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## The Evolution of the Notion of Intimacy in Psychoanalysis and Culture

When we are young we adore and poeticize those with whom we are in love: love and happiness with us are synonyms. Among us in Russia, marriage without love is despised, sensuality is ridiculed and inspires repulsion, and the greatest success is enjoyed by those tales and novels in which women are beautiful, poetical, and exalted [...] But the trouble is that when we have been married [...] for some two or three years, we begin to feel deceived and disillusioned: we pair off with others, and again—disappointment, again—repulsion [...] And in our dissatisfaction and disappointment there is nothing left for us but to grumble and talk about what we've been so cruelly deceived in.

In this passage from Chekhov's *Ariadne* (1895, p. 33), a man describes the Russian desire for intimacy and love at the end of the nineteenth century. The short story retells a conversation between two men who do not share similar concepts of intimacy, love, sexuality, or marriage. For the narrator, these concepts simply follow the laws of nature—an ideology that repels the other character, Ivan Shamokhin, who poeticizes women and does not view men and women through the prism of pure biology. In the end, however, *Ariadne*—the object of Shamokhin's desire—prefers an abusive psychopath who uses her purely for sexual pleasure.

Chekhov's narrative of disappointment in the endless pursuit of an imaginary object of desire does not sound anachronistic, alien, or even hollow to our ears; many of us have heard patients report similar stories. Those who come to

us because of a sense of loneliness, alienation, rejection, or relational problems all long for emotional connection. The contemporary pursuit of intimacy is perceived as *sine qua non* to happiness in emotional life. This preoccupation may seem paradoxical in the digital age, when computers, smartphones, and other digital devices constrain the range and patterns of our personal encounters with the world and render us *increasingly more connected, but lonely* (Turkle, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

As analysts, we spend many hours a day or a week listening to the problems of intimacy between men and women. But what we hear in the intersubjective field of the analytic situation is a function of our unconscious assumptions about the nature of intimacy in gendered interpersonal relations. It is ironic that until quite recently, many in psychoanalysis tended to follow “the laws of nature” by failing to distinguish between biological sex and cultural gender. Intimacy, sexuality, and gender continue to be treated as unproblematic concepts; the terms are used as though they occur in some intrapsychic vacuum. Only recently have we begun to acknowledge the impact of the cultural context of psychoanalytic processes, because we have difficulty conceiving that even the field of psychoanalysis itself is a cultural construct and not immune to social and cultural shifts.

Cushman (1993, 1995), in his analysis of the cultural history of psychotherapy, challenges concepts such as “universal,” “apolitical,” “ahistorical,” and “objective,” which we encounter in psychoanalytic and psychotherapy discourse. He argues that both the self and the practices that aim to restore stability and coherence to the self are continuously changing social and moral constructs. We may also point out that psychoanalytic theory and practice have indeed changed drastically in response to social and cultural transformations in the family structure and the relationship between men and women. The mothers of psychoanalysis—Melanie Klein, Helene Deutsch, Karen Horney, and Anna Freud—and their beloved sons, Ferenczi, Balint, Fairbairn, Winnicott, and Bion, have radically shifted psychoanalytic theory’s center of gravity from the father and the Oedipal complex to the mother and the pre-Oedipal relationship. The therapist as the mother, with the focus on the mother-infant relation, has feminized psychoanalysis and shifted

the analytic focus to the relational matrix rather than the mind of an allegedly isolated individual. With a focus on relationship in the analytic process comes the notion of intimacy and triggers debate on mutual analysis and the analyst's self-disclosure in the session.<sup>2</sup> This model of the analytic encounter alters the definition of the mind and the meaning of some of the most important psychoanalytic concepts, such as transference and resistance.

The first question raised in the thematic description of the 2017 IPA Congress was, "What is the relationship between intimacy and sexuality, body and gender?"—which, allegedly, psychoanalysis requires that we continually ask ourselves. In a session called "The Intrapsychic Model of Intimacy," the discussion concerned how the term "intimacy" had begun emerging in psychoanalytic discourse in the early 1960s. Rachel Blass reported that the first psychoanalytic paper with "intimacy" in the title appeared in 1964, and after that hundreds had followed. At the end of the session, in response to the question of why and how intimacy had entered into psychoanalytic parlance, there was deadly silence. The only explanation advanced was that "the concept of intimacy was born with interpersonal and relational psychoanalysis—beyond love and sexuality—with a rejection of traditional psychoanalysis" (Nemas, 2017, p. 1766). Then the popularity of relational psychoanalysis, or two-person psychology, itself requires another explanation, begging the question: Did the dawn of major social, cultural, and economic changes in sex role ideology in the 1960s play any role in the surge of papers on intimacy in psychoanalytic journals? Would the shift in our preoccupation with intimacy reflect changes in social institutions that have redefined our gender identities and our positions vis-à-vis one another, or will the pattern of emotional discontent continue unchanged across generations and cultures? Did Freud listen to similar complaints in the early twentieth century in Vienna, or would he have heard different stories in his clinical practice today? Are we emotionally wired for a particular experience of re-finding, rejoining, or merging with the unconscious object of fantasy that Lacan called the *objet petit a*—that is, a place holder for the central sense of lack in our psyche? Or are our sense of loss and desires the sense of loss and desires of the changing Other?

These are some of the questions we address in this paper. We begin with the assumption that what a person does in any interpersonal situation is a function of his or her psychic structure, as well as the actions or reactions of the person with whom he or she is interacting. All of these take place within the cultural context that defines the actors' expectations and the range of behaviors they can tolerate from one another.

There is little doubt that "intimacy" remains an ambiguous and confusing concept that undergoes continuous shifts in meaning. Even when it comes to the question of intimate analytic engagement between analyst and analysand, the notion of intimacy has a different meaning within different psychoanalytic paradigms. Similarly, when we try to use the therapeutic discourse of "the intimate analytic hour" to conceptualize intimacy in a marital relationship, which analytic discourse are we espousing? Freud's or Ferenczi's? One-person psychology or two-person psychology?

In its original meaning, "intimacy" described the most private and concealed state of one's being. The term comes from the Latin *intimus*, which means "innermost," "deepest," and "profound." It can describe a quality, or feature of *individual*, or to a quality of *relationship*. According to Duby, in the late fourteenth century, it was popular among writers to use the term describing "what occurs behind the 'wall around their private life,' and this extends to the ultimate redoubt where [a person] locks away [his or her] most precious [...] thoughts" (Duby, 1988, as cited in Olson, 1995, p. 72). However, the contemporary shift from a feature of the individual to primarily intersubjective relatedness, from personal to interpersonal, and from private self to public self reflects a fundamental change in the structure of society and social relationships from Freud's day to ours (Levenson, 1974).

Here it is interesting to note that a number of studies have suggested that the therapeutic culture initiated by psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on self-disclosure and free expression of feelings in interpersonal relationships, has changed the meaning and experience of intimacy in both public and private spaces. It has also been argued that the concepts of love and intimacy have become "feminized," in the sense that they have taken on the stereotypically feminine quality of in-

terpersonal communication of feelings, as in the therapeutic discourse (Cancian, 1986, 1987; Cancian & Gordon, 1988). In other words, psychoanalysis has changed the culture and the culture has changed psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup>

Although intimacy has been defined in a number of ways, the common denominator is a sense of openness and self-disclosure in interpersonal space. Thus we cannot talk about intimacy without talking about the notion of self that is to be disclosed. The self as an object and process is constituted through social experience on a both micro and macro level. Subjectivity as the awareness of one's self and one's own body as a human with thoughts, affects, desires, rights and needs for privacy and intimacy are socioculturally situated. In other words, it is not merely the case that our subjectivities, our sense of self, our identities, our needs and desires develop outside of the social and cultural surrounds simply as part of the "normal" maturation process, but rather that we come to claim them all by virtue of our involvement within a network of social relations.

For some analysts, the "'timeless' psychoanalytic theory and changing times" may introduce a paradoxical tension that complicates acknowledgement of the cultural foundation of psychoanalysis. The appeal to biology as the foundation of psychoanalytic theory may serve partly as a desperate flight from that paradox. The paradox is nothing but a language artifact: We speak of the "timeless psychoanalytic theory," yet psychoanalysis is a set of performances within a particular sociocultural context. It is closer to performing arts than to a timeless set of formal axioms. In fact, many psychoanalytic writers and historians have shown that psychoanalysis as a theory of human subjectivity has changed—and must change—in response to the historical conditions that precipitate a change in human subjectivity (Makari, 2000).

Since relatively few studies have systematically examined the transformation of intimacy in interpersonal relationships, we set out to analyze the changing cultural narratives of love, identity, and intimacy over the past 50 years in the United States as reflected in Ann Landers' advice column from 1957 to 2002, when the column was retired.<sup>4</sup> This we undertake with the caveat that the interactive context of the analyst-analysand pair may not be the same as that of husband-wife or domestic

partners. We believe, however, that both contexts operate within the same cultural domain and respond to similar intersubjective parameters.

The psychic space of analytic and familial relations is thus complementary rather than contradictory. The Freudian subject has always been acting within a great family romance—but that romance is a neurotic fantasy, a fantasy of a love affair, with no reference to external reality. Freud was more interested in the sexual unfolding of the structure of the psyche than in finding connections between that structure and patterns of interaction within the family. It is not clear to what extent Freud had to obscure the cultural foundation of psychoanalysis in order to present his theory as a set of objective, value-neutral, and universal medical science propositions (Cushman, 1995; Kovel, 1980; Walls, 2004). Today, with the continuing evolution of psychoanalysis since 1920s, the shift from the personal to the interpersonal, from one-person psychology to two-person psychology, from intrapsychic to interpsychic in psychoanalysis, reflects a tendency toward a “return of the social” and abandonment of the myth of the individual mind.

Before presenting our own study, it is essential that we examine the cultural and historical context of the time interval during which the correspondence between Ann Landers and her readers took place. The changing contexts of the late 1950s to the first years of the twenty-first century shed light on the transformation of intimacy within the context of marriage during that period.

### **The Cultural Climate of the 1950s**

In the American culture in the 1950s, cultural norms and ideals about marriage focused on encouraging men and women to fulfill the socially defined roles of husband and wife. The quality of the marital “relationship” between spouses was rarely addressed, although a popular *Ladies Home Journal* column, “Can This Marriage Be Saved?,” started in 1953. The institution of marriage was devoted to the maintenance of social order, and promoted a set of moral values that were enacted through

the codes of gendered identities. A woman's capacity for self-sacrifice was deemed to be a virtue, as was a man's willingness to provide for his family. Women who wanted more than what the implicit social contract afforded them were seen as selfish, and men who were unwilling to work hard to provide for their families were considered lazy; each was expected to fulfill gendered roles that were policed by a collective social morality. In broad-brush terms, one way to understand such gendered complaints of laziness or selfishness is that these adjectives relate to the aspects of self each gender was culturally required to disavow: Women were encouraged to deny their agency (active) needs, and men their dependency (passive) needs. The pejorative use of "selfish" and "lazy," therefore, could partially be understood as a cultural effort to regulate the gendered denial of certain aspects of self.

To Andrew Cherlin (1992), the mid-1960s witnessed the birth of an individualistic tone in the quest for self-fulfillment in intimate interpersonal behavior. One's own personal satisfaction was pursued, even at the expense of the needs of spouses and children. Unlike earlier forms of relationships in which trust was instituted on the basis of established normative positions, the post-traditional relationship seems to depend on the negotiation and maintenance of mutual trust between partners—trust that cannot be taken as given, and must continually be worked on and monitored (Giddens, 1991).

### **The Emergence of Intimacy as a Cultural Discourse**

In tandem with the social, political, economic, and legal changes that were current at the time, a new relational ideal of intimacy began to emerge in the 1960s under the influence of second-wave feminism's call for equality and the advent of psychological discourse on communication and self-actualization. By the 1970s, the language of intimacy had established itself in popular discourse (Shumway, 2003).

In his 1992 book, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Anthony Giddens describes the gradual emergence over the past century of what he calls the "pure relationship," in which

a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each partner to stay with it. (p. 58)

While traditional forms of relationship were formerly legitimated and supported by social norms and institutions, such as the church and strong local communities, in the wake of the erosion of these institutions a new kind of “pure relationship” arose in which a couple’s trust for each other had to be gained on the basis of intimacy. Intimacy meant the reciprocal opening of one’s soul to the other. In this sense, intimacy began to require that an individual recognize those aspects of his/her partner’s authentic self that were private, but which nevertheless “needed” to be seen by the intimate partner.

One consequence of the pure relationship’s continued existence for only as long as both partners were “getting something out of it” was that it was more difficult for one partner to “coast along” than it might be in a more traditional relationship regulated by the ideals of external criteria. Giddens (1991) went further, arguing that the common complaint of partners who described “feelings of ‘never being satisfied’ within the relationship [...] reflect difficulties inherent in creating or sustaining a relation in which there is balance and reciprocity, satisfactory to both partners, between what each brings and derives from the tie” (p. 91). Whereas in the 1950s we might expect to read more about a person’s disappointment with his or her partner’s failure to live up to a socially prescribed ideal, in the 1980s and 1990s new kinds of conflict emerged in relationships due to changing expectations of what each partner now needed or demanded.

These new narratives of intimacy affected men and women in different ways, particularly because this kind of intimacy requires a capacity for communication and emotional engagement—which, in general, comes more easily for women for the reasons described in the work of Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), and Kaftal (1991). In 1983, Lillian Rubin teasingly wrote that a woman’s idea of intimacy was related to some form of

verbal communication, whereas for a man “it is enough that they’re in the same room” (p. 101).

Giddens (1992) sees women as the “pioneers of this pure relationship in which there is a sexual and emotional equality that didn’t previously exist,” while men have remained more concerned with their position in the public domain, at the price “of their exclusion from the transformation of intimacy” (p. 67).

It seems important to note that the privilege men enjoyed pre-1960s of an unequal distribution of power in traditional marriages began to recede at the same time new ideals of relating entered the public discourse. Not only did men lose their exclusive hold on the public sphere, but they were now expected to engage in a way of relating to women that did not come easily for them. These changes led to the emergence of new kinds of conflict between the genders due to discrepancies between the gendered ideals implicit in traditional marriage and the ideal of intimacy that many relationships were now based on.

These ideals of equality and intimacy also affected expectations in the bedroom. Masters and Johnson’s 1974 study of sexuality held that the first step toward sexual intimacy was to become aware of one’s thoughts and feelings:

Once you’re aware of your thoughts and feelings, let your partner know them. If you’re afraid, say so. Perhaps together you can discover what you are afraid of and why, and perhaps your partner can help you find ways of overcoming your fears gradually. Then as you move along the way, you will be acting in accordance with your feelings, not in spite of them. (pp. 24–25)

Masters and Johnson laid out a roadmap for “improving” a couple’s sex life that emphasized the importance of emotional presence over any particular sexual “technique”:

What a great many men and women must learn is that they cannot achieve the pleasure they both want until they realize that the most effective sex is not something a man does to or for a woman but something a man and woman do together as equals. (1974, p. 84)

The liberation of women's sexuality was the most significant consequence of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas the traditional experience of sex had previously been thought to be different for men and women—men could separate the sexual act from any emotional significance, while women needed emotional connection—new narratives for sex and sexuality aimed to promote an equality of sexual experience that could only be achieved if underlying relationship dynamics were themselves rooted in mutuality and equality (Rubin, 1990). Masters and Johnson (1974) wrote:

Women are brought up to be passive. They are expected to serve the man. You know: "I want nothing for myself—just to please you." Any vestige of that philosophy has to be resisted, because it keeps a woman from experiencing her own potential for pleasure and from discovering her own wants and needs. (p. 27)

Consequently, couples began to focus on the self-experience of their sexual relationships and, empowered by the sexual revolution's new expectations, women began to demand that their male partners be more emotionally present in sexual interactions; they also began requiring that their newly legitimized sexual needs be met.

One of the main conflicts to emerge from the social changes described above arose from the move away from traditional notions of "romantic love" associated with more traditional relationships to what Giddens calls the "confluent love" of more modern relationships, which are based on the ideal of intimacy.

Romantic love, Giddens (1992) argues, involves a manner of relating that predominantly relies on mechanisms of projective identification, in which one partner ascribes to the other what is missing within him/herself. In the process, partners become bound to each other based on their perceived differences, thereby creating an illusion of wholeness with the other. Traditional conceptions of masculine and feminine allowed for a "strong" male provider to long for the "tender and pure" female caregiver, and for a helpless female to seek a powerful

male protector. Giddens suggests that this conception of love is antithetical to relationships that are based on intimacy, which require mutual respect for an equal partner.

Men's and women's different relational styles and psychological capacities are important to consider when assessing how new cultural ideals, such as those attached to intimacy, are received. Jamieson (1998) describes one narrative that emerged in the 1990s in which men were not as invested as women in sustaining the intimacy of their relationship, which contributed to women's increasing dissatisfaction. One way to understand such dissatisfaction is that the discourse of intimacy had led women to expect a degree of emotional closeness that exceeded what many men were capable of, in light of their socialization based on the disavowal of dependency on women.

The need for recognition from a romantic partner continues to grow, and the sense of self-worth derived from romantic relationships becomes steadily more important. Individuals increasingly seek recognition of their "authentic inner selves" from romantic partners. In the end, we see a movement from traditional expectations of marriage, in which each spouse performs the externally defined roles of husband and wife, to a context in which each partner turns to the other for recognition of self-worth (Illouz, 2012; Movahedi, 2018a).

## Methodology

To study the cultural narratives of emotional connection and intimacy, we systematically analyzed the Ask Ann Landers advice column from 1957 to 2002, when its long-time author, Esther Lederer, died and the column ended. It was syndicated throughout North America, and at its peak was published in over 1,200 newspapers and had an estimated readership of more than 80 million.<sup>5</sup> It ran daily from 1957 to 2002, and thus offers a rich archive of the changing concerns and conflicts of Middle America over that time period.<sup>6</sup> Columns typically contained two (sometimes three) letters from readers and Landers' response to each. Ten discrete 365-day time periods were chosen, at five-year intervals, to provide consistent sampling over the period 1957–2002.<sup>7</sup>

Within each time period, we included any letter in which the writer described some aspect of a relationship between the genders, either explicitly or implicitly, such as an intimate relationship between two partners and/or any expression of attitudes about relations between the genders. Letters from writers who described themselves as younger than 18 were excluded.

In general, four times more women than men complained in print about interpersonal relationships with their partners. Of the 688 letters that comprise the data set, 547 letters (80%) were written by women and 141 letters (20%) by men. The gendered imbalance of Landers' letter writers should therefore be considered in any discussion of the relationship between intimacy and gender.<sup>8</sup> Also, the column was representative of a mostly white, heterosexual, middle-class segment of the North American population during the last half of the twentieth century. Some have argued that the correspondents who look to the columns for emotional support and for some nonthreatening authoritative advice tend to be lonely who feel disconnected and lack face-to-face communication skill (Gieber, 1960). Consequently, the analysis and conclusions that follow are necessarily limited to this demographic.

### **A Sample of Letters to Ann Landers and Her Responses**

Below is a sample of letters written to *Ask Ann Landers* between 1950 and 2002 that reflect the women's and men's gender role expectations at the time. The numerical designation is arbitrary and only for the purpose of identification in this paper.

#### **Letter Number One** (a housewife in 1957)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

Will you please tell me if I'm a nagging wife because I expect my husband to come straight home after work? He's started the practice of stopping for a few beers with the boys every night and it may wreck our marriage. These "stops" may last anywhere from 20 minutes to two

hours, depending on his mood. I've told him the kids get hungry and hard to handle when he's late and often the dinner is dried out and spoiled. I've never been a demanding wife but it seems to me a man's place is at home with his family when he's through with work, not in a tavern with "the boys." He tells me he's ashamed to phone and "ask permission" to stay longer because the fellows rib him and call him "chicken" and "henpecked." My husband is a faithful follower of your column and said he'd listen to what you had to say. Please, Ann, let's have your opinion on this matter.

**Ann Landers responds,**

A married man who **MUST** have a few beers with the boys every solitary night admits he's unwilling to surrender his bachelor privileges although he wants the joys of marriage. The time to settle this matter is now. If you let things drift along you'll find the two hours will stretch into six and eight and before you know it he'll be bringing in the milk bottles. Tell him he can stop with the boys twice a week, for one hour, and that you expect a phone call so you'll know when to put a small fire under the roast. Keep a few bottles of his favorite brew on ice and have some jukebox music on the record player, if that's what he likes. When women marry, they give up many carefree, girlhood privileges. Men can do it, too. A husband who is afraid to call home for fear the boys will rib him, is "chicken," indeed. He admits their two-bit opinion is more important than the peace of mind of the most important person in the world—his wife.

**Letter Number Two** (a woman in 1957 writes about her loneliness at home)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

I am writing about my husband and grown son. There are no children in our family, please bear this in mind. We haven't had a normal evening meal in 2 and a half

years. There's always shooting, screaming, and cowboys—anything that moves and makes noise on a TV screen. Conversation is out of the question. My husband and son keep their eyes glued to the screen every moment they are seated at the table. They swing the set around so as not to miss a single shot. If they miss their mouths, I'm supposed to clean it up. The set is a portable and they wheel it from one room to the next as if it were an oxygen tank and their lives depended on it. I don't mind that they spend every evening looking at seven-year-old movies, nosebleeds and bone crushers, but don't you feel I'm entitled to a little polite conversation at dinner? If you tell me to leave them alone and eat in the kitchen, I will, Ann. I feel like a maid so maybe that's where I belong.

**Ann Landers writes,**

Read the riot act to these two idiots and give them a live performance that will put the TV shows to shame. A woman who shops, cooks and serves dinner to her family is entitled to 20 minutes of conversation if she wants it. Inform these two cases of arrested development if they have so little regard for your cooking and your company, they can eat in a restaurant which has TV.

**Letter Number Three** (a woman in 1962)

**Dear Ann Landers**

What can I do about a husband who says he doesn't need any friends? He claims he gets enough phony laughter, stale jokes and boring conversation during business hours. When he comes home all he wants to do is relax. I'm cooped up in the house all day with four youngsters. When evening comes I'm starved for adult conversation—some word from the outside world. He rarely has anything to say. He'd prefer to read or look at TV. I've tried inviting people in for the evening but he appears to be so bored it's embarrassing. On a few occasions he actually left the guests and went to the basement

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to putter around in his woodwork shop. He is a good father and a loyal, hard-working husband. We have no financial worries and he doesn't gamble, drink or chase. After reading this letter over I'm almost ashamed to send it. My complaint seems so trivial. Do I have a Problem?

**Ann Landers comments,**

Yes, you have a problem. Your husband is antisocial and he'll probably never change, so change your domestic program to fit his personality. Make arrangements to have a woman in to care for the children a couple of afternoons a week so you can get out of the house. Join service groups and become active. Invite women to your home for committee meetings—or just visiting. In other words, get your adult conversation and the word from elsewhere....

The ideal of intimacy, as we might think of it in today's world, begins to emerge in the mid to late 1960's, though its precedents can be seen in the 1950's. Here is one example.

**Letter Number Four** (a housewife in 1957)

**Dear Ann Landers**

I'm getting tired of reading letters in your column about "frigid wives." You place the blame on the "upbringing" and make a very good case for the men. Has it ever occurred to you that maybe the husband is to blame? [...] I knew absolutely nothing about sex when I married, and neither did my husband. We were a couple of green kids. In the last 27 years he hasn't learned ONE thing. He puts everything on a "health" and "duty" basis and has the idea that a wife should be available at all times or expect her husband to go elsewhere. Is it any wonder marriage has become disgusting to me? If a woman is frigid maybe the husband ought to ask himself when was the last time he showed any real affection or tenderness? Why not print the other side for a change? I CAN'T be the only woman in the world with this problem.

One aspect of this letter which stands out is the woman's reflection that "If a woman is frigid maybe the husband ought to ask himself when was the last time he showed any real affection or tenderness," representing her wish to be seen and loved in a particular way. Ann Landers does not focus on this aspect of the complaint but instead writes,

There's a great deal of truth in what you say and I'm happy to print your side. A lack of understanding on the part of a husband has wrecked as many marriages as "frozen wives" who've been taught that sex is something "to be put up with."

The importance of communication and talking in a relationship begins to be seen in letters in 1962:

**Letter Number Five** (a woman in 1962)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

I've been married (if you can call it that) for 12 years. My husband works nights. He doesn't drink smoke, or gamble, but his routine doesn't include me, and that's all there is to it. He hasn't missed a Tuesday to go bowling in 10 years. If I died and the funeral was on Tuesday, he'd ask them to hold the body till Wednesday. Every afternoon he gets dressed like a dude and when I ask where he's going he says, "Out." If I ask when he'll be back he says, "Later." We have nothing in common but I have no grounds for divorce. He doesn't beat me, cheat on me or abuse me. He just ignores me, which I sometime think is worse. Once I asked him if he wanted a divorce and he said: "What for?" Please, Ann, give me some advice before I dry and blow away.

The wish for better communication is seen in another letter in 1967:

**Letter Number Six** (a woman in 1967)**Dear Ann Landers,**

I am married to a psychiatrist who is in many ways a fine man and a good father. Our problem is communication. He refuses to talk to me about out areas of disagreement, even though his basic professional tenets emphasize the need for communication. When I ask him to tell me what is bothering him he says, "I don't care to discuss it." I have suggested that we see a marriage counselor together. He refuses on two grounds. First "How would it look?" Second: "Marriage counselors don't have the psychiatric or psychoanalytical training that I have. How can THEY help ME?" I am no romantic. I realize that perfect communication between two people is rare, but our relationship is on precarious ground because my husband will not talk to me about our problems. He doesn't admire many people, but he has often said he respects your common sense. Do you have some advice that might help us both?

The subject of communication within a relationship comes up again and again. Here is a letter in 1997:

**Letter Number Six** (a woman in 1997)**Dear Ann Landers,**

My husband refuses to talk to me about things I feel should be shared between spouses. This ranges from what is bothering him or me about our work, to what may be bothering one of us about our relationship. I cannot share my feelings, fears, anxieties or even my joys with this man because he has no interest and refuses to respond. There have been times when he wasn't very good at dealing with my problems. We all need an outlet, Ann, someone to share our thoughts with. How I wish it was my husband, but he's made it clear that he can't

handle that kind of intimacy. So when I need to release my frustrations about anything, including him, I rely on my sister or my friends.

We hear here the representation of a wish that this woman's husband would listen to her better, which she explicitly defines as "a part of intimacy."

Here are another example of typical letters, one in 1984 and one in 1990, that speak to the need of a frustrated woman to be heard by her husband.

**Letter Number Seven** (a woman in 1984)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

May I borrow your column for a moment to say something to your male readers? Just as there comes a time in every woman's life when she has to face the fact that there is no Prince Charming, there comes a time in every man's life when he should realize that sex is not the panacea for everything that bothers his wife, girlfriend, lover, etc. I am a fairly attractive woman who has had a number of lovers in my life. I enjoy sex, but I am well aware that it is not a substitute for good communication. So please, Ann, tell those men out there that when someone they care about is depressed or upset, to keep their flies zipped and their ears open. Why am I writing about this now? Because I just ended a relationship that could have been wonderful. We started out as platonic friends and gradually drifted into the bedroom. Things were great for a year, then I noticed the friendship aspect had greatly diminished and his principal interest was sex. When I had a problem and wanted him to listen while I sorted things out, he would say, "Let's talk about it in bed." I would feel so used afterward that I didn't feel like talking, so I'd just clam up. When men ask women to have a drink and talk about a problem, women don't automatically say, "Let's talk it over in bed." Why do men do this? I gave up looking for Prince Charming a long time ago. Now I'm considering giving up, period.

**Landers' response:**

Don't give up, honey, just elevate your standards. There are some good men out there. Keep looking. Meanwhile, thanks for a letter that just might open up some baby blues.

The theme of a wife feeling invisible is encountered again later that year, in a letter from a woman who signs herself Invisible:

**Letter Number Eight** (a woman in 1990)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

About a year ago I had to admit my husband had lost all interest in me. I looked in the mirror and decided it was all my fault. I had put on a lot of weight and looked terrible. So I launched an intensive campaign to "re-interest" him. I dieted strenuously, lost almost 40 pounds and had my hair restyled. I bought smart, new clothes and even got my teeth fixed. When old friends met me on the street they couldn't get over the change. My husband—well, he has yet to say one word. I have a lovely home, nice children and a lot to be thankful for. My husband says he loved me but claims he's not the demonstrative type. I think I could fight another woman easier than I can fight his indifference. I'm 27 and he is 28, so he's not over the hill if that's what you're thinking. Help me. Please.

The wish represented here is this woman's wish to be desired by her husband, who is impervious to her attempts to re-interest him physically. Ann Landers is not hopeful when she responds,

**Ann Lander responds,**

I hate to resort to a cliché, but actions do speak louder than words. The measure of a man's devotion is not what he SAYS but how he behaves. Of course it's disappointing to work hard to please a guy and then have him just sit

there like a clam with a broken hinge, but if that's his nature you can't change him.

The question of whether having an affair can help a marriage function comes up repeatedly over the course of the column. People write in to describe how having an affair has helped their marriage to survive and even thrive, and implicitly are seeking Ann Landers' approval. However, Ann Landers remains committed to the idea that either you are in a marriage and are faithful, or you leave the marriage.

**Letter Number Nine** (a woman in 1967)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

I just finished reading another letter in your column from the "Other Women." Why do we hear so little about the "Other Man"? In my circle, I know four married women who are having affairs. If I count myself, it is five. Three of us work outside the home, two do not. We are between 26 and 44—not a beauty among us, but all reasonably attractive, except one who is quite homely. We all have good husband, fine children and attend church regularly. I am not looking for approval. I KNOW infidelity is wrong, but I need to know why we do it. Why can't we find fulfillment in our daily lives? I hope you will print this letter and help me as well as thousands of other women who are looking for answers.

The element that is of interest here is the representation of a desire to be "fulfilled" in their daily lives, and the implication that their husbands' do not satisfy their desire.

**Ann Landers responds,**

Married women who have affairs are looking for ego-bolstering, or an element of excitement that has vanished with marriage—or did not exist in the first place. Often the husband is blameless. He may be incapable of supplying that special vitality. But sometimes it IS the husband's

fault because he has become too lazy, too complacent and too indifferent to make the effort to keep the love-light burning. A mature woman who makes a reasonably good selection realizes that no marriage can maintain that white-heat intensity forever, and she keeps herself busy-and remains faithful.

**Letter Number Ten** (a woman in 1972)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

After 15 years of marriage to Mr. Wrong, I met Mr. Right. Our affair lasted for two years, and then my husband found out. My lover and I were in no position to get married so we stopped seeing each other [...] The whole time our affair was going on, I was sweet and generous—and everyone loved me. I was even able to be nice to my mother-in-law. I had a tremendous amount of energy, could clean up the house in two hours, cook, bake and sing all the while [...] When I was deprived of my love, I became mean and bitter. Now my housework never gets done and I hate cooking. I'm living for the day when we get back together for good. There's no substitute for a satisfying sex life.

**Ann Landers responds,**

I agree. How about trying to work it out with your husband?

Concerns relating to sex make up around 10% of the letters over the period 1957–1967. Even then, the references are veiled allusions to sex, such as one wife who hints, “we did things we shouldn't have, if you know what I mean.” Or a man who says that a “wife wouldn't have allowed herself to become fat if she were interested in giving her husband pleasure.”

As with other areas of interpersonal strife in these early years, conflicts around sex are most often framed in behavioral terms. The discourse seems to center around whether it is objectively reasonable for one partner to demand or decline sex,

and readers seem to ask Ann Landers to adjudicate whether their partner is acting “reasonably.” Ann herself seems to offer generalizations and it is noticeable that the psychological and relational underpinnings of a couple’s sexual relationship are unexplored.

The number of columns relating to sex increases noticeably in 1972 (see Figure 1), a shift we might understand in part as a cultural attempt to make sense of the “sexual revolution” of the late 1960’s. Around this time there is a notable change in the way in which sex and sexuality is discussed: sex begins to be talked about in a straightforward and candid way, letters begin to focus on specific sexual practices, readers try to make sense of their own fantasies, partners question the meaning of their own desires as well as that of their spouse, the question of “what is normal?” is re-addressed in light of changing attitudes towards sex, and Ann Landers is asked to make sense of the many cultural contradictions brought about by the sexual revolution itself.

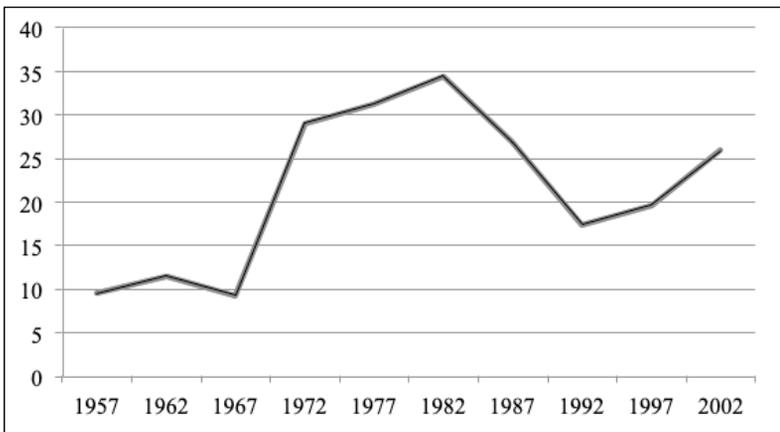


Figure 1. Percentage of Columns Relating To Sex

The language of “needs and rights” seeps into the discourse of sex in the early 1970’s and the importance of sexual compatibility is re-negotiated. A woman’s “right” to have her sexual “needs” satisfied is voiced and slowly becomes a cultural fact.

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Over the same period, male fear of sexual inadequacy starts to enter into the discussion, and sex comes to be spoken about more as a conduit for emotional closeness than as a marital duty.

**Letter Number Ten** (a man in 1972)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

In every case the woman is financially secure, has children and remains married for those two reasons, in that order. These women all described their marriages as “tolerable” but unsatisfactory. The major complaint: no communication. Example: “He is married to his business (or profession). I felt left out. I need someone to talk to, someone to make me feel alive. Someone who will look into my eyes and listen to me. I need to know that I am important as a man.

This man represents the emerging wish in men for a partner to help make them “feel alive,” and to be important in their eyes. This desire is voiced in many different ways.

Later in 1972, a wife writes about how after a heart attack, her husband told her to move into guest room. She says:

**Letter Number Eleven** (a woman in 1972)

**Dear Ann Landers**

After several weeks of frustration and loneliness, I decided to crawl into his bed after he had turned out the light. He rejected me so crassly that I vowed never again to risk such humiliation [...] I feel that an important part of me has died. It isn't just the sex I was deprived of, it was the closeness one feels from being held. I'm sure I could have settled for just his caresses if he had occasionally kissed me and told me I was important to him [...] there is such a terrible emptiness in our lives. I am certain no one has any idea that ours is a brother-sister relationship. We manage to put on a very good show for observers.

**The Advent of the “Reflexive Project of the Self”**

Beginning in the early 1960’s, and growing stronger over the 70’s and 80’s, we hear a series of letters which document the emergence of new narratives of the “Self,” in which increasing value is placed upon an individual’s ability to “take control” of their lives, independent of their partners, and find satisfaction in autonomous pursuits. An example of the growing wish for a life of one’s own, outside of the marital relationship can be seen in the following letter:

**Letter Number Twelve** (a woman in 1977)

**Dear Ann Landers,**

I love my husband very much, but we have one BIG problem. I’m a person who needs to be alone at times, and John wants to be with me every minute. I’ve told him repeatedly that I value my privacy and have pleaded with him to respect my wishes. Either he’s not listening or I’m not expressing myself properly. Would you believe I have to lock myself in the bathroom just to get a few minutes by myself? This has affected my sexual feelings toward him. John forces his presence on me to such a degree that I don’t care to be close anymore. Am I unreasonable? Am I selfish? Please level with me, Ann. I’ve reached the point I want out of this marriage so I can call my soul my own.

Landers’ response demonstrates awareness of the potential psychological underpinnings of this husband’s difficulties:

It is a miracle your marriage has survived with so little nourishment [...] Since you didn’t ask for any advice, I won’t offer any, but if you want a clue as to why your husband is so uncommunicative, my hunch is that he was frozen out by both parents and has kept his own feelings bottled up since early childhood.

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**Letter Number Thirteen** (a woman in 2002)**Dear Ann Landers,**

I'm writing about the letter signed, "Been There and Haven't Done That for Quite a While." The man said he had read books on "sexual techniques" and followed the instructions, but his wife still was "not interested." Well, Ann, I've met men just like him. They think they are the world's greatest lovers because they know what appeals to women who were surveyed for a book. What a man needs to know is what appeals to his wife. My sister will hop into bed with any guy who nibbles on her ear. Ear-nibbling would do nothing for me. What gets my engine running is a man who does something thoughtful, like cleaning the kitchen without being asked or bringing me flowers for no special occasion. Such acts prove to me that my happiness is on his mind. How could I resist such a sweetheart? Please tell those frustrated men out there that they should tune in to what makes their wives happy—then follow through. It will be far more effective than looking in a book.

**Ann Landers responds,**

... For some women, a guy who will clean the kitchen is a bigger turn-on than one who will buy her a diamond bracelet. Trust me.

**Discussion***Intimacy within the Evolving Cultural Context*

What emerges from a close reading of a random sample of 688 letters over 50 years is how complicated, nonlinear, and overdetermined the evolution of any relational construct, such as love and intimacy, is within changing cultural contexts. Cultural patterns emerge slowly over time. At first, the ideal

exists mostly in potential—spoken of by some and ignored by many. Over time, as voices that advocate new ideals grow louder, impassioned opposition emerges from those who stand to lose some kind of privilege from the new ideal.

Thinking of the broad cultural shifts over the duration of “Ask Ann Landers,” we can delineate a series of subtle movements in what typical couples expect from their partnership, though they may not experience it. We see an evolution from relational models in the 1950s and 1960s that were based on fulfillment of socially prescribed gender roles to the expectation of “pure relationship” of the 1980s and 1990s, with its ideals of communication, equality, and mutual respect between partners. We see a movement from relationships based on duty and obligation toward relationships that are grounded in individual desires and negotiated by both partners.

Cultural narratives of intimacy shift from a behavioral understanding of people’s actions to a view that is more inclusive of the internal emotional experiences of two people. Relational conflicts, which were once understood to reflect one individual’s personal difficulties gradually, come to be understood as an interpersonal process between two equal partners that resembles a dance. We see a movement from the early impetus of doing what it takes to “make a relationship work” toward one in which an individual’s happiness is part of the equation. As evidence of this shift, beginning in the 1970s, Landers would ask her readers, “Are you better off with him or without him?” Previously, with rare exceptions, she had counseled against divorce; her change in attitude is largely believed to have been the result of her own divorce in 1975.<sup>9</sup> How sex was perceived within the context of an intimate relationship also evolved, from a marital duty for the woman and a marital right for the man to a vehicle for emotional closeness and connection.

Our observation is in line with the view that the discourse of intimacy began to change along with other social and economic factors in the 1960s and 1970s. During that time, the therapeutic discourse of self and other infiltrated the cultural discourse on love and intimacy. Women who had previously been encouraged to accommodate their husbands’ self-seeking behaviors were now culturally empowered to stand up for themselves and refuse to tolerate the assumption of male privilege.

The conflicts voiced in letters to Ann Landers seem to clearly reflect the contradictions present in the changing cultural narratives. For example, in 1957 a husband wrote Landers to complain about his wife's insistence on taking money from her father to supplement the family income. The elements of this conflict that had undermined the man's self-esteem included the cultural ideal of the single-breadwinner family and the cultural ideal of masculinity's being tied to the man's capacity to provide for his family. Ann Landers, as a cultural spokesperson, had originally supported the man's right to be the sole provider at the expense of the wife's autonomy and desire. With time, however, as cultural norms changed to incorporate the economic necessity for dual-income households, this man's conflict over accepting financial help may have receded.

On a different note, in the early years of the column a number of women complained about feeling "starved for adult conversation," unfulfilled in their roles as homemakers, frustrated by the amount of time their husbands spent out of the house, and angry about the small "allowance" given them by their husbands. Each of these complaints could be understood as reflecting the prevailing cultural norms of gendered division of labor. Women were expected to be fulfilled by their roles within the home and husbands were seen to function as providers whose domain was outside the home.

This restrictive role of homemaker structured complaints about feeling starved for conversation: Forced financial dependency on her husband gave rise to complaints about his stinginess. The culturally sanctioned ability of a man to do as he pleases in the outside world led to the woman's complaint that her husband was not at home enough of the time. We could say that the cultural ideal of the happy homemaker was itself conflicted: Women were assigned a restricted role and expected to feel fulfilled—a contradiction directly addressed by Betty Friedan (1963) in her seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*.

We might also consider the shift in Landers' opinion regarding whether a wife should pick up her husband's clothes. In 1962, Landers encouraged wives to acquiesce because it wasn't "worth fighting about" and it took "less energy to pick up a few things than to fight about it." Landers perceived such conflicts within the framework of roles, in which the wife's role

was to keep the house tidy. In 2002, she responded to a similar complaint by writing, “This is an issue of respect. [The wife] needs to stand her ground so her husband will stop treating her like a doormat.”

While the woman’s *manifest* expression of this conflict did not change over the 40 years that elapsed between letters, the *way* in which it was experienced did. Rather than being framed as a conflict over socially prescribed gender roles, it came to be understood as a conflict about respect between two equals. On a different level, we could understand the conflict as occurring between cultural ideals: the traditional ideal of clearly delineated gender roles and the emergent ideal of mutual respect between equal partners.

It seems important to note that both poles of the dialectic between authority and equality, domination and mutuality, were present in the columns throughout its entire duration. For example, women continued to express a desire to be “wooed” by a man and bemoaned the fact that they were being encouraged to be more sexually assertive. This dialectical tension within cultural norms continued to operate in the columns in the form of opposing points of view. While the manner in which we address these tensions evolves over time, the tensions themselves are never fully resolved.

Perhaps the study’s most unexpected finding is that Ann Landers herself, in her position as cultural “expert,” appeared to be the subject of cultural transformation. She increasingly showed sensitivity to issues that she had either failed to recognize earlier or had declined to address.<sup>10</sup> For example, in the 1957 columns, numerous letters were published in which a woman complained about the emotional pain caused by a particular behavior of her husband. In the majority of cases, Landers was silent about complaints of emotional pain; she epitomized the prevailing cultural ideology of the time, which remained so silent on the subject that in 1963, Friedan would call it “the problem that has no name.” It wasn’t that women were not suffering emotional pain, or did not talk about their emotional suffering, but rather that American culture itself—which Ann Landers embodied—could not hear their suffering. It was only after the long decade of political and social activism

in the 1960s, during which women's voices collectively grew so loud that they were impossible to ignore, that Landers began to hear and respond to aspects of her letter writers' emotional suffering.<sup>11</sup>

We can observe a similar movement in psychoanalytic discourse. Psychoanalysis is no longer the patriarchal, father-centered classical theory of Freud, although the residue of that worldview persists in some analytic circles. The ascent of mother-centered analysis, with its focus on the interpersonal, is rooted in the same social and cultural contexts in which feminism and gender equality have continued to flourish. The breast has replaced the phallus as the master signifier (Ian, 1993; Sayers, 1991). As a result, intimacy has replaced power and authority as psychoanalysis has lost its patriarchal anchor in favor of becoming feminine.

The shifting preoccupation of psychoanalysis from the father to the mother, from intrapsychic to interpersonal, and from the past to the present may also reflect changes in the Anglo-European family structure. In her book, *Remembering the Phallic Mother*, Ian (1993) writes:

In the set of rituals and rites known as psychoanalysis, then Freud and Klein may be the phallic mother and vaginal father (though which one is which I cannot say). Together, they epitomize the psychoanalytic view of the Anglo-European nuclear family as seen self-consciously from complementary "masculine" and "feminine," patriarchal and maternal, perspectives. To see them this way is to historicize psychoanalysis as being the specific self-reflection of the overripe bourgeois nuclear family as it entered its decadence at about the turn of this century. (Ian, 1993, p. 48)

Even if one argues that psychoanalytic theories, including Freud's own formulations, were changed in response to new clinical cases, the clinical cases themselves have continued to be constructed and reconstructed in terms of the practitioner's conceptual framework. Yet Freud's theoretical emphasis on the intrapsychic at the exclusion of social and cultural forces

continues to inform our psychoanalytic practices (Homans, 1989; Jacoby, 1975; Kuriloff, 2010; Lasch, 1978; Makari, 2000; McLaughlin, 1998; Rieff, 1979; 1966).

Although the cultural and psychoanalytic discourse of intimacy advocate emotional communication and shared experience of openness based on equality, feelings of unhappiness, disappointment, and disillusion continue to mar interpersonal relations between men and women. Chekhov's Shamohkin seems to reflect precisely what we read, even in Ann Landers' later letters, and continue to hear from men and women on the couch. The trouble may be that contemporary Americans, similar to the young Russian men and women Shamokhin describes, adore and poeticize those with whom they fall love: Love and happiness for them, as for us, are synonyms. Stephanie Coontz (2005) argues that the pursuit of love and intimacy is the most destabilizing factor in marriage:

The origins of modern marital instability lie largely in the triumph of what many people believe to be marriage's traditional role—providing love, intimacy, fidelity and mutual fulfillment. The truth is that for centuries, marriage was stable precisely because it was not expected to provide such benefits. As soon as love became the driving force behind marriage, people began to demand the right to remain single if they had not found love or to divorce if they fell out of love.

This is in curious contrast to the marriages that start with no love—yet, with time, allegedly gain enough “love” to stay together (Dholakia, 2015; Epstein, 2012; Seth, 2008). We may consider this to be a consequence of the change in the structure of intimate relationships between the two sexes that has prompted romantic partners to see in one another the shadow of their *subjects of desire* (Movahedi, 2018b). They have increasingly allowed themselves to experience one another as the placeholder for their unconscious object of fantasy, which Lacan called the *objet petit a* with its subsequent sense of disillusionment, disappointment, and regret.

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## Notes

1. Spike Jonze's 2013 movie *Her* is a futuristic tale of a man who falls in love with his computer's artificially intelligent operating system. Although the film is science fiction, it is also about the imaginary digital world of today, in which people are more comfortable interacting with operating systems than face-to-face with another person.
2. It is noteworthy to recall how Ferenczi fell into disrepute for fostering intimacy, "mutual analysis," self-disclosure, and regression in analysis, which were considered to be dangerous. He was falsely accused of promoting a "kissing technique" (Raphael-Leff, 2012).
3. It is interesting that critical social psychologists protest that the subjective individualism has hijacked social psychology through the pursuit of intimacy. They complain that the social has been dropped from the social psychology and the field has been reduced to the study of the "intimate," the private, and the personal outside of the social context (Wexler, 1996; Greenwood, 2004).
4. Of course, Anthony Giddens' (1992) *Transformation of Intimacy* has the same title, but it is not based on an empirical study.
5. Figure estimated by Esther Lederer in *Ask Ann Landers* on July 23, 1987.
6. The Chicago History Museum has printed copies of all *Ask Ann Landers* columns published between April 1, 1957, and June 30, 2002, when the column ended.
7. 1957: April 1, 1957–March 31, 1958; 1962: April 1, 1962–March 31, 1963; 1967: April 1, 1967–March 31, 1968; 1972: April 1, 1972–March 31, 1973; 1977: April 1, 1977–March 31, 1978; 1982: April 1, 1982–March 31, 1983; 1987: April 1, 1987–March 31, 1988; 1992: April 1, 1992–March 31, 1993; 1997: April 1, 1997–March 31, 1998; 2002: July 1, 2001–June 30, 2002.
8. Similar statistics have been reported by other studies of advice columns. In general, women were more likely to write for advice than men. The gender of the advice columnists and their perceived lack of neutrality may have contributed to the imbalance. It is possible that men did not feel as understood by the advice columnists as women. In his study of a sample of letters written to Ann Landers and Dr. Joyce Brothers for a period of six months in 1986, Morgan (1989) reported, "When all types of problems were considered, Ann Landers was about equally likely to agree with her male and female correspondents. Joyce Brothers agreed with the male correspondents about 75% of the time and with the female correspondents about 90% of the time. However, when correspondents wrote to complain about the behavior of a spouse or opposite sex lover, both columnists agreed with the men about 50% of the time, but with the women about 95% of the time (p. 124).
9. Curiously, she had found that her husband had an affair with one of her secretaries.
10. Writing on the evolution of Ann Landers' columns from 1955 to 1980, Charlotte Hays argued that changes in Landers' columns reflected changes in American culture during that time period. Landers verged on the Victorian in 1955, but by 1970 her columns contained discussions of once taboo topics such as homosexuality (Morgan, 1989).
11. Lumby (1976) noticed a different shift in Ann Landers' advice columns, in that from 1958 to 1971, she was more likely to listen to her readers and less likely to give stereotypical responses. Lumby took this change as a reflection of the society's becoming less authoritarian (Morgan, 1989).

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