

Sexuality and ageing – an unaddressed topic. A qualitative study on sexual attitudes, behaviors and expectations among Polish women and men aged 50-65.

In the last decades, the topic of older adults' sexuality became more prominent. A notable part of recent research on sex in later life established the links between sexual activity, good health and relationship well-being – promoting sexual activity as an element of successful ageing. Qualitative research has shown that the majority of older adults value sexual activity and consider it an important aspect of life. Given the fact that societies are aging, and more individuals entering late adulthood are expected to be interested in maintaining active sex life, research should address this issue by deepening scientific knowledge in the field.

Sexuality in the context of aging has been hardly researched in Poland. The existing literature focuses mainly on the physiology of sex, theoretical description of psycho-physiological changes related to aging and its effects on sexual activity, and establishing the quality of older adults' sexual life via quantitative methods. Also, research regarding sexuality and aging has been dominated internationally by the biomedical perspective, despite the fact that human sexuality is a complex phenomenon and requires an interdisciplinary approach. This research project will be therefore informed by the bio-psycho-social perspective on sexuality, with emphasis on psychological and socio-cultural factors. By applying qualitative methodology, it aims at exploring how personal accounts of adults aged 50-65 can contribute to better scientific understanding of the specificity of sexual life in late adulthood.

This exploratory project will be based on 40 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with Polish women and men aged 50 to 65. Interpretative phenomenological analysis will be used to qualitatively analyze the data, as it requires the researcher to take an 'insider's perspective' to get close to the participant's personal world (to explore and understand unique personal experience) and is concerned with an individual's subjective perspective of a phenomenon under investigation.

The project aims at exploring the following areas: 1) the meaning and place of sex and intimacy within the lives of participants (sexual history, long-term relationships etc.); 2) sexual education and participants' knowledge about own sexual functioning; 3) participants' current sexual life and their sexual expectations for the future (scope of current sexual behaviors, continuing or discontinuing sexual activity, partner's characteristics potentially influencing one's sex life); 4) experiencing sexual problems and related help-seeking behaviors; 5) attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality in later life (what is accepted and what is rejected on a societal level, beliefs translating into individual's sexual desires, expectations, and actual behaviors, navigating between models of 'sexless old age' vs 'sexy oldie'); 6) participants' attitudes towards informal relationships and re-partnering in later life.

The aim of the proposed research is twofold: to expand international knowledge about the sexuality in later life by analyzing the aspects of the topic which have not been scientifically researched before; and to contribute to more nuanced perception of the older adults' sexuality by introducing the unique socio-cultural context (Poland). Determining how sexuality is woven into the life narratives of adults aged 50-65 is an important component of understanding the psychological mechanisms of aging. Identifying certain aspects of the topic and investigating them by qualitative methodology may support the development of theoretical models of aging, which would include sex life as one of the elements of successful aging. The findings of this proposed project will also translate into better comprehension of the links between sexual and relational functioning in earlier periods of life and in late adulthood (life-course perspective). A more detailed knowledge of older adults' sexuality may contribute to a better understanding of their current sexual functioning (activity or withdrawal from sexual life and relationships, the importance of sexuality in their lives, quality of life etc.). This better understanding is crucial for providing adequate psychological, medical, and therapeutic support to both older adults and those currently entering this period of life (50+). Professional and adequate sexual health promotion should aim at reducing the stereotypes and sexual ageism by providing reliable and scientifically grounded knowledge about sexuality in later life.