

# The sexual aspects of intimacy in old age, in the public and private spheres<sup>1</sup>

## Streszczenie

Seksualne wymiary intymności w prywatnej i publicznej przestrzeni starości

W naukach społecznych coraz wyraźniej akcentuje się zagadnienia dotyczące seksualności jako wymiaru jakości życia w okresie późnej dorosłości oraz starości. Celem artykułu jest refleksja nad aktywnością seksualną seniorów w kontekście starości biologicznej, podmiotowej i społecznej, w oparciu o czynniki obiektywne (wiek, stan organizmu), subiektywne (poczucie bycia starym) i społeczno-kulturowe (stereotypy, społeczne przekonania).

W artykule istotne miejsce zajmuje część badawcza, przedstawiająca jakościowy opis indywidualnego i pozornie nieprzekazywalnego doświadczenia intymności i seksualności kobiet i mężczyzn w starszym wieku.

## Słowa kluczowe:

starość, seniorzy, kobieta, mężczyzna, aktywność seksualna, intymność

## Abstract

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The subject of sexuality as an aspect of quality of life in late adulthood or seniority is receiving more and more attention within the social sciences. The purpose of this article is to reflect upon sexual activity among senior citizens in the context of old age – understood biologically, individually and socially, based on objective factors (age, condition of the body), subjective (the feeling of ‘being old’), social and cultural ideas (stereotypes, social convictions, public opinion). The research segment plays a significant role in this article; it provides a qualitative description of the seemingly indescribable individual experience of intimacy and sexuality among elderly women and men.

## Key words:

old age, senior citizens, woman, man, sexual activity, intimacy

## 1. The sociocultural image of asexual old age

Modern civilization, which is comprised of societies that are old and ageing, yet are saturated with the cult of youth, try to remove senior citizens and old age from the sociocultural field of view (Jakubowska 2009). The result of the ageing process is treated as unattractive and therefore different from the preferred, dominating ideal.

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The marginalization of old age is largely caused by the ubiquitous obsession with youth, health and physical power. There is no place for the acceptance of the “old, sickly and unsightly” among the images of the “forever young and beautiful”. Marcus Tullius Cicero’s (1963) dissertation regarding old age mentioned four reasons why people mostly consider old age an unhappy stage of life. “It moves us further away from active life, lessens our physical strengths, deprives us of all sensual pleasures, it is close to death” (p. 19). This idea has not lost much of its validity since ancient times. The culture of consumption puts emphasis on youth, vitality, individualism, ability, success and control – traits which are not attributed to old people.

Ageism, or discrimination based on age, is associated mostly with negative views and stereotypes regarding senior citizens which are widespread in society. Polish public opinion polls show that perception of old age is negative; that Poles are afraid of old age (Omyła-Rudzka 2012). The process of ageing is identified with unattractiveness and physical ugliness; it is also framed in the context of dementia and infantilization. Old age is assigned many negative traits, e.g. increased reflexivity, being overbearing, having outdated values or a tendency to criticize one’s surroundings (Kapała 2006).

For centuries, in Western culture, the sexuality of senior citizens has not been a point of interest and sexual activity in this phase of life was treated as an oddity or even pathological, because it had no place in the accepted and preferred social order. The dominant view was that sexual activity requires one to expend lots of energy and so it must be limited in order to preserve health and longevity. Sex was long associated with procreation; therefore the inability to procreate automatically disqualified a person as a sexual partner. Any sexual behaviour not connected with procreation was classified as pathological (e.g. masturbation and homosexual, oral and anal sex). A common conviction was that post-menopausal women do not feel sexual needs, lose their ability to orgasm, sex has less significance for them than for men, etc. In the case of older men, sexual activity was tolerated only when in marriage with a woman who is still fertile (Lew-Starowicz 2012).

Ideas about sex during old age are usually accompanied by surprise and disbelief. A senior citizen cannot be an object of desire because according to popular culture models he/she is not sexy – that attribute would sooner be assigned to young girls (“Lolitas”) than older women. The asexuality of old age stems from an obsession with sex, associated with beauty, health, youth and vitality. Old age on the other hand is usually associated with dependency, helplessness, passiveness, ugliness, sickness and death.

## **2. A reflection of sexual activity among senior citizens in research surveys**

The shift in attitudes toward the sexuality of elderly people is connected with the social changes in western culture which took place during the late 1960s, commonly referred to as the “sexual revolution”. Since the 1990s the interest of social researchers

in the sexuality of senior citizens has grown. Alfred Kinsey's report published in 1948 stated that older people are unable to remain sexually active. Later research, conducted in the 1980s and 1990s on a representative sample group aged 50 to 93, brought the conclusion that most respondents are sexually active and (especially men) declare a connection between sexual activity and satisfaction with life (Brecher 1993). In many research polls gender is a significant variable which differentiates senior citizens in their sexuality. In the *British Medical Journal* from 2010, American researchers proposed the introduction of a new term – SALE, or “sexually active life expectancy”. This value differs significantly between the two genders, when compared with average life expectancy. For men, sexual activity is 10 years shorter than life span. In the case of women, the difference between SALE and life expectancy is nearly twice that and can be up to 20 years, because women live an average of 10 years longer than men. In the 75–85 age group there are still many more sexually active men than women. But many of the women in this group are widows with small chances of a new relationship. Only half of them are satisfied with their sex life and few admit that they think about sex regularly (Tessler Lindau and Gavrilova 2010).

Part of the older population displays a high degree of sexual activity in informal relationships, or LAT cohabitation (“living apart together”). This choice comes from the need for financial and territorial independence (Hooymann and H. Kiyak 2011). So far, the little research regarding older gay and lesbian people in formal or informal homoerotic relations (between elderly LGBT persons) show a high level of sexual satisfaction and the positive aspects of partners ageing together (Heaphy 2007).

Polish reports regarding Polish sex life highlight the fact that senior citizens are sexually active and are much more satisfied with their sex life than is commonly assumed. Mature and older men, more often than their female peers, report regular sexual activity (e.g., Izdebski 2012; Izdebski 2011; Lew-Starowicz 2005).

Some modern surveys show that senior citizens devote more time to sexual activity than representatives of the younger generation. Research conducted on representative samples in western countries shows that one in three surveyed 70-year olds reveals various forms of sexual activity (masturbation, caressing or petting and sexual intercourse), while one in thirty declares daily sexual activity in old age (DeLamater and Karraker 2009). Researchers who focus on the elderly point to the formation of a new stereotype – the “sexy oldie”. At its base is the idea that sexual conduct is an expression of healthy, ideal old age, that sex at that age is pleasant and an expression of true love and that in some cases complete sexual performance requires medical intervention (Gott 2005).

Worldwide, a large percentage of 70- and 80-year olds think about sex and miss it. The research conducted clearly concludes that sexual activity promotes health and longevity, has pain-relieving qualities, improves quality of life, reduces the risk of circulatory

disease, depression and tumours, and mobilises the immune system. For men, sexual activity reduces the risk of heart attack, stroke and prostate disease, and increases levels of testosterone (Lew-Starowicz, 2012).

### 3. Areas of the sexual intimacy of senior citizens in qualitative research

It is only possible to describe sexual intimacy after a very thorough review of individual cases. For the purpose of this article I will present a small portion of research results, which are part of a wider empirical analysis. Qualitative research conducted in Warsaw from 2003 to 2011 had the objective of finding varied analytical material in the area of defining intimacy. The research process consisted of three stages: collecting definitions of intimacy, individual interviews, and focus groups regarding a chosen aspect of intimacy in adult partner relationships (Bieńko 2013). As the result of a “snowball strategy”, 1130 women and men aged 19–89 took part in the three research stages.

Analysis of chosen statements, only from people who were 60 or older and took part in the first two research stages, will be the basis for conclusions included in the article.

As the results of research I conducted show, both men and women of early and later old age emphasize the huge role sex plays in building intimacy: *Sex is that burst of passion, the road to intimacy, closeness, open love, security, where there is permission for all the senses, desire (531/k [kobieta, woman] /84)<sup>2</sup>; Intimacy is of course a sexual release, for me it's also a pleasant kind of stress, arousal, an experience full of fantasy and frivolity, indecency with effort, screaming, pain, sweat (946/m [man]/75).*

Experiencing sexuality is the key motive for striving for intimacy; sexuality becomes a tool which serves to test the limits of human capabilities. In the women's interpretation, sex more often means *tenderness and refinement (864/k/63)*. In the interpretation of men, sex is treated more objectively: *Sometimes sex, erotic intimacy, is easier than being close with someone. My grandmother was right, she said that sex sometimes replaces intimacy (415/m/73)*. In the statements of men, the main associations are desire, instinct, libido and carnality: *I break into fifty pieces then (809/m/70)*. Men more often talk about sex directly, as physical activity, while women describe it as magical, a matter of destiny and mystery, which is connected with certain traditions, values and taboos, (...) *something which I pursue, without understanding it (294/k/73); Everything that we do, just the two of us (...) flirting, conversations about our sexual fantasies, crossing boundaries, for example showing yourself to your partner in a provocative outfit, bought only for him – an act of playful exhibitionism (307/k/64)*. More often for women than for men the love act is *hidden, shrouded by mystery, embarrassing, and therefore intimate (234/k/76); Intercourse was always a bit mystical for me (354/k/79); What happens in*

<sup>2</sup> The symbols in parentheses next to statements are the codes for each surveyed person: the numbers indicate the order in which the interviews were conducted/the subject's gender/the subject's age.

*the bedrooms of old timers is a real mystery. You don't talk about it with your neighbours, what would people say? Impossible! You still do that?!... (327/m/69).*

According to the surveyed, intimacy is expressing oneself through the physical, carnality, the art of giving and receiving bodily pleasure: *It's being one body, even the insides (...) Intimacy is sharing the space of our bodies inaccessible to others (215/m/60).* Intimacy, in one of its aspects, is the key to developing the realm of the senses. The surveyed rated touch highly as an element of intimacy. The amount of satisfaction received from touch is proportionate to the openness and readiness to express personal emotions; to activeness in interpersonal contacts and satisfying relations. The frequency of tactile contact does not decrease with the age of the surveyed: *Touch is an intimate, primal language of love; extensive physical contact can be soothing for both young and old, like a natural sedative. The touch of human skin, even if old and wrinkled, is very intimate (183/m/66); We feel intimacy through our skin, we all need a tender, caressing touch from our loved ones, no matter how old we are (362/k/74).*

Intimate relations break into short-term, episodic meetings, creating a micro-reality of intimacy: *a call during the day with a short "I love you", giving each other compliments, having meals together, caressing without expecting sex right away. (...) These are usually the small things that may seem insignificant in the moment, but nothing brings people closer together than a mutual, simultaneous experience. Sex can be a ritual of intimacy, too (32/k/64).* For older interviewed participants, intimacy is the essence of normality. Its important elements are everyday interactions, significant due to the engagement of the partners: *Intimacy is like burning a bonfire together. Everyone has to add something to the fire (32/k/64) Intimacy is showing closeness in the form of hugs or holding hands, sharing laughter, embracing while watching television, doing dishes together after a meal. Even though these are not sexual activities, they help build intimacy (38/m/83).*

The surveyed married couples speak about a *well-worn* intimacy: *Step by step the partner becomes familiar, even homely. After a couple decades the relationship may become more worn, less sexy, but it does not mean we don't look for that glint in the eye – and it's thanks to that developed intimacy (28/m/69); Our marriage is becoming a little 'absent-minded'. (...) we end up in the bedroom alone, the grandkids are asleep. "What should we do?" we think with excitement. But after a while, we're both asleep. (...) Sleeping together, without sex, can be intimate in its own way (23/k/71).*

As the results of the research I conducted show, both men and women in old age consciously and carefully work on building intimate relations in long-term relationships. They try to maintain the emotional closeness and not forget the physical aspect of being together. In the second half of life sexual desire usually decreases gradually. Less frequent intercourse is effectively compensated for by other forms of activity and non-sexual forms of expressing emotions, love, tenderness, closeness and attachment.

The respondents believe that one can experience sexual pleasure at any age. The image of sex and the erotic, in the respondents' statements, is an openness to emotions, which penetrates the senses.

#### **4. Modern anti-ageing sensibilities in the image of the sexuality of senior citizens**

The sex life of older people is gradually being treated less as something sinful and shameful. We observe an increasing average life span and a growing population of people interested in being sexually active in old age. Research is conducted regarding "quality of life", which also takes into account the sexuality of the elderly, while mass culture promotes a healthy lifestyle and activeness among senior citizens. International research associations are dealing with anti-ageing strategies and a satisfying life model, which includes sex life.

Until recently there has been talk of a "double standard in ageing", different for women and men. According to Bartosz and Zierkiewicz (2005), it is still a characteristic of femininity in Poland. Although older men are perceived as being "in their golden years", an older woman is treated with tolerance and patronizing leniency. Meanwhile, thanks to exercise, cosmetic procedures and diet, older women are often more healthy and age better than their male peers. Popular culture argues that one can enter old age without radically losing physical attractiveness. The media construct an image of ageing women who keep the right to publically display their nudity. American actress Sharon Stone appeared topless on the cover of *Paris Match* in August 2009, with the provocative title, "I'm 50, so what!". Helen Mirren, a British actress, feels sexy and wears a bikini, despite being 65 years old. In 2000 in Great Britain, a calendar featuring nudes of older women caused a sensation. Profits from sale of the calendar went to charities which help fight leukaemia. In the 2007 Pirelli calendar, one of the models in a erotic photo shoot was 76 year-old Sophia Loren.

Modern 50 year-olds say that "50 is the new 30". The term "silver surfer", used to describe grey-haired adventurers, stopped applying exclusively to men. Women are becoming more confident in expressing their sexual desires in the public sphere. Erotic stories for older women, called "porn for mums" are popular worldwide (e.g. James 2012). Their intimate life does not end at 50. Not long ago the press wrote with sarcasm and disbelief about movie stars' relationships with partners many years their junior: "the star and her toy boy". Today, retired teachers searching for a partner place ads in the paper with erotic propositions. "Before I turn 67 – which will be in March – I want to experience lots of sex with a good man" (Juska 2013). Then there is the romance of a British divorcee with a man over thirty years younger, which was turned into a book and became a worldwide bestseller. The star of the scandal claims openly that she meets

regularly with three different men, says she is too old to play marriage and values her freedom. The only loss she mentions is a rib broken during passionate sex. All this, over 100 years after Princess Metternich (2012) was asked at what age a woman loses her sex drive – to which she replied, “Ask another, I’m only sixty” (p. 395).

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