



# Towards defining sexologists as professional group

## The MAPS study - MAPping Sexology as a profession in Portugal

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### Introduction

This study is part of a larger research to define sexologists as a professional group in Portugal, as developed before in other countries by Euro-Sexo research group (Giarni, 2009). The diversity of the professional profiles observed in the different countries raised questions concerning the status of this profession: *is it a fully-fledged profession in itself, or rather a specialization within the framework of mainstream health professions?*

Our Aim was to explore the process by which Portuguese sexology is professionalized, namely: (1) **how sexologists develop a professional identity and commit to a larger professional identity as sexologists**; and (2) **how do they integrate their professional role into the vast multidisciplinary field of sexual health**.

### Methods

#### Population and sampling

- Qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with informants about their perceptions on sexology and their professional experiences.
- Participants selection followed a purposeful sampling strategy to guarantee heterogeneity concerning age, gender, training and practice.
- Experts recommended by other experts were also included. From a final list of 55 identified experts, **44 interviews (22 physicians, 13 psychologists, and 9 social scientists)** were obtained.

#### Data collection

- Invitations were made by emails and phone calls from the researchers.
- Interviews lasting between 45 minutes and two hours, audio-taped (with permission), were carried out between November 2011 and April 2012 by all of the 4 researchers, in pairs or individually, specially JA for gynaecologists and psychiatrists; VF for endocrinologists and psychologists; VA for social scientists and urologists; and AB for psychologists and urologists.

- The discussion was guided by a topic guide that sought to draw out participants' accounts of their personal experiences in the field and their own perceptions of sexology.
- The primary questions derived from a review of the literature and emerging themes from analysis of the first interviews were explored in later interviews.

#### Analysis

- Discussions partially transcribed by the interviewers, and finally reviewed by the first author (VA) that listened to the tapes and checked the transcripts as part of the familiarization process.
- Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987).
- Exploratory data analysis was made using a thematic analysis with broad themes: **professional identity, profession frontiers' and collaboration with other fields**.
- A network of subordinate and superordinate themes was established. The recurrent themes were identified and coded (along with supporting quotes) independently and consensus was reached by discussion between the researchers.
- Analysis of interviews transcripts indicated that data saturation was achieved.

### Results

- Results indicate that sexology is not seen as a fully-fledged profession, but as a specialization or as a secondary field of action within the framework of mainstream health professions, even among professionals publicly associated with sexology.
- Sexual medicine field is prevalent and more visible among physicians (urologists, gynecologists, endocrinologists, and psychiatrics), reflecting the gap between psychosocial and biomedical approaches.
- A close link between clinical work and research and a gap between clinical work and health promotion were found.
- Cooperation and communication between fields (medicine, psychology, social sciences, research, health promotion) is a shared but unreached aim mainly because of lack of established networking between fields, with some exceptions.
- Portuguese sexology foundation and founders were clearly shared by experts.

### Conclusions

- It seems that sexology in Portugal is raising visibility and public recognition as a professional field.
- Although scientific associations and research have been developed since the seventies most experts do not consider it as a profession.
- Despite multidisciplinary nature of sexology is acknowledged it is not yet fully implemented by experts working in the field.
- Further analysis is expected to clarify the pathways to the profession of sexologist in Portugal.
- Ongoing research based on a quantitative approach will characterize sexologists as a professional group, their level of training in sexology, their professional practice and identity.

#### Key challenges, opportunities and future directions from experts' perspectives

- Training in sexology needs to guarantee its quality and to communicate more with research.
- Sexology research needs sustainable financial support and to increase relevant scientific production.
- Clinical sexology should articulate services and resources and collaborate more with research.
- Health promotion and sex education need more recognition and collaboration with the other areas.

Table 1. Participants themes as categorized as experts in the sexology field (N=44)

Broad themes	Main themes in narratives concerning sexologists experience
<b>Professional identify</b> <b>Sexology as specialization of a primary field</b> Sexology is interpreted as a specialization and a professional complement rather than a primary profession. Sexology is a field of practice secondary to a clinical profession (psychiatrist, urologist, and gynaecologist) or clinical psychologist. Even in experts publicly associated with sexology, personal and professional identity is not primarily sexologist.	<i>I don't really enjoy presenting myself as a sexologist, because truly there are no sexologists in Portugal. Academically, for example, in medicine there is no such thing as sexologists. So I feel reluctant to present myself as a sexologist. I devote myself to sexology for 30 years and primarily I am an endocrinologist.</i> [male, endocrinologist, working in clinical, teaching and research areas]
<b>Sexologists as sexual therapists</b> Those who identify themselves as sexologists mainly belong to psychological sciences and some have the title of sexual therapist.	<i>A sexologist is someone who studies sexuality. It should be a profession but it is not. It is a specific research field. I see it as a little baby. It is important to bring other people, other knowledge and other models to conceptualize sexuality, which is a lot more than sexual response.</i> [female, psychologist, working in clinical and research areas]
<b>Sexologists as researchers</b> Some experts are almost full time researchers and devote less time to clinical work. There is a focus on psychological issues in sexology research and clinical work and a will to collaborate with other fields like medicine (in masters degree), social sciences (anthropology, sociology).	<i>It is hard to define a sexologist: it should not be closed in a box. As for sexual therapy it is possible to establish rules, as having training in sexology and in sexual difficulties, having clinical practice. In sexology the dichotomy between psychological and medical fields exists but less than in other fields (...)</i> [male, psychologist, working in clinical, teaching and research areas]
<b>Professional collaboration</b> <b>Is sexology an interdisciplinary field?</b> There is a need for better collaboration and communication between sexology fields and services. More communication between clinical practitioners, researchers and health promoter is needed.	<i>Some doctors make efforts to open their specialization to psychological issues. The psychologists need to educate these doctors for collaboration. The relationship between family practitioners and sexual therapists is disastrous, they do not refer and they think they can do it all.</i> [female, psychologist, working in clinical, teaching and research areas]

Source: MAPping Sexology in Portugal (MAPS): Sexology as a profession 2011. Part of the study Sexology as a profession in Europe of the Research Group Euro-Sexo

### References

- Giarni A, de Colomby P. La profession de sexologue en Europe : diversité et perspectives communes. *Sexologies*. 2006;15: 7-13.
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