

Promotion of sexual health among seniors in the self-help media realm of popular culture

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ABSTRACT: The issue of seniors' sexuality, especially the aspect of sexual activity undertaken by people considered "old" is usually met with silence or even condemned. The stereotypical assumptions are that with age a person's needs associated with feeling and realizing their own sexuality dissipate, and seniors are perceived as asexual beings.

Only in the last decades of the XX century did this area of "taboo" become the subject of in-depth scientific interest and research. The average life span is increasing, and as research shows, so is the number of people who are sexually active and satisfied with intercourse at an elderly age. For hundreds of years, in Western culture, sexual health was equated with reproductive ability. The contemporary concept of health emphasizes that it is a value which allows a person to realize aspirations regardless of age.

This article focuses on the content of guides which bring up the importance of seniors' sexual health. The aestheticization characteristic of the late modern period forces a deconstruction of the concept of old age. In the rhetoric of the everyday and the narcissistic style of the realm of experts, experiencing old age simultaneously becomes a source of pleasure, as well as frustration on the road to an individual's self-realization and self-creation.

KEY WORDS: old age, sex, sexuality, woman, man, guides (self-help media)

Non-canonical aesthetics of old age

In the medical sense, the process of aging begins between the ages of 30 and 40, defined as a gradual dysfunction of different systems, hampering homeostasis (Wyciółkowski and Pawlicki 2012). The

understanding of old age is conditioned socially and culturally. Women are less privileged, because in social consciousness they age more quickly. Due to menopause, they lose attributes which defined their social worth: sexual attractiveness and the ability to procreate. According to Polish surveys, men consider a woman

old when she has turned 59, while women do not consider a man old until he is 64 (<http://wyborcza.pl/>).

In the Middle Ages, old age was a synonym for ugliness, contrary to the universal praise of youth as a symbol of beauty and innocence. A wrinkled old body, subjected to the unforgiving law of gravity, in the light of the dictate of youth, especially for women, did not fit in the aesthetic canon. Poems were written about the deceitful, dirty, smelly, old woman, called a sow. It was believed that her gaze (which was deadly due to the retention of menstrual blood) could poison children in their crib (Eco 2007). The 18th century Europe saw the development of poetry which contained palinodes, collections of misogynistic invectives describing an “old crone” (Grześkowiak 2013). The negative connotations of old age cause seniors to be removed from the collective imagination; they become socially “transparent”.

Old age is a stigma which we try to escape, even in the area of language, with various stylistic choices. Gerontological literature is rich with terms for old people, such as *older*, *elderly*, *mature*, *third and fourth generation*. The linguistic image of an old person is situated between euphemisms and unrefined colloquial terms: *geezer*, *old fart*, *fossil*, *gramps*, *moher* (from the mohair berets associated with Polish seniors, esp. women), *antique*, *geriatric*, *dinosaur*, *spinster*, *biddy*, *old hag* / *cow* / *goat* / *trout* / *crone*.

The carnality of an old person has been marginalized, limited to the areas of medication and hygiene, which mask the symptoms of dying, dirt and decay. In online forums, old age is often associated with disease, wrinkles and unpleasant smell. The need for aesthetization of bodies and media fixation on beauty

functions as censorship of old age in the physical realm.

“Sexual old age” in the area of social stereotypes and scientific research

A successful sex life promotes good health, favors a longer life span and maintaining a youthful appearance (Krzyżowski 2004; Zych 2013). However, since ancient times, sexual activity in old age has been considered a significant expenditure of energy, a toll on the body, a health risk. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, it was thought that the decrease in libido reduces the opportunity for sin. An old man or woman seeking sexual adventures was judged negatively in a moral, social, aesthetic and medical sense (Shahar 2005).

Currently, elder sexuality is still an embarrassing topic, avoided in social discourse. The realm of sexual contact and needs in the social consciousness remains the domain of young people. The myth of asexuality or “sexual old age” is prevalent and suggests that elderly people do not exhibit sexual needs or interests, their sex life is at an end; the male becomes an asexual old man, while menopause is the end of femininity for the woman.

In Western culture, sexual health was associated with the ability to procreate, combined with self-control and distancing oneself from sexuality. Sexual activity other than for procreation was considered an illness. Currently, sexuality at an older age is increasingly commonly considered part of a senior’s satisfying life, an important factor in their health and well-being. A sexually healthy older person is one who can express their sexual-

ity without fear, in the physical, mental and social realms (Marshall 2011).

Research undermines the stereotype of elderly people completely indifferent to sex. Old age does not mean the end of sexual behaviors or romantic love (Bieńko 2013). The full expression of human sexuality at a mature age depends on the frequency of sexual contacts in earlier stages of life, physical capacity and mental factors. Other factors not without merit in upholding sexual contact include: environment – large city, education – higher, and a good economic situation (Hinchliff and Gott 2011; Izdebski 2012).

American studies show that women and men aged 50–59 are sexually active, and for those 70 or older, 22% of women and 43% of men still engage in intercourse (i.e. vaginal sex) (Lindau et al. 2007). Despite declining interest in sex for those over 70, one quarter of American respondents before the age of 85 had some sexual contact in the past year (Lee et al. 2015; DeLamater 2012). Surveys conducted in Australia show that sex is important for one fifth of men aged 90–95 (Hyde et al. 2012).

According to Polish data, men and women aged 70 or older expect sexual tenderness and touch. For the surveyed, this was often more important than sexual intercourse itself (Izdebski 2012). The biggest problem relating to elder sexuality is the lack of a partner. Women find themselves in this situation significantly more often. According to data from the Polish General Social Survey (1992–2008) and Social Diagnosis (2000–2009), mature males claim regular sexual activity more often than females in the same age group. “Good sex” was declared mostly by respondents who remain married (Kasperek 2011).

In assisted living centers for seniors, the residents complain about a limited feeling of comfort and lack of space for intimate life, required to express their sexual needs. In their opinion, the medical and non-medical personnel are not properly trained in this respect (Heath 2011; Pędzisz and Kozłowska 2012).

In the generation of boomers there is a growing problem regarding contraction of sexually transmitted diseases; the number of HIV infections is on the rise. Therefore, there is a need for sexual education for 70- and 80-year-olds (Sonnenberg et al. 2013).

Life laced with sex in guides for seniors

Age is not a shameful disease which prevents one from having intercourse. The authors of guidebooks addressed to seniors claim that older people’s lives are much more involved in sex than everyone assumes (Hansen and Linkletter 2007), even though there is a negative attitude toward it: “Because of shame, sin, no partner, because you shouldn’t do it without love, besides I’m too old, just look at me” (Gutowska 2005).

Sex is important, needed and healthy in every phase of life (Weil 2005; Mackiewicz 2009). If, as Dr. David Reuben argues, “it were to serve only procreation, then the genitalia should fall off like hair, at the age of 45! Fortunately, that is not the case, which only confirms the fact that they should be used for the great pleasure which they can give us” (Reuben 2002). Authors of guidebooks appeal to their senior readers to not sentence themselves to erotic retirement and to partake in the joys of the boudoir until they are 100. It is obvious that once the

children leave home, the “golden” years of sex begin (Zdrojewicz 2011). Stressful work life is over and one can make love at any time of day – sex in the morning is a retirees’ privilege! – thousands of satisfied elders around the world claim, on the pages of these guides. “They are just as interested in sex as before, even if they do begin to spend more time tending to the garden than having sex” (Hansen and Linkletter 2007).

Around 60 years of age, the sexual needs of women and men overlap the most: “With age you get better at sex. You know what you want and what’s more, each partner knows the other’s preferences” (Hansen and Linkletter 2007). Aged couples only begin to see sex as attractive during this phase of life. Women are more disposed physically then, there is no more risk of pregnancy. Sex over 60 is not subject to sudden flights, it is unrushed and mature (Parker and Elsberry 2009).

The guidebooks assure us that at an older age sex will bring more benefit than harm: “a healthy 50-year-old who dies during sex – that’s a scene straight out of a mediocre Hollywood film” (Hansen and Linkletter 2007). Seniors can find advice in the guides on how to stay healthy and enjoy sex for longer, which is an element of the Anti-Aging Formula (Fonda 2012; Depko 2008; Riemann and Kleespies 2006). A “sex diet” is promoted, full of healthy fats, lean protein and anti-oxidants, as well as a regular dose of cardio and flexibility exercises Robert N. Butler and Myrna I. Levis (2002) recommend sexual fitness for men, while Abraham Morgentaler (2013:) assures that “for overweight men, every 16 kilograms of excess weight lost, reveals an average of 2,5 cm of penis”.

Partners should always strive to be attractive to each other, desirable, regardless of age. Being sexy” is obligatory in a woman’s life (Price 2006). In guidebooks the sexuality of older women is disciplined more often than that of men: “Arousal adds color to the world. Do not build an artificial dam to your own sexuality. Do not avoid the issue” (Gutowska 2005). Experts recommend sexual awakening workshops for older women, to rejuvenate their sensuality and sexuality (Levine 2007: 166). In order to better seduce men, “slutty sixty-year olds” are to consult magazines for teens, fall in love like teens do, romance and use Internet dating sites (Lynn and Spitzer 2010).“(…) a little feminine coquettishness does good at any age. Flirt. It is training for your femininity” (Gutowska 2005).

Authors write about “non-traditional sexual techniques”, such as: oral and anal sex (Rutter 2006); they encourage experiments in realizing one’s erotic fantasies (Skinner and Vaughan 2004). They also write about risky sexual behaviors, effects of sex addiction, pornography, prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases (Seiden and Bilett 2008). There is scarce mention, in the guides, of formal or informal homoerotic relationships (LGBT elders).

Love and sex in old age are treated as the art of life, requiring a positive attitude toward the world: escape from routine, activeness, openness, creativity, sense of humor and a less strict view of your own body (Viljoen 2013). Aiming for electrifying sexual perfection in seniors’ intimate lives is commendable. Kamasutra after 50 is in fashion (Betito 2014). The “temperamental penis” is just as important to younger men, as it is to older ones (Keesling 2004). A lot of space is devoted

ed to techniques of extending the time of orgasm and autoeroticism. Entire chapters of guides are devoted to the benefits of various erotic toys and gadgets (Price 2011; 2014).

Successful sex at an older age requires legitimate work. Joel D. Block (2008) proposes an “erotic lesson plan”, in which he recommends pelvic floor exercises and exercises in sexual self-acceptance. The “Good sex questionnaire”, attached to guides, allows the verification of your current achievements. Authors advertise sex coaching as part of “extending the boundaries” of a relationship (Block 2008).

In guidebooks, “winter of life” sex is beautiful lovemaking, without the stigma of ugliness or the negative connotation of old age. Sexual intercourse and everything which leads to it is fascinating. Guidebook authors revitalize the erotic and sensual sphere, which old age has been stripped of, contrary to 4 stereotypes functioning in social consciousness : 1) Sex can be hazardous to your health, if you are older than 50; 2) Sexual desire wanes with age; 3) Old people cannot be sexy; 4) Seniors get less joy from sex than young people do.

In these guides, the appearance of physical or physiological deficits and objective loss of attractiveness does not correspond to the spiritual sphere, and a lack of love energy, sensory experience does not weaken. The stereotype of sensory-erotic sleep in old age is cast away. Its sensory-desire sterility spread through stereotypes and prejudice is negated by a view of old age as sexually active and positive. Elderly people’s satisfying of their sexual needs plays three important roles in their lives: healthful, integrational and recreational. Sex is an element of health, a way of improving

the quality of life and a resource which guarantees growth.

A new formula of old age

Even doctors in ancient times already noticed the difference between old age understood as a state of decay, helplessness and decline, and a whole gamut of possibilities associated with the second half of life as a period of fruitful development. This is the new, current rule of living through old age. The generation of rebels from the 60s and 70s are getting a voice, and as they reach the third age, they put more emphasis on the satisfaction of their needs, including sex. With them comes a new model of old age: seniors “forever young”. They are hedonists, who control their weight, diets, practice yoga, dye gray hair and wear torn jeans. They are representatives of the youthened old age, joyful, able, social.

More and more couples believe that passionate intercourse at the age of 80 is possible, hearing from experts that sex is like air – everyone requires it, and seniors can enjoy it at length, deliberately and without fear. On one hand, the image of ailing retirees complaining in the doctor’s waiting room of gout, cholesterol and constipation does not fit with sex in any way. On the other, seniors are expected to negate biology and remain attractive and sexually active despite their years. In the race for youth they are forced to fight their bodies, which are not allowed to age. To paraphrase Tennessee Williams, getting old takes guts.

Conflict of interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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