

Sexuality in later life: Exploring the influence of aging and social representations in a Portuguese sample of heterosexual men and women¹

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As discussed by Barbara Marshall, contemporary sexual medicine presents sexual function as an indicator of overall health, transforming changing sexual capacities into a health problem requiring intervention. This not only increases medical attention but accentuates the importance of continued sexual activity across the lifespan. Yet there is limited information on sexual behavior and its influencing factors among older adults and how sexual activities change with aging and illness. People of advanced age still face stereotypes about sexual function. Only recently an increased interest in the sexuality of older people has been apparent by their inclusion in surveys, which has not happened in Portugal. Drawing on a mixed mode of data collection due to the intimate and sensitive nature of the topic, we intended to explore the differences regarding various components of sexuality, including sexual practices, sexual function and social representations, in Portuguese men and women before and after reaching andropause and menopause. Combinations of the benefits of a face-to-face interview and the privacy of self-completion for more sensitive questions have been used in many surveys, with selfcompletion modules producing higher rates of sensitive behaviors than face-to-face interviews. Diligent attention was undertaken with regard to ethical principles such as respect, autonomy and confidentiality. Results highlighted that sexual life in older adults is influenced by many factors other than hormones, making difficult to disentangle the effects of aging from those of andropause and menopause. Anticipation and negative representations of sexuality remain pervasive, shaping popular images of older people, research and policy agendas.

Key words: Sexuality, aging, menopause, andropause, social representations

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