



Uncontrollable bodies: Greek Cypriot women talk about the transition to menopause

Andri Christoforou

European University Cyprus, 6 Diogenes Str., P.O. Box 22006, 1516 Nicosia, Cyprus



ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore Greek Cypriot women's interpretations and experiences of menopause and the menopausal body. The findings presented here illustrate that the menopausal body is commonly interpreted and experienced as an uncontrollable body and, therefore, as a body that becomes a central and distressing aspect of experience. I focus particularly on women's accounts of the separation between body and self, the conceptualization of the menopausal changes as uncontrollable, and the association of menopause with aging. I embed my findings within the context of women's everyday lives, taking into consideration the socio-cultural meanings attributed to aging and 'being a woman' in the context under investigation. Drawing on the importance of the 'civilized body' (Elias, 2000) in contemporary societies, as well as the symbolic association of women's bodies and social order in Greek culture, I argue that the conceptualization of menopause as loss of embodied control contributes to the construction of menopause as a mainly negative and challenging experience in the contemporary Greek Cypriot context.

Background

Research across different disciplines (i.e. anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies) and research paradigms has resulted in a significant body of literature on menopause, providing insight into the social construction, as well as the lived experience of menopause. The literature suggests that, contrary to the biomedical perspective which tends to conceptualize the menopausal experience as universal with definite 'symptoms' and 'risks', the experience of menopause varies both across and within geographical, socio-cultural, and temporal contexts (Agee, 2000; Hunter & O'Dea, 1997; Lock & Kaufert, 2001). The position and the social roles of women in the society, the meanings attributed to womanhood, sexuality, and aging, as well as the representations of menopause in both scientific and popular culture accounts, have been found, among other socio-cultural parameters, to influence the experience of menopause (Melby, Lock, & Kaufert, 2005).

For example, studies of scientific and medical texts in western contexts show that menopause has been largely portrayed as a failure or breakdown of a system (Martin, 1987/2001; Niland & Lyons, 2011), while studies examining the 'menopause discourses' in popular culture show that, despite variations in ideological positions (i.e. biomedical vs. feminist models), menopause is commonly constructed as a condition to be treated or problem to be solved (Coupland & Williams, 2002; Lyons & Griffin, 2003). Such studies provide valuable insight into the available cultural resources that women might draw upon to make sense of their experiences.

On the other hand, research conducted in different geographical contexts suggest that variations in the embodied experiences of

menopause across cultures (e.g. variations in the experiencing of hot flashes and night sweats) cannot be understood as simply the products of culture (Lock & Kaufert, 2001). For example, the ethnographic study of the construction and experience of menopause in Mayan and Greek peasant women conducted by Beyene (1989) illustrates that despite the common cultural factors that could frame menopause in similar ways (i.e. aging being associated with greater freedom, power, and respect), Mayan and Greek women reported very different experiences. While menopause was neither 'a highly elaborated concept', nor associated with negative physiological or psychological changes in the Mayan rural culture, menopause in the Greek culture was more similar to the portrayal and experience of menopause in the West. The studies conducted by Nancy Avis and Sonja McKinlay, Patricia Kaufert, and Margaret Lock in the 1980s in Massachusetts, Manitoba, and Kyoto, respectively, also lent support to the argument that the observed differences in the experiences and interpretations of menopause stem from a rather complex interaction among socio-cultural and biological factors, that are linked to genetics, environment, and lifestyle (Melby et al., 2005).

Nonetheless, even though the materiality of the menopausal body cannot be denied, it is important to highlight that this materiality is mediated by socio-cultural meanings: 'bodies are not meaningful in themselves' (Jackson & Scott, 2014, p. 578). The meanings attributed to menopause and the menopausal body are socially and culturally constructed, influenced by 'what it means to be a woman' and 'what it means to have a woman's body' in a specific context at a specific time. For instance, Lock (1993), in her ethnographic study of menopause in Japan, found that 'koneruki', the Japanese term for menopause, is

E-mail address: A.Christoforou@euc.ac.cy.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.07.009>

Received 5 July 2016; Received in revised form 11 July 2018; Accepted 17 July 2018
0277-5395/© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

commonly articulated as a natural transition not causing any social or psychological problems and not requiring any medical monitoring or treatment. Rather, *konenki* is commonly thought to be a challenging time for housewives, a 'luxury disease' for those women whose socio-economic status allows them to stay at home, and to have more free time and less worries than other women. On the other hand, studies conducted in western societies such as the United States and United Kingdom suggest that the embodiment of menopause (i.e. menopause-related changes) is experienced as problematic as it interferes with the societal norms and the roles women are expected to assume (Ballard, Kuh, & Wadsworth, 2001; Howell & Beth, 2002; Walter, 2000). For example, hot flashes and sweating have been found to result in embarrassment when experienced in public settings such as the workplace, which do not accommodate the female reproductive body (Agee, 2000; Griffiths, Bendelow, Green, & Palmer, 2010; Kittell, Mansfield, & Voda, 1998; Martin, 1987/2001; Nosek, Kennedy, & Gudmundsdottir, 2010).

The individual contextual background of women has also been found to play an important role in the experience and interpretation of menopause. For example, the experience of midlife as a period of reflection, evaluation, and transition can potentially affect the meanings women attribute to menopause (Perz & Ussher, 2008). Socio-economic factors such as the experience of employment and social support (Hunter & O'Dea, 1997), as well as common midlife stressors that are often experienced in conjunction with menopause such as changing relationships and illness or death of family members also seem to affect the ways in which menopause is experienced (Ballard et al., 2001; Dare, 2011; Nosek, Kennedy, & Gudmundsdottir, 2012; Winterich & Umberson, 1999).

This research is a part of a larger study which aimed to explore and examine the multiple and diverse meanings that Greek Cypriot women of different generations who live in Cyprus attribute to the embodied experiences of menstruation and menopause. To examine the experience of menopause, I combined two theoretical approaches within the sociology of the body. First, I used the phenomenological approach to the body by engaging in an empirical investigation of women's accounts of their bodily experiences (the lived body). I examined the ways women articulate, interpret, and experience the menopausal body and the relation between body and self (i.e. body and mind), without dismissing the materiality of the body, which, according to the phenomenological approach, acquires meaning in the specific socio-cultural and historical context in which it is embedded (Bendelow, 2000; Cregan, 2006; Crossley, 2001). Secondly, drawing on Norbert Elias' theory of the 'civilized body', I engaged with the social regulation of the body to explain the women's own conceptualization of the menopausal body as uncontrollable. I approached the body both as a subject and as an object, therefore, by examining the women's experiences and practices on the one hand, the construction of the female body and its representations within discourses on the other, and how these affect the women's experiences in the context of everyday.

While key poststructuralist and postmodernist feminist perspectives such as the work of Irigaray (1993), Kristeva (Kristeva & Goldhammer, 1985), Grosz (1995), and Kirby (1991) make extensive contributions to the conceptualization of the body as a representation of power and culture, here, I was mostly interested in how women *themselves* experience, interpret, and negotiate the embodied experience of menopause. In this regard, I found Kathy Davis' theorization of the body particularly useful as it views the examination of how women perceive, interpret and feel about their bodily experiences as necessary for the production of knowledge, while acknowledging the materiality of women's bodies and considering the sociological concept of 'agency' (Davis, 2003, 2007). While relations of power are not negated, and while accounts of experience are not equated with 'reality', women's accounts serve as a starting point for understanding 'what it means to live in a particular body, at a specific moment in time, or in a particular social location' (Davis, 2007, p. 62). This kind of theorization relates to

earlier debates within feminism on menopause, whereby both the 'medicalization argument' and the 'classic feminist model' of menopause (Leng, 1996) were criticized for failing to take into consideration women's own preferences in framing and constructing their experiences (Bell, 1990; Harding, 1997; Lewis, 1993; Lock, 1998; Lupton, 1996).

In this article, I argue that the experience and the conceptualization of menopause as loss of embodied control contributes to the construction of menopause as a mainly negative and challenging experience in the contemporary Greek Cypriot context, where control over the female body gains additional cultural significance. Loss of control becomes particularly problematic in Greek culture, where women's bodies are symbolically associated with social order and boundary maintenance (Dubisch, 1983, 1986). The focus of this study on a population not researched before makes significant contributions to the literature on menopause.

Method

My data come from in-depth, semi-structured interviews I conducted in 2010 with 20 Greek Cypriot women between the ages of 23 and 73. While one of the broader aims of the study was to explore the meanings women of different ages and generations attribute to menopause and the menopausal body, in this article, I focus on the *lived experience* of menopause, utilizing data from the ten interviews with women 'in menopause' (four women experiencing perimenopause and six women post-menopause). The ages of these women ranged from 47 to 73 years and pseudonyms were used to protect their anonymity. The sampling method, the interviewing process, as well as the coding process are described in detail in Christoforou (2018). Overall, I followed the 'grounded theory' approach developed by Glaser and Strauss as a 'general disposition' of making theory from data (Bryman, 1988). Rather than having predetermined set of codes, the themes and codes emerged directly from the data. The analysis was a continuous phase, interwoven with data production, following Glaser's (1965) constant-comparison method of analysis.

Both during the interviewing and during the interpretation of data I was sensitive to imbalances of power and control, utilizing a process of reflexivity, a necessary practice in feminist research (Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002/2008). The distinction insider/outsider (δική/ξένη - diki/kseni) that is strongly emphasized in the Greek society (Dubisch, 1988) helped me make sense of the power dynamics during the interviews. The terms diki and kseni are contextual, that is, a person can be an insider in one context and an outsider in another. For example, in the interviews with older women, I was an insider in terms of my ethnicity and my gender, but I was also an outsider in that I was a younger woman menstruating regularly. In any case, what I noticed was that the power was shifting during the interviews; at times I had power and at other times the women had power. An example of the respondents viewing me as having more power was the concern expressed explicitly by three of the older participants that they were not knowledgeable enough to master a few of the interview questions. As they explained, they were a bit worried as they did not know anything from the scientific perspective: 'What do we know from science?' (Virginia, 60). I reassured them that I was looking for their own perspectives and experiences and did not care for any scientific explanations. I also explained that I was particularly interested in learning how women experienced the menopausal body (an experience to which I was clearly an outsider), something which put these older women in an advantageous position: they had some knowledge that I did not, despite my educational status.

Furthermore, reflexivity enabled me to consider issues of power that surfaced during the interpretation process. In interpreting the data, I became painfully aware of how my own personal ideas and values were influencing the direction of the interpretation. One such example was my initial predisposition to interpret the women's reluctance to engage

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6852236>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6852236>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)