



PERCEPTION OF ELDERLY ABOUT THEIR SEXUALITY
PERCEPÇÃO DO IDOSO ACERCA DA SUA SEXUALIDADE
PERCEPCIÓN DEL ANCIANO ACERCA DE SU SEXUALIDAD

Deborah Nayane de Oliveira Silva¹, Natalia Pereira Marinelli², Ana Carla Marques Costa³, Rita Cassia Gomes Santos⁴, Adonias Ribeiro de Sousa⁵, Jucielma Ribeiro de Lima⁶

ABSTRACT

Objective: to understand the perception of the elderly about their sexuality. **Methodology:** this is an exploratory and descriptive study with a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews as a data collection technique, with 10 elderly from 60 to 79 years old. After collection, we used the content analysis technique, in which the speeches were categorized, subcategorized and analyzed according to the literature. The research project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under the CAAE number 0020.0.043.000-10. **Results:** most seniors found themselves able to live their sexuality, but feel fear to experience it freely, for the family and social behavior is negative and creates stigma in relation to this theme. **Conclusion:** sexuality is legitimate for the elderly; they do not see time as a factor that prevents them to enjoy a pleasant and rich sexuality in love experiences. Even though they have some difficulties, most considered themselves sexually active and able to enjoy it. **Descriptors:** Perception; Sexuality; Elderly.

RESUMO

Objetivo: compreender a percepção do idoso acerca da sua sexualidade. **Metodologia:** estudo exploratório e descritivo com abordagem qualitativa, no qual foi utilizada como técnica de coleta de dados a entrevista semiestruturada. Participaram da pesquisa dez idosos com idade entre 60 a 79 anos. Após a coleta, empregou-se a técnica de análise de conteúdo, onde foram analisadas as falas, categorizadas, subcategorizadas e analisadas com a literatura. O projeto de pesquisa teve a aprovação do Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa sob o CAAE nº 0020.0.043.000-10. **Resultados:** a maioria dos idosos percebeu-se capaz de viver sua sexualidade, porém, sente certo receio de vivenciá-la livremente, pois o comportamento familiar e social é negativo, criando estigmas em relação à temática. **Conclusão:** a sexualidade é legítima à terceira idade, o idoso não vê o tempo como impossibilidade de desfrutar uma sexualidade prazerosa e rica em experiências amorosas. Mesmo admitindo ter algumas dificuldades, a maioria se considerou sexualmente ativa e capaz de usufruí-la. **Descritores:** Percepção; Sexualidade; Idoso.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: comprender la percepción del anciano acerca de su sexualidad. **Metodología:** estudio exploratorio y descriptivo con enfoque cualitativo, teniendo la entrevista semi-estructurada como técnica de recolección de datos, con 10 ancianos entre los 60 a los 79 años. Después de la recolección, se empleó la técnica de análisis de contenido, donde fueron analizadas los discursos, categorizadas, sub-categorizadas y analizadas con la literatura. El proyecto de investigación fue aprobado por el Comité de Ética en Investigación sobre CAAE número 0020.0.043.000-10. **Resultados:** la mayoría de los ancianos se vio capaz de vivir su sexualidad, sin embargo sienten cierto recelo de vivirla libremente, pues el comportamiento familiar y social es negativo, creando estigmas en relación a la temática. **Conclusión:** la sexualidad es legítima a la tercera edad, El anciano no ve el tiempo como imposibilidad de disfrutar una sexualidad de placer y rica en experiencias amorosas, mismo admitiendo tener algunas dificultades, la mayoría se consideró sexualmente activo y capaz de usufructuarla. **Descriptores:** Percepción; Sexualidad; Anciano.

¹Nurse, Specialist IN Health Family and Occupational Health, Master Student in Bioengineering, University of Vale do Paraíba/UNIVAP. Belem (PA), Brazil. E-mail: debnayane@hotmail.com; ²Nurse, Master in Bioengineering, Professor at the CTBJ of the Federal University of Piauí/UFPI. Teresina (PI). E-mail: enfnatmarinelli@hotmail.com; ³Nurse, Master in Genetics and Applied Toxicology, Coordinator of the Nursing Course, Faculty of Science and Technology of Maranhão/FACEMA. Caxias (MA), Brazil. E-mail: carla_ma27@hotmail.com; ⁴Nurse, Specialist in Occupational Health Nursing, State University of Pará/UEPA. Belem (PA), Brazil. E-mail: dikassia_santos@hotmail.com; ⁵Nurse, Specialized in Elderly Health, Federal University of Maranhão/UFMA. Caxias (MA), Brazil. E-mail: adonias_@hotmail.com; ⁶Nurse, Specialist in Family Health, University Center of the State of Pará/CESUPA. Belém (PA), Brazil. E-mail: jucielma_12_lima@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the life expectancy of the population has been increasing around the world due to better hygiene and public health advances in combating diseases and dissemination of rational precepts for healthy eating and better living habits. Of course, this extension of the average human life is more pronounced in the first world countries, but it has been felt even among developing countries, where statistics show that the fastest growing age group is over 60 years years.¹

Aging is a universal process marked by specific biopsychosocial changes associated with the passage of time. It is a phenomenon inherent in the process of life, and varies from individual to individual according to their genetics, their lifestyle and environment. The changes resulting from the aging process involve numerous social, cultural, political and economic events, influencing the lifestyle, values and especially in the way elderly are seen by society.²

The health of the elderly, more than in other age groups, is influenced by multiple physical, psychological, social and cultural factors. It is required a balance between all these factors to maintain and improve the quality of life of this population. However, health-related issues likely to be addressed with greater emphasis when talking about seniors are chronic diseases, physiological changes, loss of functions and social roles, among others. Thus, elderly sexuality is not within the list of concerns and issues relevant to health and well-being in old age.

Traditionally our society has always considered sexuality as a youth prerogative, and with the advent of ignoring the social role of older people, these concepts have become even more emphasized. In this sense, the obligation to undergo an orgasmic dysfunction, of excitability, and especially of desire are imposed to elderly people.

Seniors love in a different way, because they manage to experience love mostly in a sensual way, rather than in a genital way because sexuality at this stage of life is related to many feelings like joy, affection, willingness to live, loves, shame and repression of each.³

In old age sexuality is somehow seen negatively due to the misconception of society that in getting to this stage of life the individual loses their sexuality and lives without any perspective in relation to affection and love. So, regarding the exercise of sexuality the seniors are discredited to an

extent that their sexuality is subject of sick jokes as if it was something ridiculous and embarrassing.

This research is greatly important because it will provide an understanding of how the elderly people see themselves regarding sexuality. It will also provide an awareness of society and the family so that the elderly can be seen as an experienced being that did not lose their functions.

Health professionals working with this population will be able to reflect on the care provided to the elderly client taking into account all their aspects and thereby older people will benefit from the possibility of improvement in their quality of life and more freedom to express their sexuality.

OBJECTIVE

The objective was to understand the perception of the elderly about their sexuality.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive and exploratory study of qualitative approach, carried out in a Community Center for the Elderly in the city of Caxias, MA, located in the northeast region of Maranhão State.

The subjects were 10 seniors who met the inclusion criteria: patients of both genders, aged 60 years or older and participating in the activities of the Community Center for the Elderly of Castelo Branco district.

For data collection we used a form based on semi-structured interview technique. Interviews were recorded on an MP4 player and after collection we used the content analysis technique, where the lines were analyzed, categorized, subcategorized and analyzed with the literature.

The research project was submitted to the Ethics Research Committee of the University Center NOVAFAP (UNINOVAFAP) with CAAE protocol No. 0020.0.043.000-10. We preserved privacy and individuality of the subjects, and the survey was conducted by signing the Informed Consent Form. In addition, the elderly did not have their names revealed; we used the letter I followed by a serial number as codes, which were chosen by the researcher, aiming to preserve participants' identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants were 10 seniors that fit the age range of 60 to 79 years old, of whom seven are female; in relation to marital

status: four were single; three, widowers; two, married; one is divorced.

The results were divided into five categories and nine subcategories that show the feelings of the elderly respondents about their sexuality, difficulties and even stigma and family and social taboos experienced by them with regard to their sexuality. It is noteworthy that the results meet with the literature, thus giving more credibility to the research.

♦ CATEGORY - The Experience of sexuality by the elderly

Based on the interviewees' statements it can be found two groups of people, in relation to the elderly sexual experiences: those who live their sexuality and feel sexually able and those who do not live their sexuality in this phase in which they are.

♦ The positive experience of sexuality by the elderly

The following lines reveal the thinking of seniors who see their sexuality similarly to the sexuality they had experienced before:

I'm like when I was young, I want it and I make love, it's the same thing [...] But in relation to it, my wife does not agree because she does not want to, so I find a way because I still want it. (I 1)

[...] The desire I had before is the same that I still have, it's the same desire [...]. (I 3)

I'll be honest with you, I get dressed, I like to spray some perfume and I still feel like having a date. (I 4)

I feel like doing it, yeah, just like when I was young, I still think it's good and I really like doing it [...]. I feel better than these boys of 18 and 20 years old, who walk around with a lot of women. Laughter. (I 7)

Analyzing the statements, it can be noted that the elderly see themselves as a sexually capable being that still has the will to express their sexuality, including sexual act itself. It also noticed that they see sexuality in old age as something completely possible and satisfactory.

It is observed that for the elderly themselves sexuality is not in the memory of virile younger years, quite the opposite, it is a present and indisputable reality even before the advanced age.

Even when old, individuals continue to love in a deeper way because they become less impulsive and at the same time more tolerant and understanding. Sexuality can be considered as a pillar of quality of life.²

♦ The negative experience of sexuality by the elderly

Not all older people experience their sexuality in a positive and satisfactory manner. This is evidenced in the following lines:

No, I have no desire anymore, it erased everything. laughter [...]. (I 2)

I no longer desire to make love at all, for me it's all over [...]. (I 5)

I see myself today as a nothing, I am a discouraged person, I do not even feel like doing it anymore [...] When I was married it was an obligation to me, I had never felt desire. (I 9)

The statements show a negative conception of elderly about their sexuality, which show that they see themselves as beings without emotional ability to express their sexuality. This becomes very clear when referring to the lack of desire due to age.

Certainly the negative attitudes of the elderly about their sexuality contribute to their lack of interest in remaining sexually active. A negative attitude regarding sexuality favors the lack of interest in it, the reduction in sexual activity and the dissatisfaction in all ages, but in a very special way in old age.⁴

This reiterates the idea that every person has the right to live their sexuality or not. And the possible lack of interest does not imply being concerned about this, unless somehow the disinterest or sexual abstinence disturb the personality or cause personal problems.

♦ CATEGORY - Meaning of sexuality

The concept of sexuality is not public domain, and this can be found in several situations, where this issue arises. In the survey it was observed that the elderly did not know the real meaning of sexuality: some were totally unaware about it and others linked it the sexual act itself.

♦ Unknown meaning of sexuality

In the research, there were seniors who did not know the meaning of sexuality. The following statements reveal what was said:

Sexually? [...] (I 2)

What do you mean, sexually? [...] (I 7)

With regard to sexuality, the ideal would be that people came to old age prepared to live it in a pleasant and satisfactory way. However, it has been observed many sexual problems related to lack of adequate sex education and the way that sexuality at this stage of life is conceived, as a deviation.⁵

Thus, we emphasize the importance of working on sexuality theme with people, because the knowledge gained cannot be extinguished, and can provide that individuals experience sexuality at any stage of life in a healthier and more intense way, especially in

the old age, when, above all, one can still rely on the experience that was gained over the years.

♦ The meaning of sexuality understood as synonymous with sexual intercourse

Some elderly respondents showed not knowing the true context of sexuality, and associated it on sex:

Hum... I do not understand, no [...] It might mean sex. (I 3)

To me, sexually is living like husband and wife, isn't it?! [...] The love they two make. (I 5)

Sexually means as husband, right?! [...] (I 6)

Sexually, there is a union when man and woman have sex. (I 9)

Sex does not mean sexuality because sexuality is related to interpersonal relationships, life experiences, care, affection and attention.² Therefore, sex is part of sexuality but that does not mean they are the same thing, and the knowledge between the differences of concepts makes sexuality different to the person experiencing it, since in knowing the real meaning of sexuality, it can be further exploited and experienced, even before the sex itself.

♦ CATEGORY - Sexual difficulties faced by older people.

Old age is marked by physiological changes, losses and social changes that can be reflected in the sexuality of the elderly. This category sought to expose the main difficulties that were reported in the statements of respondents.

♦ Physiological changes

When asked about the difficulties faced by older people in their sexuality, it can be seen that the answers are different and that some physiological problems cause difficulties in sexual experience, as noted in the following lines:

The difficulty is because when we are young everything is easier to get, now, in old age, everything becomes slower than before. (I 3)

Only the weakness due to age [...]. (I 10)

According to the reports of respondents, changes caused by age are present and are challenges faced by them in sexuality process. However, these changes do not prevent sexuality.

The aging process is particularly important for the physiology of sexuality, besides the fact that personal experiences change. The changes caused by the aging process trigger numerous social, cultural and even life-style changes.⁶

♦ A ausência do cônjuge

Another problem exposed was the absence of partners, mainly due to widowhood:

My husband died. (I 4)

I do not know, because for me man does not exist anymore. (I 5)

I am a widow and I don't have sexual intercourse anymore. (I 6)

In fact, losing a spouse contributes to several difficulties in sexuality of the elderly, mainly because they do not always feel free to find another partner, due to nostalgia and remembrance of the deceased partner, or even by family repression. So the elderly in many cases start to live alone and come to see solitude as the main problem in their sexuality.

Widowhood is the beginning of a process of change that leads the individual to change from married to single. Sometimes people had lived decades together with their partner before becoming widowed. Thus the impact of widowhood and the reactions of bereaved people have always been different for each person due to individual characteristics such as sensitivity, vulnerability and psychological structure, also affecting sexuality.⁷

♦ Fear of STDs

The statements of the respondents reveal concern about sexually transmitted diseases, depicted in the following statements:

Yes, I do, because I live alone, my wife does not live with me anymore and I'm afraid to sleep with these women, because the world is full of these diseases [...]. (I 7)

I'm afraid. When I was young we could date without fear because these things didn't exist, but now anywhere we go there are a lot of these diseases. (I 8)

This concern with sexually transmitted diseases is not unnecessary because currently, with increasing longevity and facilities of modern life, including hormone replacement and medicines against impotence, the elderly have been rediscovering experiences, including sex. However, unsafe sexual practices make elderly more vulnerable to contamination with STDs and the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).⁸

The possibility of an elderly be infected with HIV appears invisible in the eyes of society, and also for the elderly themselves, who are not used to use condoms. In face of the increase in the elderly population, the number of notifications of new cases of HIV infection in this age group has also increased.⁹⁻¹⁰

These statements make it clear that the relevant issues on STDs and AIDS are not being treated effectively with the elderly, since it is widely known the existence of the

preservative method, commonly known as condoms, which has important and effective action to prevent those diseases.

Added to this, the use of this method allows the elderly to live their sexuality in a satisfactory, safe and free of fear manner and does not allow that this concern stops and prevents the experiences of their sexuality.

♦ CATEGORY - Sexuality of the elderly on family perspective

This category aims to show the family perspective, in the seniors' conception, about their sexuality, in which it became clear that for the elderly, most families see sexuality in old age negatively. However, there were reports that showed an indifferent behavior of the family related to the subject.

♦ The negative behavior of the family related to sexuality of the elderly

In the family environment, the little acceptance of sexuality of elderly is noted in an intense way, since the bias related to the topic is mainly in the households, where the elderly have less freedom to express their sexuality, mainly due to children and grandchildren.

When it comes to sexuality in old age, families usually address this subject in a negative and oppressive way, as it can be seen in the following statements:

My wife is the first to say that I'm old and that I should settle down. (I 1)

My son does not support. In fact, when I come here he asks if I danced with a man [...]. There's a man that I get thrilled when I see him, but my son does not allow me, he says I'm an old person and still think of dating and that this is ugly. (I 4)

I did not get married after my husband left me because my children are angry with me when I talk about it [...] I have seven children and they all say that I am too old and they said it is not for me to date anybody. (I 8)

I might not have the courage now, for my grandchildren, I do not want to disappoint them; I do not want their friends telling them that their grandmother is hussy. (I 9)

The statements above clearly show that the family has a certain prejudice against sexuality in old age, especially the children and sometimes grandchildren, which leads the elderly in some cases to deprive themselves of their right to sexuality.

Children are usually the first to deny the sexuality of their parents. They negatively interpret their parents' sexual needs. When they admit that it exists, they treat it as something derogatory, as a sign of second childhood, or as sign of dementia.¹¹

Sexuality when related to aging refers to myths and stereotypes leading elderly to the condition of asexual people, and therefore represents a strong taboo. Most of the time, this prejudice begins inside the households, by family members.¹²

The fact is, it is most common and suitable for the family to accept the image of the old woman as the grandmother who spends much of her time cooking and telling stories to her grandchildren, or doing her knitting in the living room watching television and of the grandfather that stays in his rocking chair remembering his youth or napping a bit, due to the culture that preaches this behavior for this age group.

The fact is that this profile of old people does not match reality. Seniors have a life with the same yearnings of a young people or an adult, and this, combined with their experience can give the more maturity and perhaps responsibility in their attitudes.

The family should be educated to understand that reaching old age does not mean the end of life and that major accomplishments and achievements are still possible, including sexual and love practices, as sexuality is not a privilege of youth, it endures over the years.

♦ The indifferent behavior of the family related to sexuality of the elderly

While some do not accept the sexuality of their elderly relatives, others in turn remain indifferent to this context, as shown by the following statements:

That's what I think, and my children do not speak bad things to me, no [...]. (I 3)

My family is not against, but I do not talk about sex with them, no. (I 6)

At home, my oldest son doesn't say anything [...]. (I 10)

It is difficult for the family to realize that the elderly, despite the physiological aging, can stay psychologically young, expanding ties, as there is in our culture a false idea that the elderly have no desire or sexual life.⁵

Society and the Family try to deny the sexuality of the elderly, or to remain indifferent since people find it ugly and refuse to accept that the elderly may want to date. The family, in turn, forgets that sexuality is not only genitality, there is also an affection that is essential to the human being, the need for affection and care.⁵

The statements above show that not all family members take a negative stance towards sexuality in old age. However there is no freedom for these seniors to talk about their sexuality with them. This might happen

due to shame by the elderly or even due to the lack of openness of the family so that this subject can be dialogued openly.

♦ **CATEGORY - Sexuality of the elderly before the taboos and social stigma.**

When it comes to sexuality of the elderly, society has a significant role regarding taboos and stigmas. This can be pictured below:

For me it's normal, but for them it's not [...] People, they think we're old, that we can't take it anymore because of age [...] but they are thinking wrongly, it's not like that. Laughter [...] (I 1)

I think they do not like because they think that just because I'm old I do not want to do it anymore. But I feel because I'm alive, I'm not dead, and when we are alive we always feel like dating [...] I think the young people find all the same, but that I'm ashamed to talk about these things because they will think I'm hussy. Laughter [...]. (I 8)

The elderly who are sexually active most often are ashamed to admit it, since love and sexuality in old age are commonly neglected by society that sees the affective expressions at that age as shameful.⁵

In this way, society does not contribute to the experience of sexuality in old age, in which older people feel prevented of freely experiencing their sexuality often due to cultural internalization that presents negative stereotypes related to sexuality in old age.

I think it's like people say right ?! Some people ignore it and think it's ugly, they laugh about it ... But what the new needs the old also needs. (I 3)

People talk a lot. Especially in my neighborhood, they talk too much. The people say that I'm old and that I can't do these things anymore [...] They really say it, they pressure me, talking bad things [...] They call me shameless and hussy old woman. (I 4)

I think they think it's a very different thing, so they keep telling jokes about old men. I think that they say that since I'm old I shouldn't be looking for man, I think but I don't know, right?! (I 5)

The reports show the view of society in the perception of the elderly, and through these reports we can see that the stigma of society regarding sexuality of the elderly is so transparent that they feel affected by prejudice.

Sexuality in the elderly is related to various feelings such as joy, guilt and shame, and sex in old age provides physical satisfaction, reaffirms the identity and shows how each person can be valuable to another, stimulating sensations of warmth, affection, love and affection.

Above all, it is observed a limited view on the experience sexuality in old age. This period of life is often seen as a period of asexuality and resignations in which the elderly should save their time only to play the roles of grandfather and grandmother, forgetting about their wishes, their desires and their rights.⁴

In this scenario, as regards the sexuality of the elderly, it is necessary to overcome the myth of asexual old age, currently seen by society and the stigma that tend to discourage them, since sexuality is an important part of life, regardless of age. So, references about elderly unable in their sexuality must be overcome.

FINAL REMARKS

Sexuality begins at birth and continues until the end of life; it is a vital human need and cannot be forgotten nor less valued than the sexuality of the young people, since the desires and the experiences of elderly are not less important and not least possible.

The participants' reports reveal that sexuality is legitimate for the elderly, and that they do not see time as inability to enjoy it in a pleasant way and rich in love experiences. Even though they have some difficulties, most of them considered themselves sexually active and able to enjoy it.

By the speeches, it was evident that the stigmas and taboos imposed by their very family and society are felt and experienced by the elderly, a fact that in some cases make them feel shy and embarrassed to express their sexuality, as if that were prohibited and denigrated somehow good reputation.

It is understood that the aging process is inherent to human being and sexuality is a feature that accompany people until the end of life, so it should be a further reflection regarding the sexuality of the elderly and they should be encouraged to experience it in a natural and pleasant way, thus recognizing the uniqueness of each.

It is recommended that health professionals create public health strategies looking carefully, with responsibility and competence at the quality of life of older people, enabling campaigns and projects in order to avoid discrimination, focusing in the possibility of valuing them for their experience.

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Corresponding Address

Déborah Nayane de Oliveira Silva
Programa de Pós-Graduação Bioengenharia
Universidade Vale do Paraíba
Av. Duque de Caxias, 483
Bairro Marco
CEP 50670-901 – Belém (PA), Brazil