

# The Greek context in relation to homosexuality, homophobia and gay identity and community

Karyofyllis Zervoulis

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*This paper describes and explores in some detail the status of sexual minorities in Greece and in broader Greek communities, with a focus on gay men and lesbians. It starts with a brief historical review before concentrating on the contemporary Greek society. While exposing the lack of substantial empirical evidence, including psychological, it discusses the basis and the extent of societal and institutional homophobia within the Greek context. The review continues with an exploration of contemporary Greek gay identity and community. The conflict between Greek cultural values and acceptance of sexual diversity in the country as well as the potential negative effects of this conflict on sexual minorities are highlighted. The review concludes by exposing the lack of any contribution by Greek psychologists and of their professional bodies in addressing issues faced by sexual minorities in the country. A strong recommendation is made for Greek psychologists to play their part in facilitating the process that leads to changing homophobic attitudes and legislation and, therefore, help affected communities and people.*

**Keywords:** gay identity; Greece; homophobia; LGBTI; psychology.

CONTEMPORARY GREECE is a country that is often viewed as the natural descendant of classical Greece and its people are viewed as those having laid the foundations of what is called 'Western civilisation'. In relation to how it deals with homosexuality, one could argue that Greece finds itself in a awkward position. There is certainly a split between polytheistic classic ancient Greece and post-Christian Greece; or, as Nussbaum (2002) put it, there is a great distance between the ancient Greek way of thinking and the Christian way in relation to sex, both in the general culture and in their philosophy. We define the split in religious terms because interpretations of monotheistic Judaic-Christian religion form part of the basis of homophobia and, as we demonstrate below, seem to be playing a great role in contemporary Greek life. On the other hand, what is also interesting to note are some striking similarities between ancient and modern Greeks, for example, in the way family values and honour were seen in the past and are seen today.

All of these issues, together with evidence on contemporary Greek societal and institutional homophobia, are explored and discussed in this paper. Also, considering that not much research has been done on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersex (LGBTI) people living in Greece, this paper describes relevant aspects of the socio-cultural context by drawing on the work of journalists and other commentators who provide some anecdotal evidence. It is acknowledged that this may not provide the most accurate and most reliable account of this context, but we thought it would provide the reader with useful indications and information that is missing from the literature.

## Homosexuality in Classical Greece

It is often assumed that the Western roots of modern same-sex relationships are found in ancient Greek societies, especially those of the fifth century BC. This is the case even with some scholars and historians who frequently appear to impose their own nega-

tive values about homosexuality onto the Greeks of that era, as Hoffman (1980) reported. It was a period and place where male nudity was idolised and even sensualised, and where men exercised nude together, and dined and drank without the presence of any women (Bullough, 2006). Evidence comes in various forms, from the hundreds of respectable paintings representing same-sex acts to the literature such as jokes of comedian Aristophanes and the philosophical writings and dialogues (Nussbaum, 2002; Percy, 2005). Nussbaum (2002, p.22) also refers to Foucault who, in his book on the history of homosexuality, said that 'the Greeks free our thought from what it silently thinks and so enable it to think differently'.

Some historians hypothesise that male homosexuality was introduced into the Greek world by one of the Hellenic groups, the Dorians. The Dorians were a highly militarised society, and, when they migrated to southern Greece, they encouraged homosexuality by means of a military oriented education (Hoffman, 1980). Indeed, there is evidence that, in Sparta, male-to-male sexual relationships were encouraged in connection with the military culture; and in Athens, there was the view that encouraging such relationships was 'a fine way strengthening the social fabric, of making people who will fight for one another and will hold together the social fabric' (Nussbaum, 2002, p.18). However, even after the military machines of the various Greek city-states collapsed, homosexuality remained a cultural aspect although it took other forms; if anything, there is evidence in poetry that homosexual love was becoming more romanticised than ever before (Hoffman, 1980).

As Nussbaum (2002) explained, the pattern of same-sex relationships, especially in Athens, was that the younger male partner (*eromenos*), who was usually the passive one, was likely to be the object of admiration and interested in benefits such as friendship, education and political advancement that a relationship with his older active male partner (*erastis*) could provide. This younger

man was thought to be of full height and the author here assumes that he would be the equivalent of a high school senior or a university undergraduate. For the *eromenos*, it was not about the physical pleasure but it was about enhancing the spirit and thought. Percy (2005) questioned the notion that within this dichotomy of an active/passive sexual behaviour in sex between men, the passive was denigrated and ridiculed in ancient Greece. Furthermore, he argued that to reduce homosexuality or same-sex behaviours to the purely physical or sexual does an injustice to the complex phenomena of the Greek male experience. Instead, Percy (2005) focuses on evidence that points to homosexuality having had an educational and inspirational function, and he takes this point further to claim that ancient Greek paederastic relationships might have released creative forces that led to what has been called the Greek 'miracle'. According to Isay (1996), in ancient Greece, it was matter of social status for a man to have an adolescent male lover as long as he was himself active in sex. For the adolescent, it was a gift to have such a sexual relationship.

Overall, the ancient Greek same-sex sexual behaviour lacked the modern concept of the term 'homosexual' and certainly of the term 'gay'. However, there are examples of same-sex relationships that did not follow the pattern of an older and a much younger man. For example, the famous philosopher Plato was 50 when he had a sexual relationship with Dion, a 35-year-old man; and both philosophers Pausanias and Aristotle referred to other such relationships (Nussbaum, 2002). Still, everything we know suggests the absence of a gay lifestyle and, in fact no word was devised to categorise an individual as a homosexual (Hoffman, 1980). The drinking party, the athletic contest and the mode of Athenian education that involved men only were not homosexual or gay institutions and, therefore, they did not constitute the equivalent of today's 'gay scene' or culture; they were just 'homosocial activities' (Hoffman, 1980).

Hoffman (1980), in discussing the cultural aspects of ancient Greek male homosexuality, focuses on three points. First, family was very important and few men engaged exclusively in homosexual acts. Second, homosexuality was widespread among all levels of society. And third, homosexuality was not regarded by ancient Greeks, especially Athenians, as against their religion or against nature.

To start with the first point, Hoffman (1980) argued that the tightly knit ancient Greek family had a strong influence on sexual behaviour that, as we will see, relates very much to the contemporary Greek family:

‘As the honour of a man and his family was sustained through maintaining the sexual purity of his female kin, strict regulations governed the sexual behaviour of women. Men were relatively free from control so long as the honour of someone else’s family was not impugned through the seduction of their women. Because male homosexuality in no way threatened this code of honour, such behaviour was socially acceptable.’ (Hoffman, 1980, p.218)

In relation to the second point, in texts of the fifth century BC period, homosexual relationships were treated in the same way as heterosexual ones. For example, Hoffman (1980) argued that there is nothing in the historian Thucydides’s account that would suggest that homosexuality was anything but accepted and rather ordinary in Athenian society. Nussbaum (2002) also argued that all the evidence shows that sexual appetite in general and homosexual behaviour in particular were not considered problematic or shameful. There is no condemnation of same-sex acts as such, and male arousal on the sight of a beautiful young male was considered natural and normal or even as one of the necessities of nature. Even male prostitution was treated as a perfectly routine matter. In fact, the gender of the sexual partner was far less important than it was in consequent and current Western

societies. The only real problem was considered to be when there was excess or lack of control and management of such appetite. Furthermore, it was not only an urban phenomenon as there is evidence of rural homosexuality.

Finally, in relation to the third point, like many other polytheistic religions, same-sex acts were not criticised by the Gods (Nussbaum, 2002); not only that, but Greek Gods did engage in same-sex acts and two male Gods could even reproduce offspring (Hoffman, 1980). So, homosexual acts, like heterosexual ones, were not regarded as irreligious or antisocial. Sexuality in all of its forms was an accepted part of Greek cosmology, and this view helped to keep sexual legislation to a minimum. Furthermore, for the Greeks, it was actually the family and not the State that regulated such actions (Hoffman, 1980).

For female-to-female relationships, the primary evidence is the poetry of Sappho, the lesbian ancient Greek poet. As a result of Sappho’s fame, she and her land, the island of Lesbos, have become emblematic of love between women. Further evidence of lesbian relationships is also depicted in erotic parts of Spartan choral poetry. However, cultural records on women’s lives in general are limited (Hoffman, 1980).

### **Homophobia in recent and contemporary Greece**

Before we move on to reviewing and discussing homosexuality in more recent and contemporary Greece, we also need to explain the country’s geopolitical situation. Modern Greece, a Mediterranean country of the south-east corner of Europe, is located in the crossroads between the East and the West. It carries its ancient baggage and still has both European and Middle Eastern influences by virtue of its position. Nowadays, geographically fully belonging to the European continent, politically belonging to the European Union, Greece is culturally a lot more than just European. As Fygetakis (1997) suggests, Greece has had an unusual

blend of identifying as European and accentuating the legacy of the classical Hellenic period (which the rest of Europe have always revered) while being greatly influenced by Asia Minor. This influence is rooted in Greece's neighbours and history of wars with the other big civilisations of the broader Middle Eastern area (such as the Egyptians, Assyrians and mainly the Persians) and the 400-year Ottoman occupation until the early 19th and even 20th century for some, mostly northern, areas of modern Greece. Let us not forget that the metropolitan Greek populations until only 100 years ago were to be found in Istanbul and Asia Minor until about 1.25 million Greeks were expelled by Turkey (Fygetakis, 1997). Athens on the other hand, the sizeable capital city of Greece of more than three million now, used to have less than 50,000 inhabitants at that time. So, these expelled people must have brought customs and beliefs that were influenced by co-habitation with other groups of people of the area.

### ***Lack of research***

Despite efforts to locate modern and recent academic work on LGBTI people in Greece, this proved quite difficult. Most research that has been published is part of general surveys on social issues in Greece run, for example, by the EU, the Greek 'National Centre for Social Research' (EKKE) and private polling companies under media requests. Some psychological research refers to Greeks living abroad, especially in the US and the UK, which we consider enlightening and not completely irrelevant to Greek lesbians and gay men who still live in the country. To put things into perspective, Fygetakis (1997), when she was presenting her work with other lesbian panellists 'representing' an ethnicity within the US, realised that she was the only one who could not refer to any psychological literature on Greek lesbians. As she says, even up to the 1990s, we still knew little about Greek lesbians except what we have read about Sappho. In the last few years, however, there has been the emergence of

some empirical work, and this may prove to be a promising development.

### ***Basis of homophobia in contemporary Greek society***

Greeks appear to be in denial in relation to their sexually more liberal ancient past. This is highlighted by Kirtsoglou (2004) who argued that few Greeks embrace their homo-historical heritage. This is obvious even in linguistic terms. Currently, in conversation, Greeks very rarely refer to the island of Lesbos. They prefer to call it Mytilene which is just the main city of the island (Fygetakis, 1997). Another finding of Fygetakis's study was that the vast majority of Greek American lesbians who she interviewed stated that they had never talked about homosexuality, even in a general sense, in their families. Fygetakis, a Greek American lesbian herself, tells us how she had never met another Greek lesbian at least until she came out; and she wonders, 'why did it seem as if being Greek and being a lesbian were mutually exclusive experiences?' (p.153).

Firstly, we shall briefly review the influence of position of the Greek Christian Orthodox Church. Christodoulos, the very popular and populist former Archbishop of Greece who died in 2008, had called same-sex attraction a defect and a sin (Homosexuality and the Greeks [Ὁμοφυλοφιλία και οι Έλληνες], 2005). This is as moderate a view as one can get from officials of the Greek Church. Below is a quote by the general secretary of the 'Holy Association of Priests of Greece' (translated into English):

'Homosexuality is a perverse diversion from nature. It is a dirty act that God hates, one totally out of the spirit of Christianity. It's the shame of humanity and the great danger for human society with immeasurable consequences. It blacks out the genders and encourages ideologies that promote the contestation of family which, by nature, consists of two parents of different sex, a man and a woman. Faced with this whirlwind of homosexuality that aims to destroy the

family and erode society on many levels, there is an urgent need for the State, the Church and the society in general to make sure that they extinguish this disgusting act of homosexuality with the necessary drastic measures before it is too late' (Galanis, 2005).

Today, while the current Archbishop of Greece, Ieronymos, has expressed moderated and relatively liberal views, there are still strong homophobic and inflammatory statements coming from the bishops of the second and third biggest city districts of Greece. For example, Anthimos, the Bishop of Thessaloniki, did not hesitate to call homosexuality a 'deadly sin' (Thessaloniki Bishop, 2015).

Fygetakis (1997) reported findings that some 98 per cent of all Greeks identify Greek Orthodox Christianity as their religion. EKKE (2003) found that Greeks score on average 7.7 on a 1-to-10 scale assessing how religious they are; a score that is much higher than most EU countries. Almost half of them scored the maximum 10 and only 1.6 per cent scored the minimum 0 on the question asking how important religion was in their life. The average was 8.3, again much higher than in other EU countries. For example, the corresponding average score for the UK was 3.9. Some recent studies with Greek participants also found a positive correlation between religiosity and homophobia (Grigoropoulos, 2010; Papadaki & Papadaki, 2011; Papadaki et al., 2014; Papadaki, Plotnikof & Papadaki, 2013).

Fygetakis (1997) claims that the Greek Orthodox Church in the US follows the dogma and teachings of the Church in its motherland. The Greek Orthodox Church of North America views homosexuality as a grave sin and procreation is taken to be the only purpose of sex. Homosexuality is believed to breed promiscuity, to corrupt the morals of the young and innocent with devastating effects on their psyche, and to undermine traditional family values. While it claims to acknowledge the homosexual person's basic human rights, the Church

encourages the use of mental health services designed to treat homosexuality and discourages the passage of legislation that gives homosexuals equal rights to heterosexuals. So, considering that the Church remained for Fygetakis' Greek lesbian participants a symbol of national/ethnic identity, Greek lesbians had to decide between the teachings of the Church and the self-truth of their sexuality. Leaving the Church would be perceived as rejecting their community and denouncing their ethnic background and 'Greekness'; remaining would be equally painful.

Family is also very important for Greeks. When asked to answer on a scale of 1-to-10, with the former being least important and the latter being most important, Greeks on average scored 9.7 in response to how important they consider family in their life (EKKE, 2003). Greece has traditionally been a culture where the father/husband's authority is ultimate and not to be questioned. Men who are unfaithful are forgiven by wives as long as they do not neglect their family (Phellas, 2001). In general, family as well as sex roles are quite rigidly maintained. For example, the role of a daughter is to obey and support the efforts of the male members of her family until she gets married and then has the same role within her new family. Women are seen as passive but also a source of danger. There is an old folk saying that says that the man may be the head of the family but the woman is the neck that controls the direction the head will turn. Furthermore, the homosexual label is traditionally given only to a man who is being or thought to be penetrated. Therefore, the 'active' partner is still unambiguously a man (Phellas, 2001).

All the above are what Fygetakis (1997) and Phellas (2001) report based on personal experiences and a brief review of Greek sociological literature until the mid-1990s. We argue that there are significant changes in relation to women's position in Greek society in recent years and a generational gap is evident. Some evidence is provided by



the Eurobarometer<sup>1</sup> where discrimination based on gender is thought to be equal to the average observed in other EU countries (European Commission, 2008). However, most LGBTI Greek people would have grown up within a more traditional family.

Phellas (2001, 2005) discusses the family's importance in Greek-Cypriot and, by extension, in broader Greek culture. He argues that Greek people merge with the family and the community. Children stay with their family until they get married and create their own. Also, Greek individuals are not allowed to have any secrets or private lives and, if they do, it is seen as an indication of something going wrong. From an early age, Greek children learn that their actions will always reflect upon the family and its status in broader society. Any behaviour that diverts from the Greek norms and cultural expectations is frowned upon and is seen as offending the family in terms of shame and 'philotimo' – literally the love of one's (or the family's) honour. As Phellas (2001) states, the concept of sexual behaviour in Greek culture is closely tied up with this shame and honour value system. Within this background, if anyone discovers a member's homosexuality, then the whole family is shamed and dishonoured beyond repair; and in Greek tradition, even death is more preferable than dishonour (Fygetakis, 1997). For instance, one of Fygetakis' (1997) recounts how often she heard expressions such as 'don't shame us' or 'what will people say' while she was growing up and suggested that her family cared more about keeping up appearances and others' approval than what she felt. Dendrinou's (2008) ethnographic study of gay Greek men's negotiations of their sexuality within their family also addressed the concepts of honour and shame. He argues that shame, in particular, affected his participants' own feelings towards their sexuality; such feelings

contrasted with those required by the politicisation of sexual identity as expressed by the participation in a 'proud' gay movement. There is the temptation here to link old societal attitudes, as seen in Ancient Greece and especially Sparta, and these recent attitudes of honour and shame.

Next, the phenomenon of pretending or preferring not to be seeing the facts is introduced; an attitude that is also met in other Mediterranean and Latino cultures (e.g. Bereket & Adam, 2006; Morales, 1992, 1996). Fygetakis (1997) provided an example of how one of her study participants would leave gay publications on the coffee table but her mother would never ask about them. The same mother would make it her business to inspect every room of a new home of a relative or friend but would not venture beyond the kitchen and living room of Sophia's one-bedroom apartment that she was sharing with her partner of four years. The mother would often say, 'I don't need to know anything beyond that you are happy' (p.169). Sophia's partner was also included in all family events as Sophia's close friend. Phellas (2001) too reported how the Greek gay son is often very much welcomed within the family as long as he does not declare his sexuality.

Finally, Greek society, being culturally deeply patriarchal, provides many benefits to men but also pressures for them to satisfy their role in society. Men, for example, until recently feared that, if their wives worked, others would view them as unable to support their family (Fygetakis, 1997). So, maybe, Greek gay men, as part of a deeply patriarchal society, have to live up to greater social expectations and pressures compared to Greek lesbian women. This may explain why Papadakis et al. (2013) found that Greek social workers' views were more negative about gay men compared to lesbians.

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<sup>1</sup> The Eurobarometer is a long-running series of surveys conducted on behalf of the European Commission that is measuring public opinion in European countries.

### ***Evidence on societal homophobia in Greece***

People in Greece are generally 'tolerant' of lesbians and gay men, at least in public. Violent or abusive instances against LGBTI people are said to be very rare (Pattelis, 2008) although this has been changing for the worse with the strengthening and political legitimisation of the neo-Nazi party 'Golden Dawn'. Also, for many years, the islands of Mykonos and Lesbos have been famous destinations for gay men and lesbians respectively. However, after considering Greeks' personal views on homosexuality, one wonders whether this 'tolerance' extends more towards tourists than locals. For example, it was reported in the media that, when gay marriages (that will be mentioned later in the paper) were to take place on the island of Tilos, some of its inhabitants verbally attacked the mayor of the town who was going to run the ceremonies, the people who were going to attend as well as the television crews that wanted to cover the event (Kalivouris, 2008). In reviewing Kirtsoglou's ethnographic study on a group of lesbians who live in a small Greek town, Hillier (2004), reported that Greek people's attitudes to lesbianism appear to range from disbelief to outright hostility. So, Greeks who choose to move beyond invisibility may run the risk of being harassed and there are even examples in the 1990s of people being incarcerated because they were very vocal in advocating LGBTI rights (Fygetakis, 1997). Sotirchou (2005) reported that during the first Athenian Gay Pride event, an extremist nationalist group had thrown leaflets telling the 'faggots' to leave Athens.

According to *Kathimerini*, a respected newspaper, that commissioned a survey on Greeks' attitudes towards homosexuals (Homosexuality and the Greeks [Η ομοφυλοφιλία και οι Έλληνες], 2005), six in 10 Greeks considered that there were many or too many homosexuals and they mostly saw homosexuality both as immoral and as a disease. The majority was disturbed by homosexuals who did not hide their sexu-

ality in public, especially when they kissed. Almost half of those asked said that having to see homosexuals in managerial positions in the police or army would bother them and an equal proportion would be against a politician who publicly declared s/he is a homosexual. Sixty-nine per cent would also be bothered if they learned that a family member was homosexual. In answer to whether homosexuals should have the right to promote their views through television, 54 per cent said no. There is also a relationship between right-wing political orientation and conservatism with more homophobic views. So, those who report to be left-wing support gay marriages while those who say they are right-wing do not support them. The majority also believe that homosexuals should not be able to adopt children. On a more positive note, the majority of those younger in age and those who, even if older, have met homosexuals appear to have more accepting attitudes. Research by Grigoriopoulos (2010) and Papadakis et al.'s (2014) on Greek students' views on homosexuality also seem to support Allport's (1954) 'contact hypothesis' and Papadakis et al. (2013) found that only a small percentage of their social work students in the island of Crete expressed negative views about gay men and lesbians.

Additional evidence of Greek people's homophobia comes from the EU-funded European Social Survey that included an item asking European citizens of 23 countries whether, 'homosexual men and women should be free to live their life the way they want'. The findings involving a few selected countries presented the Greeks as the least accepting of homosexuals (EKKE, 2003). In consequent waves of the Survey, 53 per cent of Greeks agreed with the same statement in 2004/05 and 52 per cent in 2010/11 (European Social Survey, 2013). The 'Institute for Rights, Equality and Diversion' produced a comprehensive report revealing that levels of homophobia and discrimination against LGBTI people are very high in Greece (Pavlou, 2009). On the specific question of

legalising gay marriages, the European Commission (2006) found that only 15 per cent of Greeks supported the idea. They were in the bottom three together with Latvians and Cypriots, when the EU average of people supporting such marriages was 44 per cent and the UK was slightly above the average with 46 per cent. Greeks were also in the bottom five countries in relation to adoption of children by same-sex couples. Moreover, 73 per cent of Greeks have been reported to agree with the statement that discrimination against homosexuals is very widespread in their country (European Commission, 2008). In relation to a recent proposed law called the 'free cohabitation agreement', one survey found that 37.2 per cent of people agreed that this law should cover same-sex couples (Eurokinisi, 2008), although another suggested that almost two-thirds of Greeks would support the inclusion of same-sex couples in this proposed law (Saltou, 2008).

Another interesting finding by the Greek Institute of Psychological and Sexual Health showed that 30 per cent of people aged between 17 and 25 years who visited the Institute were worried that they were homosexual without actually being homosexual. In other words, these young people expressed fear of the possibility of being homosexual, something that Karatziou (2005) identifies as a type of homophobia. In a series of studies on men who have sex with men (MSM), participants who live in Athens perceived local homophobia to be significantly higher compared to those who live in London, however, Athens' MSM reported comparable levels of internalised homophobia to those reported by MSM living in London (Zervoulis, 2011; Zervoulis, Lyons & Dinos, 2015).

### ***Greek media representations of LGBTI people***

The representation of sexual minorities in the Greek media is very poor. There are no well-known lesbians and gay men who are willing to come out and talk publicly and break social stereotypes about lesbians and

gay men (Theodorakis, 2007). Furthermore, in 2003, one of the biggest private television channels was fined 100,000 Euros for allowing an erotic kiss between two male lovers in one of its most popular series (Uproar for a kiss of 100,000 euros [Σάλος για ένα φιλί 100.000 ευρώ], 2003). The thinking behind the decision, as expressed by the president of National Radio-Television Council, was that the 'kiss represented a minority trend in society that does not belong to the reproductive functions', a view similar to the mainstream Greek Christian ideology (Panagiotopoulos, 2003). However, a few months later, the State Council that safeguards constitutional matters overturned this decision (Fotopoulou, 2006). A cinema critic also reported how viewers of a Greek film, shown as part of the famous Thessaloniki Film Festival, reacted in surprise when they saw the two male lead characters kissing (Kayios, 2006).

### ***LGBTI legal and civil rights in Greece***

Sex between men was decriminalised in 1951 while there was never any mention of lesbians in Greek law. Today, the age of consent for gay men is set at 17 which is two years higher than the age that consensual sex is legal for heterosexuals. Only as recently as 2014, anti-discrimination laws were adjusted so hate speech and violence against LGBTI people are punishable by law (Smith, 2014). In broader terms, it was only in 1982 that Greece revised its Family Law section of the Civil Code. Until then, and, in line with the patriarchal structure of Greek society, the husband held authority in all areas of common life and all decisions to be made, women had to take their husband's surname once married, officially mothers had no rights over their children, and the only marriage that was considered legal was the one conducted by the Greek Orthodox Church (Fygetakis, 1997). Only very recently (December, 2015) did the Greek parliament pass a bill that recognised civil partnership agreements between same-sex couples. This bill, despite falling short in not allowing



same-sex couples to marry or adopt children or have the same pension, tax and health rights as heterosexual couples, signifies a significant step for LGBTI people in Greece (Greece passes bill allowing civil partnerships for same-sex couples, 2015).

Until this recent development, the revision of Family Law (1982) had a loophole by failing to specify the gender of the people within a marriage. This fact provided a foothold for Greek lesbians and gay men to claim their right to marriage 25 years later (BBC News, 2008; Zachariadis & Vradelis, 2008b). Several lawyers and academics expressed opposing views on whether same-sex marriages would be legal or not (Cazalotti, 2008). On these grounds, few mayors of Greek cities expressed their willingness to conduct gay marriages (Alexiou & Vradelis, 2008a; Fotopoulou, 2008a). Two marriages, one between two women and one between two men, actually took place at the island of Tilos despite fear of prosecutions, fines and aggressive statements by the Church and others. There was extensive coverage by national and international media (Kalliri & Karanatsi, 2008). The couples and mayor of Tilos made statements on the legal and psychological consequences, such as those of better mortgage rates or feelings of dignity (Kiousis & Kalivouris, 2008; Zachariadis & Vradelis, 2008c). Prosecutions followed by the most senior public prosecutor of the country. Eventually, the case reached the European Court of Human Rights and the Greek State was found guilty of discrimination (Roberts, 2013).

Within this national context, the first political group of lesbians and gay men of Greece was the Liberation Movement of Greek Homosexuals (AKOE) that was founded in Athens in 1978. Since then, gay magazines have been published and a gay telephone support line and clinic have been created (Fygetakis, 1997). The movement subsequently split, several subgroups emerged and currently, the Homosexual Lesbian Community of Greece (Ομοφυλοφιλική Λεσβιακή Κοινότητα Ελλάδας, OLKE)

is the most vocal relevant group. OLKE asks for the legalisation of male prostitution, the reduction of the age of consent for sexual acts between men to 15 so that it is equal to heterosexuals, and the inclusion of sexual orientation in anti-discrimination laws ([Ζητούν και ένταξη στο σύμφωνο ελεύθερης συμβίωσης], 2008; Dama, 2008a). Most of OLKE's demands are supported by the National Committee for Human Rights, that is the official advisor to the Greek Prime Minister on such issues (Zervas, 2005).

Taking advantage of the declaration of parliamentary elections in October 2009, OLKE asked all main Greek political parties with representation in Greek and/or the European parliament to provide their answer to a number of issues concerning the community. They then published these in a national newspaper (The positions of political parties on the issues of homosexuals [Οι θέσεις των κομμάτων για τα θέματα ομοφυλοφίλων], 2009). The two conservative parties, including the then governmental, and the communist party did not reply. In response, OLKE published homophobic views and voting behaviour of prominent members of these parties. On the other hand, OLKE found the responses of the remaining three parties that replied (the Socialists, the Greens and SYRIZA – Coalition of the Radical Left) satisfactory and encouraging. It was with the left party SYRIZA becoming the current governing party in Greece that same-sex partnerships finally achieved legal recognition. However, one needs to remember that its governing coalition partner, ANEL (Independent Greeks) is a populist right wing party with homophobic views; one of its Members of Parliament (MP) recently labelled Luxemburg's openly gay prime minister as a 'faggot' (Duffy, 2015). Most of this party's MPs voted against the legalisation of same-sex partnerships. With Greek politics currently being extremely dynamic due to the severe financial crisis, any further progress in terms of LGBTI rights is hard to predict.

## Contemporary Greek gay identity and community

Phellas (2001, 2005) highlighted how the high degree of homophobia in Greek culture complicates people's willingness to 'come out', and how the coming out process could potentially undermine family and kin relations. Coming out to one's family and making one's sexuality public knowledge, he argued, would almost be considered as an act of treason against the family and Greek culture. So, a lot of Greek lesbians and gay men choose to not tell their families about their sexuality even as adults. Thus, it is not surprising that none of Fygetakis's participants answered affirmatively when asked if they were 'out' in their Greek community and that most of them claimed that it is harder to come out to Greeks than non-Greeks. Others, however, expressed annoyance at the community's expectation of them to come out so they can feel proud. They argued that one can be out in many other ways beyond disclosing her/his sexuality to loved family members who would just get hurt for 'no reason' (Fygetakis, 1997). In the same study, a lot of women did not actively come out as lesbians; their sexuality was made known to others by accident. All of these participants reported bad experiences. A mother who found out about her daughter requested that she tell no one Greek in their home or even neighbouring states so the chances of her father knowing were minimal. Fygetakis (1997, p.178) claimed that, *'Greek parents believe that it is their duty to teach their children what is 'right' even if that means the lessons can be learned only through a process as painful as rejection.'* Apart from their family, they can also lose their Greek community. One participant said how painful it was for her that she could not be herself in her church and in her culture and that her community would not celebrate her relationship with another woman. What is painful for gay and lesbian Greeks is that the two identities appear to be polar opposites. The Greek Institute of Psychological and Sexual Health (Karatzidou, 2005), have

suggested that 10 per cent of all people who visit them do so because of their homosexuality, worried that family members will find out about their sexuality, and about the cost to them and their loved ones. In addition, it was reported how the parents of homosexuals very rarely co-operated. There were three types of parents: (i) those who passively observed the situation without co-operating in any way in order to come to terms with their child's homosexuality; (ii) those who became aggressive and condemned their child's homosexuality; and (iii) those who had the illusion that, with time, their child would change.

The fact that 'Gay Pride' events have been organised annually since 2005 and that they are reported in the media (Cazalotti, 2008b; Dama, 2007) is evidence that there is a group of Greek lesbians and gay men who are out. However, as Galanis (2005) commented, the first Athens Gay Pride was much smaller than those in other big European cities, although the number of attendees in subsequent years has more than doubled (Saltou, 2007). The internet and gay-themed websites, in particular, may be playing a role in facilitating Greeks to express their sexuality and sexual identity more freely. Zervoulis (2011) found that Athens' MSM value the importance of these websites and rely quite heavily on them for finding other MSM for all kinds of interactions, from casual sex to friendships and intimate relationships.

Coming from a Western perspective, people may be prone to say that Greek lesbians and gay men who do not come out to their families cannot have a positive lesbian or gay identity. There are also Greek voices who blame lesbians and gay men for hypocrisy and for being their own worst enemy by applying methods such as self-censoring and self-prosecution. However, Fygetakis (1997) like others, argued that we should be very careful in making this assumption and view Greek lesbians – and, we would add, gay men – as simply needing to work through their internalised homo-

phobia. She adds that they should not be discounted simply as not brave or not proud enough but, on the contrary, they should be commended as trying to embrace both their ethnic and sexual identities with dignity and honour. Phellas (2001, 2005) added that for many Greeks who retain a deep attachment to their ethnic culture, their ethnic identity and community constitute more primary concerns compared to their sexual identity; and a lot of his interviewees would spend considerable energy in trying to balance the two. His conclusion is that many Greek gay men not only find it difficult but are also resisting translating their sexual desires and behaviours into a political statement of gay identity. Fygetakis (1997), in summarising her findings on Greek lesbians living in the US, argued that her lesbian participants are simply being culturally consistent when they remain in the closet within their Greek communities but are visible and active otherwise. In Greece, however, where there is nothing but a Greek community, the challenges for native LGBTI people who live in the country are great.

### **The contribution of psychologists and related professions in relation to LGBTI issues in Greece**

The lack of substantial academic research, including psychological, in relation to LGBTI people in Greece has already been mentioned. This in itself implies the minimal role that psychology plays towards investigating and potentially changing homophobic attitudes and laws in the country. There is one qualitative study that reports the experiences of five Greek gay men who underwent psychotherapy (Spiliotis, Brown & Coyle, 2011). Two reported very positive experiences, while another felt even greater isolation and hopelessness. The remaining two participants reported somewhat negative experiences as they realised that their therapists had different positions

to their own in relation to homosexuality; their homosexuality was challenged, they felt that it was seen as inferior to heterosexuality, and they themselves felt partly accepted by their therapists. While this was by no means a representative study of LGBTI people in Greece, with four out of five men of the study reporting that therapy was their only source of support at the time, one can understand the importance of its effect on such groups of people.

Throughout an extensive search for grey literature, not a single reaction of any Greek psychological body to the themes, policies, and current affairs discussed in this paper was ever located. There also appears to be no reference to LGBTI people in the code of conduct of the few psychological societies that exist in the country (ELPSE – Hellenic Psychological Society, SEPS – Society for Greek Psychologists, and the Panhellenic Psychological Society). This, together with the lack of psychological research, was also observed by Spiliotis, Brown and Coyle (2011). One would expect that psychologists and their professional bodies would currently make an effort to address the issue of the challenges of LGBTI people in Greece for both therapeutic and socio-legal reasons. Relevant provisions and guidelines in the code of conduct of these bodies need to be added, and interventions in all types of media need to be exercised every time the need rises. The total lack of such efforts fails LGBTI people living in Greece and adds to the struggles that they have to overcome.

### **Correspondence**

**Karyofyllis (Lakis) Zervoulis** is a Lecturer in Social Psychology at BPP University. His research interests include social identity and politicisation as applied in the context of stigmatised and minority groups, sexuality and gender roles, and internet psychology. Email: KaryofyllisZervoulis@bpp.com

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