Healthy Sexual Aging: Sexual function and sexual well-being in older European adults

Relevance

Sexual health is relevant throughout the lifespan and increasingly considered a human right. Research has demonstrated important gaps in the understanding of sexual problems and the provision of sexual health-related assistance for older adults. Yet, less is known about the associations between sexuality and health in older adults, leaving contemporary societies less prepared for the challenges associated with the demands of new and larger generations of older adults when it comes to their sexual health and sexual well-being.

When addressing the concerns and needs of older adults, it is important to keep in mind the significant role that sexual health plays in the lives of older adults. Sexual well-being and function are increasingly regarded as integral components of health and well-being in later life.

Healthy Sexual Aging

Sexual function and sexual well-being are complex constructs influenced by a range of factors, including biological, psychological, and social factors. These factors interact in complex ways, and the experience of sexual functioning and satisfaction can vary greatly among individuals.

Although the topic of sexual health is increasingly gaining legitimacy and importance, our knowledge regarding sexuality in older age is lacking, especially when it comes to the question of how biopsychosocial age-related changes may affect the body and sexuality in older age. The expressions of sexuality vary between and within different societies and cultures. In a new research project, the sexual well-being and sexual function of older adult men and women in Europe will be compared. It is hypothesized that sexual behavior, sexual function, and sense of sexual well-being in older adults will be culture-dependent, gender-specific, and cross-sectional.

The new project applies a mixed-methods approach. A quantitative sub-study will be carried out as national, representative cross-sectional questionnaire surveys in Norway, Denmark, Portugal, and Belgium. A qualitative sub-study will involve in-depth interviews of 25-35 men and women of different sexual orientations in different countries. This sub-project was first initiated in Norway in 2015, and new data collection will start in the UK and Croatia in 2016-2017. Four PhD students will be affiliated to the project.

The quantitative segment aims to answer the following core questions:

- How often do older adults experience sexual problems? What are the factors that transform short-term sexual problems into more persistent and troubling problems?
- Are there important gender differences in individual perspectives on the aging body and sexual functioning? Are there gender-specific predictors of healthy sexual aging among men and women? What is the role of gender norms, dominant cultural tradition, and social class in shaping assessments of sexual well-being and personal expectations related to sexual health?
- How are sexual well-being, sexual functioning, and sexual health related to hormonal changes in aging and/or illness prevention and recovery? To which extent do older adults seek information or help in relation to sexual health? If they have had a help-seeking experience, how satisfied were they with the help they received and were the problems improved?
- The qualitative segment of the study will address the following four core questions:
  - How do people experience their sexuality and body in older ages? Does the importance of sexuality and appearance change across the lifespan? Do aging people adjust to the bodily changes related to growing older, and if so, how do they do this?
  - What is the role of intimacy and emotional support in coping with changes related to sexuality and difficulties with sexual functioning?
  - Are there cultural or media ideals and role models for how to handle body changes and aging sexually?
  - What are the barriers for seeking information or help in relation to sexual health? Who can older adults contact, and who would they prefer to contact? If they chose to have a help-seeking experience, what were their perceptions of this, and what was the consequence thereof?

The findings from the different components will be contextualized to highlight cultural and policy-related differences between European regions, and their societal challenges and implications for health will be considered. Based on this analysis, the results will be used to inform the design and development of scalable, culturally appropriate awareness-raising interventions for the public and a professional intervention program for health practitioners working with aging populations.

STATE OF THE ART

Sexual Satisfaction and Well-being

The position of sexuality in the lives of older adults has become more prominent, with increasing age. Throughout the lifespan, sexuality is regarded as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as expectation and attention to sexuality, as 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European Context

Even though sexuality and its expressions have undergone many changes in Europe over the course of the past few decades, particularly among women, large inter- and intra-cultural differences exist. For instance, recent research has pointed to a difference between northern and southern European countries in sexual behavior such as sexual debut age and use of contraception in emerging adults, and it is likely that these differences are even larger in older segments of the population. Variables and changing gender roles and gender equality and the restrictions on sexuality, particularly as related to the expression of women’s sexuality, most likely contribute to these differences. Nordic countries have long-held ideological traditions favoring equality between individuals and social groups. Both female and adolescent sexuality are more accepted in Nordic countries than many other Western countries. Accordingly, sexuality in Nordic cultures is often regarded as representative of a ‘liberated’ culture. Despite this move toward equality, however, gender differences in sexual matters still exist, in both adolescents and grandparents.

The situation in southern Europe seems to be somewhat different from that of the north. A decade ago, men in this region generally began their sexual life at an earlier age than women. In many Mediterranean countries, including Croatia and Portugal, men’s behavior continues to be influenced by patriarchal traditions. In these cultural contexts, men and women’s sexual roles tend to adhere to gender constructions that position masculinity in opposition to femininity. The sexual dimension of masculinity involves initiation, dominance, assertiveness, and independence. In contrast, femininity, in these cultures, is associated with sexual passivity, submissiveness, and dependency. As traditional societies are more restrictive of women’s sexual expression, women are socialized to protect their reputation by setting limits on men’s advances and by lýing sexual activities to institutionalized love and/or partnership represented by marriage. The constraints on women’s sexuality in these cultural contexts may negatively impact women’s general and sexual well-being, a possibility that will be empirically tested in our project.

Sexual cultures and gender roles can be expected to affect the sexuality of older adults as well. A sexual culture and its related system of gender roles may influence the extent to which men and women feel free to express themselves sexually and able to negotiate or influence social policies toward treatments or resources that improve sexual health and enhance sexual well-being in older adulthood (e.g., the availability and costs of sex therapy and of the medications, and hormone treatments, used to help improve sexual function). This is particularly important when we try to contextualize patterns of sexual behavior in older adults, highlighting cultural and policy-related differences between European regions, and when we explore and discuss the associated societal challenges and implications for health and illness.

Thus, it is important to better understand country-specific predictors of various outcome variables as these subsequently may be targeted in intervention studies and sexual health approaches in various countries. For example, if sexual attitudes are found to be more important determinants of sexual health in Denmark than in Croatia, then intervention studies and sexual health strategies in Denmark should include an explicit focus on these attitudes, whereas other needs may be needed to be addressed in Croatia. Given other cultural differences between, for example, that being a sexual being throughout the lifespan should be considered a fundamental human right.

Relevance and Benefits to Society

The WHO has explicitly stated that increasing sexual health and well-being of the aging population is an important topic and goal. The population of older adults is growing, and quality of life during older age is a significant issue to address. Sexual satisfaction and well-being are part of general satisfaction and well-being, and, consistent with this, the Declaration of Sexual Rights explicitly states that being a sexual being throughout the lifespan should be considered a fundamental human right.

KEY PERSPECTIVES AND COMPLIANCE WITH STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS

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Relevance and Benefits to Society

The results of our research project can be expected to produce new and much-needed knowledge about sexual well-being and health in older adults and its psychosocial and sociocultural aspects, and will improve our understanding of how sexuality is linked to healthy aging, illness, and recovery. Hopefully, the findings will assist health professionals in new interventions aiming to prevent sexual problems and SIs in older adults, singles and couples. The findings will provide policymakers, health administrators/personnel, and institutions training medical and health care staff with evidence-based guidelines for addressing issues related to sexual health of older adults. The findings and insights from this research project will be used to design an educational program for healthcare professionals working with older adults, which will promote a more systematic inclusion of sexual health issues in the promotion of healthy aging, illness prevention and treatment. This will enable better preparation of older adults for the social challenges related to aging and sexual health and well-being in aging European societies.

The intervention part of the study will be developed on the basis of the findings from the quantitative and the qualitative studies, and in consultation with key stakeholders. It will include creating a project website and designing downloadable brochures in various languages, with the goal of raising awareness and providing sexuality and sexual health-related information in aging women and men. The intervention will also target health practitioners working with the aging population, to increase their knowledge about and competence in meeting sexual health-related needs in older adults. The sexual health intervention will have particular emphasis on improving sexual functioning and reducing sexual problems in couples as well as in older adults who do not have a partner.

Dissemination and Communication of Findings

When it comes to the EU, we consider the dissemination of our findings to the general public, in a highly accessible form and style, as a core goal of our project. With this, we aim to address dominant stereotypes about sexuality in older age, to normalize the importance of sexual activity among older adults, and to provide the often missing evidence-based information about sexual health and the related problems in older adults.

Authors

Professor Bente Iraeen (Project coordinator), the University of Oslo, Norway, with Professor Aleksandar Stulhofer, University of Zagreb, Croatia, Professor Erick Janssen, University of Leuven, Belgium, Professor Cynthia Graham, University of Southampton, United Kingdom, Associate Professor Gert Martin Hald, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, Professor Paul Essink, University of Leuven, Belgium, Professor Ana Carvalheira, ISPA-University Institute, Portugal.