



PERCEPTION OF THE ELDERLY PEOPLE ABOUT THEIR SEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to analyze the elderly person's perception about their sexuality. **Methodology:** this is a field study, descriptive and of qualitative nature, carried out at the Social Assistance Reference Center (CRAS) of Ipaumirim, Ceará. The sample consisted of nine (9) individuals and data collection was performed between August and September 2016, using a previously prepared questionnaire. The data were analyzed according to content analysis techniques and discussions based on the dialectical method. **Results:** the elderly participants in the study understand the concepts related to sex, despite not having an active sex life. The subjects emphasized the importance of sexuality in old age and consider prejudice as the main factor that hinders the full experience of sexuality in old age. **Conclusion:** it is possible to conclude that the older adults understand the importance of sexuality and are aware of their own needs and desires, as well as they perceive the benefits of an active sex life for well-being and quality of life. However, the culture of asexuality and the prejudice surrounding old age make this practice difficult.

Keywords: Nursing. Aging. Quality of life. Sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Aging is a stage of human life characterized by several changes of a biopsychosocial character, understood from the age of 60. However, these changes of old age are permeated with prejudice and having as a synonym incapacity, impotence and unproductiveness, in physical, social, mental and economic fields ⁽¹⁾. In this sense, the changes that mark this stage of life can compromise, among other dimensions of the individual's life, the experience of their own sexuality. ⁽¹⁾

The experience of aging is experienced in a harmonious way depends on the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships that allow companionship, complicity, passion, affection, dating, love and sex in a satisfactory and healthy way, promoting a dynamic balance between the natural decline in individual, physical and mental functions and capacities and the quality of life of the elderly people ⁽²⁾.

When it is related to aging, it is common for sexuality to still be permeated by taboos and myths, causing the impression that elderly people are necessarily asexual and do not have sexual desires or fantasies ⁽³⁾. In this sense, it is important to point out that the elderly individuals' sexuality must be perceived from the totality of the individual, not only as a biological factor, but also psychosocial and cultural ⁽⁴⁾.

The lack of knowledge about the aging process is one of the main factors that feed prejudice and the social stigma that still exists when it comes to sexuality in old age. The perceptions of the elderly people, considered autonomous subjects, about the experience of their own sexuality, can contribute to encourage the confrontation of exclusion and prejudice, opening space for the full experience of sexuality ⁽⁵⁾.

Thus, the study aimed to analyze the elderly person's perception of their sexuality. From this brief exposition, this study was developed in a

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Social Assistance Reference Center (CRAS) in the municipality of Ipaumirim, Ceará, guided by the following problems: what is the perception of the elderly people about their own sexuality? What is the importance of stimulating sexuality in old age?

METHODOLOGY

This is a field study, cross-sectional, descriptive and of a qualitative nature. It was held at the Social Assistance Reference Center (CRAS) in the city of Ipaumirim, Ceará. The city of Ipaumirim has an area of 275,159 km² and its estimated population, in 2019, was 12,463 inhabitants, with a demographic density of 43.86 inhabitants/km². Its Human Development Index (HDI), in 2010, was 0.606⁽⁶⁾.

Nine (9) elderly individuals who attended CRAS from the city of Ipaumirim were interviewed, in particular those ones who participate in the group of coexistence and strengthening of bonds of the elderly people. The sample was selected at random, being considered sufficient considering the demographic density of elderly people in the municipality of approximately 6 inhabitants/km², based on data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)⁽⁶⁾: 1,629 elderly people, based on in the 2010 census, divided by the municipality's territory - 275,159 km².

For data collection, a questionnaire was used which, according to Minayo⁽⁷⁾, is a set of questions on the topic under study. The interview was previously prepared by the researcher with open questions related to the topic of sexuality of the older adults. There was also a questionnaire of sociodemographic data, in order to get to know the research sample better.

Among the structured questions, they are: (1) Do you know the difference between sex and sexuality? Explain.; (2) Do you have an active sex life?; (3) Do you feel uncomfortable talking about your own sexuality? Why?; (4) What is your opinion about sexuality in old age?; (5) Do you consider sexuality important in old age? Why?; (6) How important is sex to you today? Why?; (7) In your opinion, what are the main difficulties faced by the elderly people regarding

sexuality?; (8) Do you feel satisfied with your sex life?; (9) What is the importance of sexuality for your quality of life?

The questions were divided for each category analyzed, and the category sexuality and active sexual life, covered questions 1 and 2; the category, perception of the importance of sexuality, incorporated questions 3, 4, 5 and 6; the category, difficulties in exercising sexuality in the elderly, attended question 7 and the category personal satisfaction with sexuality, inserted questions 8 and 9.

The data were collected in the months of August and September 2016. At first, contact was made with the municipality's social assistance secretary, presenting the consent form to formalize the research authorization.

The data were analyzed according to the Content Analysis technique proposed by Bardin⁽⁸⁾, which is a set of communication analysis techniques containing information about human behavior, based on document sources. And in order to preserve the identity of the participants, the names were omitted, using the term "participant" followed by numbers to identify the answers, as follows: "participant 1", "participant 2", and so on.

The discussions were developed based on the dialectical method. According to this method, phenomena are seen in constant change, considering that as something grows and develops, other aspects disintegrate and transform. Thus, the phenomena identified by the researcher, considered as an expression of the truth, must be contradicted with other realities, in order to add more rigors to the analysis⁽⁹⁾.

According to the ethical aspects defined in Resolution 466/2012, of the National Health Council, about the standards that must be observed in research involving human beings, this study was developed based on the references of bioethics, ethical principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice. Data collection started after the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of Faculdade Santa Maria, under opinion number 1687512.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, the results of the sociodemographic survey are presented in this chapter, with the data distributed in Table 1 according to the age group, race or color, sex, marital status and religion of the elderly people who agreed to participate in the survey. Then, the results obtained through the application of the data collection instrument, about sexuality in the elderly people, are presented and discussed. Four

categories of analysis were created to group the data collected with the elderly individuals.

Sociodemographic data

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic variables of interest in the present study, determining the frequency (f) and the relative percentage (%) of each characteristic.

Table 1 – Sociodemographic characteristics of the research participants, Ipaumirim, CE.

VARIABLES	f	%
AGE GROUP		
60-65	7	78%
66-70	1	11%
80-85	1	11%
SELF-REFERED RACE / COLOR		
White	3	33%
Brown	6	67%
SEX		
Male	3	33%
Female	6	67%
CIVIL STATUS		
Single	1	11%
Married	1	11%
Widower	4	45%
Divorced	2	22%
Others	1	11%
RELIGION		
Roman Catholic	7	78%
No religion	2	22%
TOTAL	9	100%

Source: research data, 2016

According to the table, the predominant age group was from 60 to 65 years-old and the most frequent self-reported race or color was brown. Most of the elderly individuals are female and widowed. Regarding religion, the highest frequency identified indicated the Roman Catholic religion and the other participants declared that they did not follow any religion.

According to a study by Oliveira et al.⁽¹⁰⁾, aiming to get to know the perception of the elderly about sexuality, the authors found that 9% of the participants were male, whereas the age varied between 60 and 89 years-old and the married marital status predominated.

In another study with similar objectives, Queiroz et al.⁽¹¹⁾ identified the prevalence of females, race or mixed race and married, and, regarding religion, the participants were divided between Catholics and Evangelicals.

These results are similar to those found in the present study, except for marital status, in which it was possible to observe a sociodemographic profile formed mainly by women, aged 60 and 85 years-old, of brown color, widowed marital status and Catholic religion.

Sexuality and active sex life

In this category, we observe the participants' perception of sexuality and know if sexual practices are present in old age. The main responses are transcribed:

Nowadays, sex is defined as what we are born with and sexuality is the option of each one being a man or woman. **(Participant 1)**

Sex is physical, it is what defines gender. Sexuality is psychological, everything that involves libido, desire. **(Participant 3)**

Sex is sexual intercourse. Sexuality is behavior. **(Participant 6)**

Yes. Sexuality is the sexual will. Sex is the act itself. **(Participant 7)**

The responses demonstrate that, in the elderly individuals' perception, sex refers to the sexual act itself, while sexuality is more comprehensive, a concept related to behavior.

Sexuality influences each person's way of expressing themselves, and feeling. It is an identity that is expressed in the way the individual relates to himself and to the world. Sexuality is an integral part of the personality of every human being and its development constitutes a basic need, such as pleasure, the desire for contact, intimacy and emotional expression⁽¹¹⁾.

It was possible to observe some responses in which the participants did not know how to clearly define the difference between sex and sexuality; however, they had a basic notion of what these definitions would be, they also understand that sexuality expresses a more comprehensive dimension to the sexual act.

The responses indicate that most of them do not have an active sex life, a data possibly related to the frequency of widowers and divorced people, as shown by the sociodemographic profile.

It is understood that asexual old age is a myth, a stereotype that contributes to reinforcing the image of the elderly person as an individual who should dedicate himself exclusively to family and grandchildren, among other typical activities of socially constructed old age⁽¹²⁾.

It is clear that the majority of participants, although they do not have an active sex life, they are devoid of fear or prejudice and do not do so by choice. In some cases due to the state of widowhood or separation, which, in the absence of a partner, makes sexual practice as a couple unfeasible. Participants demonstrated to agree and value sexual practices in old age, not seeing obstacles or reasons to abstain from active sexual life.

Perception about the importance of sexuality

This category of analysis sought to know the perception of the elderly individuals about the importance of sexuality and, therefore, it covers

several questions, which show how they feel talking about their own sexuality and what is their opinion about how much sex and sexuality are important for the individual.

At first, the elderly people were asked if they felt uncomfortable talking about the topic, the responses showed that none of the participants was uncomfortable talking about their own sexuality.

No, because it's natural. **(Participant 2)**

I feel good; after all it contributes to the good performance of the human being. **(Participant 4)**

No, it's a pleasure to talk about it. **(Participant 8)**

No, because it is so pleasurable, and it is good for us, bringing safety and welfare for our longing. **(Participant 9)**

Participants understand that sexuality is natural. It is inherent to human beings at any age and it contributes to well-being, self-esteem and health. Because of this, there is naturalness on the statements about sexuality, what leads us to understand that prejudice starts from society and its stigmatization and that the elderly people have no discomfort when talking or experiencing their sexuality⁽¹⁾.

Thus, elderly people can have an active sex life and, even if they do not, they are no longer bothered to talk about their own sexuality because they understand that sexual interest is normal at all ages and society, little by little, has understood that sexuality is a healthy and natural exercise⁽¹⁾.

Some answers transcribed below clearly demonstrate that the elderly individuals have no prejudice regarding sexuality in the elders and, apparently, are not influenced by social stereotypes that relegate the older individuals to exclusion, renunciation and abstinence from practices supposedly reserved only for the youngest people.

It's normal. **(Participant 1)**

It makes no difference from the other stages of human development. It is as normal and necessary as at other ages. **(Participant 2)**

It is normal, regardless of age. **(Participant 5)**

It's great! **(Participant 8)**

We often feel rejection from our partner due to our age, but in addition to doing us well it makes us more and more rejuvenated. **(Participant 9)**

Some reports call attention. On the one hand, it is understood that sexuality in old age is necessary as in all ages and even beneficial for health. On the other hand, there is a report that, eventually, rejection occurs due to advancing age and the physical, organic and emotional consequences that aging causes. However, in general, the elderly people showed positive perceptions about sexuality in old age⁽¹³⁾, corroborating this study, since most participants perceive sexuality as an absolutely normal and necessary practice.

Sexuality in old age is still viewed with prejudice, as it is still a practice very linked to reproduction and it is difficult for many people to see the continuity of sexual practices in old age. However, the responses of the elderly people who participated in the research showed a position that points to a new interpretation of sexuality in older individuals, in which they become aware of their role in society, come to know their own body better and face aging as a stage that is natural in the life of the human being.

The elderly individuals expressed opinions about the importance of sexuality in old age, justifying the point of view. It is noticed that some participants do not see sexuality as strictly necessary for the individual in old age. They understand that even though it is a healthy and important practice, it is not indispensable for them. Some answers are transcribed below:

Yes, because everyone needs. **(Participant 2)**

Yes, since many people depend on it for their physical and mental balance. **(Participant 3)**

I think it's not important. **(Participant 5)**

Yes, because we fight against all the prejudices that the elders are useless. **(Participant 7)**

Most elderly people agreed that sexuality in old age is very important, contributing to physical and mental health, in addition to contributing to combat forms of prejudice against them. However, one of the participants simply commented that he does not think sexuality is important for the life of the elderly people.

In this sense, it is known that understanding sexuality as something healthy and necessary, especially in the elderly people's life, often seems far from being accepted socially. These

elderly people, who have not yet managed to become free from prejudice and social stigmas, may feel impeded from seeking sexual satisfaction for their own needs, including their quality of life⁽¹⁴⁾.

It can be noticed that there is a division of opinions with the answers to the previous item, that some participants understand sexuality as a necessary practice for old age; while others simply state that the practice of sex is not important and is dispensable.

It's not important. **(Participant 3)**

I really don't have sex, I don't need sex, it's totally dispensed. **(Participant 6)**

It's very important, after all sexuality persists until the last days of life. **(Participant 7)**

It's not important; I don't need it. **(Participant 8)**

It's importante; it's healthy. **(Participant 9)**

In this sense, many elderly people have their sexuality reduced or limited due to social stigmas, cultural values that span generations, prejudices, among other factors. However, currently, due to the greater prominence and visibility achieved by the elderly population, many are already able to free themselves and assume autonomous attitudes regarding sexuality⁽¹⁵⁾.

Problems related to widowhood or prolonged interruption of sexual life, as well as lifestyle, myths and false beliefs, the presence of acute or chronic illnesses characteristic of old age, in addition to family resistance, may together contribute to the elders to build an image of themselves, just to please those around them, giving up their own desires and needs, including sexuality⁽¹⁰⁾.

In view of the questions and answers analyzed in this category, regarding the importance of sexuality for the elderly people, under the perception of them, it is possible to say that sexuality and sex are considered important by most elderly people; however, when asked about their own practices sexual, the participants, notably those who said they did not have an active sex life, report that sexual activity is not needed and is not fundamental in their lives. Making a comparison with the sociodemographic questions, it is clear that most of the elderly participants in this study are

widowed, separated or without a partner, which can lead to lack of sexual interest or their dismissal⁽²⁾.

Difficulties in exercising sexuality in old age

In this category of analysis, only one item of the questionnaire was included, which was aimed at knowing, according to the perception of the elderly individuals, the main difficulties faced by them in relation to sexuality.

A lot of prejudice and discrimination, but nothing changes, whether the human being is old or young. (Participant 3)

Prejudice. (Participant 4)

Fear, prejudice. (Participant 6)

Fear. (Participant 7)

Lack of good mood, lack of courage, lack of love; and prejudice. (Participant 8)

Among the responses, prejudice stands out as a possible reason that hinders sexuality among the elderly people. Other factors pointed out by them included discrimination, fear, lack of mood and courage.

Sex in old age is permeated by prejudice, but old age is not necessarily an obstacle to normal sexual life. However, when people age healthy, becoming aware of the changes that naturally occur in their bodies, it is possible to create space for new practices and exercise sexuality in different ways.

Personal satisfaction with sexuality

In the last category, two questions were analyzed, seeking to know the satisfaction of the older people with sexuality and the importance of it for their quality of life. Among the participants, only one was dissatisfied.

Yes. (Participant 1)

Yes, a lot. I feel full even without practice, I have other compensations. (Participant 2)

No. (Participant 8)

Yes. Because it is another complement to the satisfaction that sex brings to our health. (Participant 9)

Some elderly people explained that even without an active sex life, they feel happy and

fulfilled. Others said that sexual practices strengthen health and complement life satisfaction. However, one of the participants stated that he was not satisfied with his sex life. Thus, it was possible to identify the desire for an active sex life; however being prevented or limited by intrinsic factors (physical limitations, lack of motivation) or extrinsic factors (lack of partner, social stigmas) to the individual.

Often, even if the elderly person wishes to meet the other and be loved, there is not enough motivation because most of them believe that if they do, they will be treated as perverts, stigmatized by society and often even by their own family⁽¹²⁾.

It is also important to remember that the absence of an active sex life is not always related only to fear of stigma and rejection. Most of the older adults are affected by pathologies that deeply influence their daily lives, decreasing their vitality, quality of life and sexual activity. Though, sexuality can be present in other ways, through the manifestation of affection, even when sexual activity is not possible⁽¹⁶⁾.

One of the responses stands out in which the participant does not perceive any influence of sexuality on the quality of life. The main responses are transcribed below:

It makes us feel good. (Participant 2)

I was born female and I love it. I am very accomplished as a professional, mother and housewife. Thanks, God! (Participant 4)

No one. (Participant 6)

It helps us to relate to each other and to life. (Participant 7)

It brings us health; quality of life, it helps us to maintain sexual performance, showing that seniors have their experiences acquired. (Participant 9)

In summary, the elderly people stated that sexuality helps in well-being, improves health and quality of life, helps in relationships with others and shows that old age does not necessarily mean sexual abstinence.

The quality of life, mentioned in the question asked to them, is a topic that has been gaining more and more space in discussions about aging, as it is a subjective concept to the elders, but which generally refers to well-being, satisfaction with life, the absence of disease and fullness,

including with regard to sexuality⁽¹⁷⁾. In view of an increasingly aging society, not only in Brazil, but worldwide, it is important to implement new paradigms for the elderly individuals, meeting their new demands, highlighting the role of nursing in this context⁽¹⁸⁾.

CONCLUSION

It is possible to conclude that the elderly individuals understand sex and sexuality and are aware of their needs and desires, as well as they perceive benefits for well-being and quality of life through an active sexual life, but still fear the prejudice and stigma that it still exists around old age.

Several factors that can hamper the full sexuality of the elderly people, it is then necessary to reinvent practices and experience new experiences, based on the wisdom they have, finding pleasure and rediscovering sexuality, regaining the place of man and woman

not as a limited elderly and socially restricted, but as a human being of infinite possibilities.

Studies related to the sexuality of the older adults are still incipient, considering the research carried out for this work, making it necessary studies that involve the sexuality of the elderly in a general scope, not only involving sexual practice. The present study has as limitations the fact that it is a qualitative study and it is subject to how the participant is at that moment, and may not represent their experience, but their momentary state, and the fact that the number of women is twice the number of men, which may represent their experience and not represent the population as a whole.

Despite these limitations, the study proves to be relevant due to the discussion of an important theme, as well as the findings found, possible corroborations and findings about the change of ideals of this population, which, despite being permeated with prejudices, manages to discuss and talk openly about sexuality.

PERCEPÇÃO DOS IDOSOS ACERCA DE SUA SEXUALIDADE

RESUMO

Objetivo: analisar a percepção da pessoa idosa acerca da sua sexualidade. **Metodologia:** trata-se de um estudo de campo, descritivo e de cunho qualitativo, realizado no Centro de Referência da Assistência Social (CRAS) de Ipaumirim, Ceará. A amostra foi de nove (9) indivíduos e a coleta de dados realizada nos meses de agosto e setembro de 2016, por meio de um questionário previamente elaborado. Os dados foram analisados conforme técnicas de análise de conteúdo e discussões com base no método dialético. **Resultados:** os idosos participantes do estudo compreendem os conceitos relacionados ao sexo, apesar de não possuírem uma vida sexual ativa. Os sujeitos ressaltaram a importância da sexualidade na terceira idade e consideram o preconceito como principal fator que dificulta a vivência plena da sexualidade na velhice. **Conclusão:** é possível concluir que os idosos compreendem a importância da sexualidade e são conscientes sobre suas próprias necessidades e desejos, assim como percebem os benefícios da vida sexual ativa para o bem-estar e qualidade de vida. Porém a cultura da assexualidade e o preconceito em torno da velhice dificultam esta prática.

Palavras-chave: Enfermagem. Envelhecimento. Qualidade de vida. Sexualidade.

PERCEPCIÓN DE LOS ANCIANOS SOBRE SU SEXUALIDAD

RESUMEN

Objetivo: analizar la percepción de la persona mayor acerca de su sexualidad. **Metodología:** se trata de un estudio de campo, descriptivo y de abordaje cualitativo, realizado en el Centro de Referencia de Asistencia Social (CRAS) de Ipaumirim, Ceará/Brasil. La muestra fue de nueve (9) individuos y la recolección de datos fue realizada en los meses de agosto y septiembre de 2016 por medio de un cuestionario previamente elaborado. Los datos fueron analizados conforme técnicas de análisis de contenido y discusiones con base en el método dialéctico. **Resultados:** los ancianos participantes del estudio comprenden los conceptos relacionados al sexo, apesar de no poseer una vida sexual activa. Los sujetos señalaron la importancia de la sexualidad en la tercera edad y consideran el prejuicio como principal factor que dificulta la vivencia plena de la sexualidad en la vejez. **Conclusión:** es posible concluir que las personas mayores comprenden la importancia de la sexualidad y son conscientes sobre sus propias necesidades y deseos, así como perciben los beneficios de la vida sexual activa para el bienestar y la calidad de vida. Pero la cultura de la asexualidad y el prejuicio respecto la vejez dificultan esta práctica.

Palabras clave: Enfermería. Envejecimiento. Calidad de vida. Sexualidad.

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