Biological Psychiatry and Postfeminism in Female Sexual Dysfunction

In this paper I will discuss the emergence of Female Sexual Dysfunction (‘FSD’) within the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in the postwar period, detailing, on the basis of my archival work at the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the role of key figures involved in deciding the sexual dysfunction classifications in DSM-III (1980) and beyond. I will, in the process, query an increasingly accepted story of the DSM-III as a categorical rejection of psychoanalytic psychiatry and a concerted statement of a biological psychiatry.

Coming into the present, I will suggest that widening the range of sources – beyond the psychiatric and pharmaceutical—that we examine in thinking about contemporary FSD, enables us to challenge sociological accounts of a multifactorial, surveillance medicine, and of the modern ‘biological’ self. It also reveals a complex ontological register. While an ontological hierarchy can be discerned in discussions of FSD—prioritising physical causes and evincing unease about psychological and emotional factors in illness – self-help literature and women’s magazines speak in a language which undermines the characterisation of FSD as overly reductionistically conceived. Moreover, I will argue that the complex and embattled historical relationships between psychiatry, psychoanalysis and feminism—and post-feminism, both as a chronological phenomenon in historical scholarship, and as a political position—are crucial in understanding contemporary discourse about what kinds of thing sexual problems are and are caused by.

Biography
Katherine Angel is a Wellcome Trust Postdoctoral Fellow in the History of Medicine at Warwick University in the UK. She holds a PhD from the History and Philosophy of Science Department at the University of Cambridge, and has held research posts at Cambridge, at the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College London and the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College London. She has published on FSD, on interwar psychiatry, and on clinical waste. She has also published journalism on sexuality and sexual politics, and has appeared on BBC Radio 4 Women’s Hour and More4 TV to talk about FSD.