

ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUALITY IN ELDERS LIVING ALONE IN A SAMPLE OF NON-INSTITUTIONALIZED PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: One of the inherent aspects to humans is sexuality. Those age 65 and older are in a vulnerable position when discussing sexuality due to their concern over society's perception of them. The objectives of this study were to evaluate older persons' attitudes toward sexuality in people over 65 years old and determine whether associations exist between these attitudes.

Material and methods: We conducted a cross-sectional survey of attitudes and knowledge about affective and sexual behaviors among older people who attended two senior centers in Madrid, Spain. Sixty-seven participants from 65 to 95 years old responded. A self-administered questionnaire about sexuality developed by Corominas and colleagues we collected (cronbach's α of 0.85).

Results: Participants tended to talk with others about sexuality, and this was especially so for men and those aged 65 to 80 years. Women and men and participants of all ages generally did not consider it indecent for older persons to show interest in sex. Men were less bothered by being naked in front of their partners than women were.

Conclusion: Those over age 65 remain interested in sex; women and men think different about their level of comfort at being naked in front of a partner and their desire to receive sexual information; younger participants were more likely to talk about sex than older ones.

Keywords: Aging, Sexuality, Sexual Behavior, Sex, Attitudes.

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Introduction

Sexuality is an inherent aspect of humans⁽¹⁾. Experiences and how they are integrated into life determine each person's sexuality⁽²⁾. Sexuality is defined by the Royal Spanish Academy as "anatomical and physiological conditions which characterize each sex". Definitions of sexuality given by other authors all have three basic components in common: biological, psychological, and social. The interaction of these components affects the life cycle⁽³⁻⁵⁾. The development of sexuality has

a long course that begins at birth and continues throughout an individual's lifetime^(1,3,6). Sexual identity is acquired during the first years of life and is related to the awareness of belonging to a particular sex, which depends on multiple factors⁽⁷⁾.

Adolescence is a stage of transition, when both somatic and sexual maturation and psychological and emotional development occurs^(5,8-10). Sexual activity is possible in those over 60 years of age⁽²⁾. People now live longer and better than in the past⁽¹¹⁻¹⁴⁾, but the sexual abilities of those over

60 years old are underestimated. When older people show interest in sexuality, sometimes they are rejected⁽²⁾. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines the elderly as persons aged over 60⁽¹⁵⁾. Older people are in an awkward position regarding sexuality: they feel uncomfortable talking about it because of the reactions of other people and false beliefs that they are “sexless”^(1,16-19). WHO determined in 2005 that 22% of the older population has problems related to sexuality derived from such prejudices⁽¹¹⁾. We evaluated attitudes towards sexuality in people over 65 years old and examined the relationships between demographic factors and these attitudes as well as associations among the attitudes.

Methods

We conducted a cross-sectional survey of attitudes and knowledge about affective and sexual behaviors in older people. Data collection began in November, 2012, and continued through January, 2013. We selected respondents from people over 65 years old who attended two senior centers, both belonging to the Madrid city council, with simple random sampling. Persons who could not speak and read Spanish were ineligible to participate. The final sample included 67 participants, with 26 recruited from one center and 41 from the other. One of these centers is in the highest income district of Madrid and the other is in the lowest. All participants gave their written informed consent in accordance with Directive 2001/20 / EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 April 2001. The directors of both senior centers and the Madrid City Council authorized this study.

To collect the data, we used a self-administered (respondents read the questionnaire and wrote their answers) sexuality questionnaire developed by Corominas and colleagues⁽²⁰⁾. We obtained a Cronbach’s α of 0.85 for the internal consistency of scale. Participant confidentiality was ensured as there was no identifying information recorded on the questionnaire.

We analyzed the data with SPSS Statistics 19. We summarized categorical distributions with percentages (Table 1), and computed chi square and Student’s t tests for associations between variables (Table 2).

Variables were:

- Qualitative nominal: gender, previous sex-

ual information, talk about sexuality, sexual interest, who has most sexual interest, considered sex as indecent, sexual attractive, importance to show themselves naked, considered penetration necessary, and want information.

- Qualitative ordinal: marital status, where do they live, how previous sexual information is considered, most important element in sex, statements with which agree.

- Quantitative: age.

VARIABLE	N	%
GENDER		
Men	25	37.30%
Women	36	53.70%
-	6	9%
AGE		
65-80	39	58.20%
81-95	9	13.40%
Ne	19	28.40%
MARITAL STATUS		
Married	35	52.20%
Divorced	1	1.50%
Single	6	9%
Widower	23	34.30%
-	2	3%
WHERE DO THE LIVE		
Their home	63	94%
Others home	0	0%
Nursing home	2	3%
-	2	3%
PREVIOUS SEXUAL INFORMATION		
Yes	30	44.80%
No	36	53.70%
-	1	1.50%
HOW PREVIOUS INFORMATION CONSIDERED		
Adequate	16	23.90%
Poor	36	53.70%
-	15	22.40%

Table 1: sample description, with counts and percentages.

Results

Table 1 shows the characteristics of participants. Most participants were women, between the

ages of 65 and 80, married or widowed, and lived in their own homes. Most indicated they had received no previous information about sex, and those who had, considered the information to be poor (Table 1).

VARIABLES	CHI2/ T-STUDENT	RESULT
Gender- talk about sexuality	CHI ² 0.134	Independent
Gender- sexual interest	CHI ² 0.709	Independent
Gender- who has most sexual interest	CHI ² 0.479	Independent
Gender- considered sex as indecent	CHI ² 0.194	Independent
Gender- statements with which agree	CHI ² 0.149	Independent
Gender- importance to show themselves naked	CHI ² 0.236	Independent
Gender- most important element in sex	CHI ² 0.140	Independent
Gender- considered penetration necessary	CHI ² 0.789	Independent
Gender- want information	CHI ² 0.031	Dependent
Age- talk about sexuality	T-STUDENT 0.789	Independent
Age- sexual interest	T-STUDENT 0.904	Independent
Age- considered sex as indecent	T-STUDENT 0.214	Independent
Previous sexual information - talk about sexuality	CHI ² 0.001	Dependent
Sexual interest - want information	CHI ² 0.522	Independent
Talk about sexuality- want information	CHI ² 0.572	Independent
Sexual attractive - importance to show themselves naked	CHI ² 0.051	Independent
Want information - previous sexual information	CHI ² 0.370	Independent
Want information	CHI ² 0.214	Independent

Table 2: variables, test done and results about people over 65 years old position towards sexuality.

Table 2 shows the bivariate results. Fifty percent of women and 64% of men reported that they talked about sexuality with someone else. One-third of women and 73% of men said that those age 65 and older were interested in sex.

Most participants (72% of women, 52% of men) believed that men were more interested in sex than women. Most (94% of women, 52% of men) also reported that they did not consider it indecent for people over 65 to show interest in sex. Half of women and 56% of men supported heterosexual relationships only. The majority of participants (58% of women, 84% of men) did not mind being naked in front of their partners, and about half (44% of women, 52% of men) did not consider penetration necessary for sexual satisfaction. Most (61%) men, but only 39% of women, reported they would like more information about sex.

When asked what the most important aspect of their sexuality was, women most frequently selected communication with partner, mutual pleasure, and procreation. Men, however, most frequently selected mutual pleasure, communication with partner, and individual pleasure.

Younger participants (aged 65 - 80 years old) were more likely to talk about sex than older participants (81-95 years old) (56% vs. 44%). Younger participants were also less likely (8%) to consider it indecent for people over 65 to show interest in sex than older participants (33%). In both age groups, most (69%) thought persons over age 65 were interested in sex.

Sixty-one percent of participants who talked with others about sex reported they had previously received information about sex. Similar proportions of those who wanted more information about sex (61%) and those who did not want more information (56%) had talked about sex with others. Seventy-eight percent of participants who wanted more information believed persons over age 65 were interested in sex. Most (68%) participants who considered persons over age 65 sexually attractive also indicated they did not mind being naked in front of their partner. In addition, 48% of all participants did not want additional information about sex. Participants who had received prior information about sex were similar to the whole sample as 50% reported wanting more information about sex.

Some of the p values in Table 2 suggest strong relationships between variables, as "Gender- whether wants more information about sex" (p 0.031) and "Whether previously received information about sex - talked about sexuality with partner, friends, family" (p 0.001).

Discussion

Sexuality in the elderly is a subject that is rarely addressed in today's society. To address this issue, we conducted a survey on attitudes towards sexuality among people who were age 65 or older.

In the literature, we found most of the population think of the elderly as "asexual beings"^(1,21) and that many observers display attitudes of rejection towards the sexuality of the elderly^(1,16,21). However, our findings show that among the elderly, interest in sex exists.

There are other myths related to the sexuality of the elderly. Gázquez and colleagues reported the belief that men retain greater sexual interest in old age than women, who are thought to lose interest after menopause⁽²²⁾. This finding was refuted by Pérez and Arcia, who found that both women and men maintained sexual interest in their old age⁽²⁾. This contrast was also present in our sample. While we found no age and gender differences in the perception that older people are interested in sex, both men and women tended to report that men were more interested in sex than women.

Those age 65 and older are in a vulnerable position when discussing sexuality due to their concern over society's perception of them⁽¹⁶⁾. Nevertheless, in our study, we found that most participants surveyed discussed sexuality with others, with this being more common among men and younger participants (age 65-80). In addition, men were more interested than women in receiving more information about sex.

In our sample, most participants (regardless of gender or age) did not consider it indecent for the elderly to have sexual interest. Neither men nor women tended to be concerned about being naked in front of their partners, with men less likely to be concerned than women. This could be related to the fact that women are more afraid of what is thought of them⁽²¹⁾. Our participants also tended to show approval only for heterosexual relationships.

In our study, both women and men reported that mutual pleasure and communication with their partner were very important aspects of sexuality. In addition, women also cited procreation, which could reflect the historical tendency to attribute a reproductive role to sexuality⁽¹⁾, while men also cited individual pleasure, consistent with what was previously reported by Pérez and Arcia⁽²⁾.

Multiple anatomical, physiological, psy-

chosocial, and pathological changes occur with aging⁽¹⁾, and among them is increased difficulty of penetrative sex. This is consistent with Pérez and Arcia's observation that most of their respondents indicated coitus as necessary for sexual satisfaction⁽²⁾. However, most men and women in our study did not report penetration as necessary for sexual satisfaction.

A good sex life contributes to a better quality of life^(23,24). To maintain a healthy sex life, people need to have accurate information about sexuality⁽²⁾. In our study, we found that most of our participants had never received information about sex. Those who had received information and those who wanted additional information were more likely to talk with others about sexuality. The relatively low percentage of people who desired sexual information may be due to shame⁽¹⁶⁾.

Aging is also accompanied by changes in interests, thoughts and feelings. It is possible that younger people may not find individuals 65 and older to be attractive⁽²⁵⁾, but most of the participants in our study thought they do have sex appeal and they are comfortable showing themselves naked in front of their partners.

There are several limitations to our study, including some participants refusing to talk about the topic, some potential participants refusing to participate because they had become widowed recently and, some participants failing to answer all questions

We urge other researchers to conduct research on sexuality in older persons due to the lack of empirical information on the topic. For example, a qualitative study could be done to explore the experiences of the elderly and their taboos. Additional studies could also provide insight into the way that the young view sexuality in older persons.

Conclusions

People over age 65 remain interested in sex. Women and men were similar in their responses in our survey on sexuality, except in their level of comfort at being naked in front of a partner and their desire to receive sexual information. Younger and older participants also responded similarly, except that younger participants were more likely to talk about sex with others than were older participants. As a significant association between variables related to sexuality, we found that elders

who talk about sexuality with other partners are those who had also received prior information about sexuality.

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