded that "Men are more conceited than women." Instead of concluding that, "Women do not value their efforts as much as men do, even when they are doing the same work," the same study could have concluded that "Men over-value the work they do, and are not as realistic and modest as women in assessing their abilities." Instead of concluding that, "Women are more likely than men to say they are 'hurt' than to admit they are 'angry,'" they could have concluded that "Men are more likely than women to accuse and attack others when they are unhappy, instead of stating that they feel hurt and inviting sympathy." And finally, instead of concluding that "Women have more difficulty than men in developing a 'separate sense of self,'" they could have concluded that "Men have more difficulty than women in forming and maintaining attachments."

When the problems are stated this way the biased tone is apparent. But the reverse, seeing female behavior as problematic, is so ingrained that it feels normal—until the assumption is questioned. The other approaches, "Women are opposite and superior" and "Women are the same as men," are in my estimation so far removed from the experience of the Greek-American community (I have never read or experienced anything that indicates that Greek Americans feel and/or think that women are better or that there are no differences) that I will not discuss them but only to say that they are also flawed.

Given this background of the male norm, let us turn to the issue of sex roles and relationships in the Greek-American family. I do not have to elaborate on the profound emphasis on the male norm in the Greek-American community. The ethnic roots for this can be traced

back to the old country. According to Eva Topping,³ patriarchal prejudice and pride are institutionalized in Greece and are responsible for women's low status. Just in case you believe, "Well, that was the old country and this is not relevant to Greek Americans," let me offer two recent examples, one from the pages of the "newspaper of record" and one straight from my class on the Greek-American Community at the Center for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at Queens College.

On November 30, 1992, an article appeared in *The New York Times*⁴ about George Stephanopoulos. Mr. Stephanopoulos was then the communications advisor to President-elect Clinton. His face was often seen on television and his name frequently referred to in news reports. The article claimed that to the entire Greek-American population in Washington (numbering about 20,000) Stephanopoulos was the toast of the town. To them, Stephanopoulos was a God-send, given the uncharismatic Dukakis and Tsongas. The community was very proud of him. The article went on to say that,

John Arvanitis, the owner of The Lunch Box cafeteria downtown, even clipped a photo of Mr. Stephanopoulos from People magazine and hung it in his house. "He's an excellent role model for my 16-year-old son," he said. "And if my daughter were a little older, I wouldn't mind if George Stephanopoulos came by to ask for her. I'd throw a traditional Greek wedding for George."

As is obvious to the reader, this attitude reeks of traditional gender stereotyping. Why could not Stephanopoulos be a role model for the daughter? What if the owner's son were gay, would the owner throw a traditional Greek wedding then? Would the owner, Mr. Arvanitis, commit suicide? Would he blame and beat his wife for producing such a son?

My second example concerns a class on the Greek-American community I was teaching in the fall of 1992 at the Center for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at Queens College of the City University of New York. The class included many bright and talented young adults of Greek background. We were discussing some of the very same issues being addressed in this paper, which makes the example even more ironic. I teach in an informal manner and the seating arrangements are somewhat like a semicircle. I do not sit in front of a desk, but in a chair facing the students who are around me, sometimes two and three

³ E. Topping, "Patriarchal Prejudice and Pride in Greek Christianity—Some Notes on Origins," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 1 (1983), 7-18.

⁴ "To Greek Americans, Clinton May Just Be No. 2," *The New York Times*, 14 November 1992, p. 14.

deep because it is a small room. On this particular day, directly facing me were three male students, and behind them was a female student. As we were talking about patriarchal dominance, I finished drinking some orange juice and got up to throw away the container. I looked around for the garbage can, and the young woman behind the men said, "I'll throw it away for you." I responded with, "No," and we began to use this relatively minor interaction as an example of gender arrangements. I asked why I could not do it myself? Why did she spontaneously offer to assist me in throwing away my garbage? Was it because I was a male? An older male? A professor? She shrugged her shoulders and could only muster that she was polite. But, what about the three men directly in front? I knew for a fact that they, too, were polite. But, they did not offer to throw away my garbage. This young woman, who is married and has a child, is a bright and relatively assertive person. Yet, years of training probably have led her to respond in an unconscious deferential manner to men in power roles. As we were discussing this, one of the men seated in front of me asked her why she had made the offer and began to politely criticize her for acting so submissively. The implication was that she deserved her predicament because she participated in it. Of course, the problem with this line of reasoning is that he was blaming the victim. It is the same argument made against battered women who do not leave their abusing spouses. It blames the victim and does not take into account the social context, economics, and power relationships.

Greek-American women have been the subject of research by a number of social scientists,⁵ but I find the most compelling and extensive examination to date to be sociologist Alice Scourby's treatment in her book *The Greek Americans*.⁶ Scourby outlines the history of the early Greek women immigrants and then addresses the contemporary Greek-American family from sociological and psychological viewpoints. The application of a psychoanalytic viewpoint is an innovative effort by Scourby. I agree with much of what she writes about regarding sex roles, but I feel that her psychoanalytic explanations are only partial, particularly with regard to the mother-daughter relationship. Psychoanalysis was founded as a clinical treatment method for what, at the turn of the century, was referred to as "neurosis." As a clinical enterprise, it has undergone tremendous innovations since Freud's original libido theory was used as the basis for treatment. The nine-

⁵ Some of these researchers include Aphrodite Clamar, Chryssie Costantakos, and Mary Lefkarites. Constance Callinicos, a writer, has also conducted work in this area. The works of this group appear in various journals and books, and are, to date, qualitative studies.

⁶ A. Scourby, *The Greek Americans* (Boston, 1984).

teenth century scientific paradigm used by Freud, a system that was in its essence biological and mechanical, has undergone numerous evolutions and revolutions. Reductionism and historicism are no longer considered valid and reliable clinical approaches. Contemporary psychoanalytic theory focuses on unconscious transactional patterns and internal psychic structures derived from an interactive and interpersonal human field.⁷ Despite such changes, the tradition begun by Freud and currently upheld by feminist psychoanalytic thinkers, such as Judith Alpert,⁸ Nancy Chodorow,⁹ Dorothy Dinnerstein,¹⁰ and Jessica Benjamin,¹¹ is that "psychoanalysis should stand with one leg in clinical theory and practice and the other in public intellectual discourse." In other words, the consulting room is not the only place for psychoanalysis.

Scourby attempts to apply the feminist psychoanalytic theory of Chodorow, also a sociologist, to her discussion of gender and Greek-American ethnicity. When women are the exclusive or primary caretakers, they are unconsciously imbued with incredible power.¹² According to psychologist-psychoanalyst Sophia Richman,

The infant first experiences the most intense primitive feelings of love and hate with the mother. She is the person who can frustrate the child or gratify its needs. It is with her that the child learns to submit, and it is against her that the child must push in order to become a separate person. Males in particular must leave the female-dominated world of early childhood in order to individuate and develop a sense of wholeness. Because of the species prolonged dependence and vulnerability throughout life, there remains in us a sense of dread and resentment toward the mother, and a fear of engulfment. Such feelings and fears most often remain unconscious, exerting their influence indirectly.¹³

Thus, one of the fundamental psychological differences between the

⁷ S. Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

⁸ J. L. Alpert, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Women: Contemporary Reappraisal* (Hillsdale, NJ, 1986).

⁹ N. Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven Press, 1989).

¹⁰ D. Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York, 1976).

¹¹ J. Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York, 1988).

¹² Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid*, p. 15.

¹³ S. Richman, "New Parents in a Changing World: Existential and Interpersonal Dilemmas," *Gender in Transition: A New Frontier*, J. Offerman-Zuckerberg, ed. (New

sexes appears to be perpetuated by the fact that the girl is raised by a caretaker of the same sex, the boy by a caretaker of the opposite sex. This difference predisposes to greater ease for women in achieving a feminine identity than for men in achieving a masculine one.

Scourby's analysis is important because it is the first to examine the nature of dependency and independence with regard to Greek-American gender. Nevertheless, it is flawed because it leaves out the father. I do not believe that you can examine the mother-daughter relationship and leave out the father. Of course, you can argue that the father is not present in the beginning anyway, because his role is usually that of the breadwinner, so he's not involved in the childbearing. But, that is at its best an innocent assumption. The father is always present, at least in the unconscious of the mother. And to expand this even further, patriarchal norms are always present either consciously or unconsciously. Scourby discusses the attachment of the mother to the daughter and vice versa as a dependency bond, as a relationship that is safe for them, but one that engenders a great fear of abandonment in the mother. Thus, the daughter has to give up her strivings and identify with the weaker position of the mother in order to not hurt her mother. This is how, according to Scourby, a particular female personality structure develops from generation to generation. Scourby writes,

It is not only the daughter who identifies with the mother but also the mother who identifies with the daughter, far more than she does with the son. As a result, she does not allow her daughter to separate herself as much from her and achieve independence. In the experience of mothering, a double identification takes place. "A woman identifies with her own mother, and through identification with her child, she re-experiences herself as a cared-for child." In identifying with both her mother and her daughter, a woman will reproduce her own mother's caring for her as a child. Despite efforts to socialize daughters differently, this double identification allows for interaction patterns to be perpetuated from generation to generation.¹⁴

The problem with all this is that it is only one layer. As the daughter struggles with the contradictory pulls of security and autonomy from the mother, the father, in actuality or in fantasy, represents independence from the mother. He becomes for the daughter the link to the exciting outside. Little does the daughter understand the limita-

¹⁴ Scourby, *Greek Americans*, p. 134.

tions placed on the psyche of the father by the oppressive patriarchal system, be it Greek or American. He assumes the role of standing for freedom and separation.¹⁵ That is one of the main reasons why daughters become so enchanted with their fathers, even when the fathers are off to work most of the day. The father promises freedom and separation if you identify with him, but as we know, he, too, is subject to a male norm and cannot fulfill that desire. I have worked with Greek-American families where the mother and her adolescent daughter are fighting fiercely, but when all is said and done, the young girl and the mother do understand each others' social role and psychological dilemmas. I have been struck with the grave sadness expressed by the female adolescents in relation to their fathers. They cry as if seriously wounded by their father's lack of emotional support in their struggles with their mothers. The father offered hope for the daughter but betrayed her by not truly helping her separate from the mother. It is very common in the clinical situation to hear adult women wish to pair with a man in order to feel free. The problem again is that no individual man can provide this. The male himself is not free from the chains of gender polarities.

Now, let's consider the mother-son relationship. Scourby believes that the Greek-American mother does not identify with the son as much as she does with the daughter. I believe there is something missing from this position. And it is the following critical psychodynamic. The mother is profoundly involved with the son, but in a different manner than she is with the daughter. I believe it happens on a different unconscious level. The mother, because of her subordinate role, has an opportunity for power and control through her son. She projects onto him her desires. He can accomplish for her what the social and cultural milieu do not permit her to do. He can achieve for her, become her pride and joy, in a way she cannot for herself and in a way her daughter cannot. Through him, the son, she will realize herself. True, this is a rather indirect way of doing it, but it is often the only avenue open to her. Of course, like the restaurant owner who wants Stephanopoulos to act as a role model for his son, presumably so that his son can achieve, the father's role supports this effort on the part of the mother. And as we know from the studies on Greek Americans and values,¹⁶ this system finds great support in the larger American culture. The mother often loves the son as if he were a prince, a prince who will inherit the throne and perhaps unconsciously make her a queen, a queen who is free and in control of her own destiny. Much later, the son's romantic choice

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Bonds*, p. 107.

¹⁶ Scourby, *Greek Americans*, p. 122.

can raise feelings of competitiveness for the mother, especially if the choice is like the mother in some significant ways. We end up with what Greek-American clinical psychologist, John Papajohn, calls a "GAP," a Greek-American Prince—one who feels profoundly special both in his existence and in his maleness.¹⁷ One who is entitled.

Jean Baker Miller¹⁸ writes about the cultural source of the female nurturing imperative which brings forth a sense of male entitlement to female care. Because women are expected to nurture men, and not vice versa, women's psyches have become organized around the principle that they exist to serve others', especially men's, needs. As a consequence, mothers are expected to nurture husbands as well as children. This demand can lead to a mother's dependence on her daughter to help her with her nurturing responsibilities both by the daughter curtailing her own nurturing needs and by her directly taking care of male family members. It is easy to see how overvalued the male can come to feel, how narcissism develops from these dynamics. But here is the rub, the male knows very well and deep down that he has done little to actually deserve the adulation and entitlement. But given that he likes being a prince, he colludes with the females and accepts the role, albeit a false one. Scratch the surface of a narcissist and you will find a highly insecure and vulnerable person.

One of the best examples of male narcissism is in the 1965 short story, *The Journal of a Wife Beater*,¹⁹ by the dean of Greek American writers, Harry Mark Petrakis. It is a story written with the intent of being humorous, but like any good piece of literature its appeal lies in the fact that it is a cultural channel of subjectivity and feeling. The story revolves around the journal entries of a Greek American named, Vasili, who records the beatings of his wife, Nitsa. "I preserve this momentous event for future generations by beginning this journal and recording the first entry with some pride." Following the first beating, Nitsa crying, asks why, and Vasili responds that her infractions have been minimal: "It is exactly because I do care for you that I desire to improve you." He also tells Nitsa that his father beat his mother. Thus, under the guise of tradition and with the explanation that it is for her own good, something that those oppressed have heard often, Vasili avoids dealing with his own possible sadism and/or resentment towards women.

As the story continues, Vasili fills us in on his courtship of Nitsa. "She was not as beautiful a girl as I felt I deserved," he tells the reader

¹⁷ Personal communication, 28 October 1982.

¹⁸ J. B. Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston, 1976), pp. 76-78.

¹⁹ H. M. Petrakis, "The Journal of a Wife Beater," *A Petrakis Reader* (New York, 1978), pp. 29-39.

narcissistically. When Nitsa begins to hit back, Vasili is in shock. He consults with the local priest (the "Father"), who provides his own phobic views of women, and suggests that the violence be increased. But, Nitsa is a worthy opponent of the patriarchy as represented by her husband and the priest (who is also Nitsa's uncle), and during a beating in her husband's restaurant, she scoops up a meat cleaver. The story ends with a stunning rationalization, as a hospitalized Vasili's outrage and fear transforms into even greater narcissism.

I had fancied myself married to a mortal woman and instead was united to a Goddess, a fierce Diana, a cyclonic Juno! I realized with a shock of recognition that one eagle had found another, perched on Olympian peaks, high above the obscure valley of pigeons and sheep. O fortunate woman! You have gained my mercy and forbearance and have proven to my satisfaction that you deserve my virile love and are worthy of my intrepid manhood!

Many readers of Petrakis' short story who have had extended dealings with Greek men will find elements in the portrayal of Vasili that they recognize. Of course, Greek-American literature is full of portrayals of pathological male aggressiveness and female dependency. My clinical experience does not indicate an age or class dimension to this. This does not mean that Greek Americans have any more or less problems in living out their relationships than other ethnic groups. In fact, the research discussed in the beginning of this paper may be an indicator of American psychology's phallocentrism. My intent in this paper is to point out that most of us are unconsciously harboring thoughts and feelings about women that we often deny, rationalize, and repress at the expense of a full understanding of what is going on. It is as if we sweep these feelings under the rug—only to trip over them at some point in the future.

I started with comments about the male norm and the need to understand the paradox of gender in its social ecology. Next, I offered some observations about the development of the female self and the male self. Finally, I used a Greek-American short story to highlight a narcissistic feature of the Greek male's personality. Obviously, I have left out a great deal with regard to gender arrangements and psychoanalytic explanations. Mature gender arrangements in our time, place, and culture, depend on mutuality. It is my belief that excessive dependency or independence gets human beings in trouble. Genuine mutuality results when we overcome unconscious projections, repressed fantasies, and unrealistic expectations. The relationships of Greek-American women and men are subject to these dynamics and need to be further explored.

The Pursuit of Greek Bilingual Education

JOHN SPIRIDAKIS

ONE WOULD HAVE EXPECTED THAT THE EMERGENCE OF BILINGUAL education in the public schools of the United States would have been enthusiastically welcomed by the Greek community. Bilingual education elevated the status of certain ethnic languages in the classroom by utilizing them as the medium of instruction. Greek immigrants had focused their efforts on maintaining the Greek language in this new country since their arrival. However, the resurgence of ethnic identity, awareness, language, and bilingual education which characterized the 1960s ironically brought a measure of conflict to certain Greek ethnic enclaves in American society.¹ This paper focuses on the reaction to Greek bilingual education in the Greek-American community centered in Astoria, Queens, one of the largest of its kind in the United States.

The love and devotion of Greeks in general for their native language is a deep-rooted cultural phenomenon. The literature of ancient Greece offers young Greeks a comprehensive and potent rendition of their rich heritage. The vital historical expressions of Greek heritage, culture, and tradition have survived and have been preserved throughout centuries, despite the assault of various external and destructive internal social forces. The four centuries of oppression and enslavement of the Greek people and their land is well known. Their lives endangered, the Greeks

¹ On a description of Greek bilingual education and its variety of types see: C. J. Ovan-
do, and V. P. Collier, *Bilingual and ESL Classrooms* (New York, 1985); J. Spiridakis,
"Greek bilingual education: Policies and possibilities," *Education and Greek-Americans:
Process and Prospects* (New York, 1987); S. K. Orfanos, H. J. Psomiades, and J.
Spiridakis (eds.), *Education and Greek-Americans: Process and Prospects* (New York,
1988), pp. 73-90; J. Spiridakis. An overview of Greek Bilingual Education Practices.
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posium, October 1-2, 1988. Reprint.