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Older Polish adults' narratives on their past and present sexuality.
Exploring the intersection of socio-cultural background and sexual scripts theory.

Doctoral dissertation

Prepared under the supervision of
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Abstract

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have revealed and documented that sex remains an integral part of older individuals' lives, affecting their physical and psychological well-being, as well as their overall life satisfaction. Despite this growing interest, there is a scarcity of qualitative research regarding sexuality and aging from the subjective perspective of older individuals, particularly in non-Western cultures. To fill this gap in the literature, the aim of the presented doctoral dissertation was to explore the narratives of Polish older adults regarding their sexual history, sexual experiences, and expectations.

The research was informed by the bio-psycho-social perspective on sexuality and Simon and Gagnon's sexual scripts theory, and conducted by carrying out 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Polish women and men aged between 65 and 82. Qualitative analysis of the collected data adhered to the Braun & Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis method.

The presented doctoral dissertation took the form of a series of articles that were published in peer-reviewed academic journals, and includes the following:

Article 1: Gore-Gorszewska, G. (2021). What do You Mean by "Sex"? A Qualitative Analysis of Traditional versus Evolved Meaning of Sexual Activity among Older Women and Men. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 58(8), 1035-1049.

Article 2: Gore-Gorszewska, G., & Ševčíková, A. (2022). Trajectories of intimacy in later-life: a qualitative study of Czech and Polish narratives. *Culture, Health, and Sexuality*, 1-16.

Article 3: Gore-Gorszewska, G. (2021). „Why Would I Want Sex Now?” A qualitative study on older women's affirmative narratives on sexual inactivity in later life. *Ageing and Society*, 1-25.

The first article sought to clarify the understanding of "sex" among older adults and its impact on their sexual attitudes and behaviors. Building on this, the second article delved deeper into the subject of sexual intimacy in later life, through the description of the sexual life trajectories that emerged in the respondents' narratives, as well as reference to the socio-cultural factors dominant during the participants' youth. The third article focused specifically on the phenomenon of sexual inactivity among older women, aiming to identify and nuance a range of reasons for the discontinuation of sexual activity in later life.

The findings discussed in the dissertation contribute to the current literature on psycho-social mechanisms concerning sexuality in later life by providing insights from older women and men with a specific socio-cultural background. The study clarifies the various meanings of sex among older adults and their implications for sexual attitudes and behaviors in later life. Moreover, it describes life trajectories related to intimacy, identifies life events that may alter attitudes and perceptions towards sex, and advances the scientific understanding of factors linked to the cessation of sexual activity in older age. These results may have both theoretical and practical implications, particularly in clinical practice with aging individuals and in educational programs related to sexual health and well-being in later life.

Key words: older adults, ageing, sexuality, intimacy, sexual scripts, sexual inactivity, socio-cultural factors, subjectivity, qualitative, thematic analysis.

Streszczenie

Prowadzone w ciągu ostatnich dwóch dekad badania ujawniły i udokumentowały, że aktywność seksualna jest integralną częścią życia osób starszych, wpływa na ich dobrostan fizyczny i psychiczny, a także na ogólną satysfakcję z życia. Pomimo rosnącego zainteresowania tematyką, zauważalna jest ograniczona liczba badań jakościowych, które z subiektywnej perspektywy osób starszych zgłębiałyby wątki w obszarze seksualności i starzenia się, szczególnie w kulturach innych niż Zachodnie. Celem prezentowanej rozprawy doktorskiej było wypełnienie tej luki w literaturze poprzez zbadanie narracji starszych dorosłych w Polsce na temat tego, jak doświadczają i przeżywają własną seksualność.

W ramach projektu przeprowadzonych zostało 30 pół-ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów pogłębionych z kobietami i mężczyznami w wieku od 65 do 82 lat. Przyjmując bio-psycho-społeczną perspektywę seksualności oraz opierając się na teorii skryptów seksualnych Simon i Gagnon, zgromadzone dane zostały poddane analizie jakościowej z wykorzystaniem metodologii refleksyjnej analizy tematycznej Braun & Clarke.

Prezentowana rozprawa doktorska przyjęła formę cyku artykułów opublikowanych w recenzowanych, międzynarodowych czasopismach naukowych i obejmuje następujące pozycje:

Artykuł 1: Gore-Gorszewska, G. (2021). What do You Mean by “Sex”? A Qualitative Analysis of Traditional versus Evolved Meaning of Sexual Activity among Older Women and Men. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 58(8), 1035-1049.

Article 2: Gore-Gorszewska, G., & Ševčíková, A. (2022). Trajectories of intimacy in later-life: a qualitative study of Czech and Polish narratives. *Culture, Health, and Sexuality*, 1-16.

Article 3: Gore-Gorszewska, G. (2021). „Why Would I Want Sex Now?” A qualitative study on older women’s affirmative narratives on sexual inactivity in later life. *Ageing and Society*, 1-25.

Celem pierwszego artykułu było zbadanie i doprecyzowanie, jak rozumiany jest przez starszych dorosłych „seks” oraz jak to rozumienie wpływać może na ich postawy i zachowania seksualne. W drugim artykule pogłębiony został wątek intymności w późnej dorosłości poprzez opisanie trajektorii życia seksualnego, które wybrzmiały w narracjach respondentów oraz nawiązanie do czynników społeczno-kulturowych dominujących w czasach młodości uczestników badania. Trzeci artykuł skupił się na zjawisku nieaktywności seksualnej wśród starszych kobiet, dążąc do zidentyfikowania i zniuansowania szeregu przyczyn, które prowadzić mogą do zaprzestania aktywności seksualnej w późniejszym życiu.

Wyniki omówione w rozprawie wnoszą wkład do obecnej literatury na temat mechanizmów psychospołecznych dotyczących seksualności w późniejszym życiu, przedstawiając spostrzeżenia starszych kobiet i mężczyzn o specyficznym tle społeczno-kulturowym. Badanie wyjaśnia różne znaczenia seksu wśród starszych dorosłych i ich implikacje dla postaw i zachowań seksualnych w późniejszym życiu. Ponadto opisuje trajektorie życiowe związane z intymnością, identyfikuje wydarzenia życiowe, które mogą zmieniać postawy i postrzeganie seksu, a także przyczynia się do naukowego zrozumienia czynników związanych z zaprzestaniem aktywności seksualnej w starszym wieku. Wyniki te mogą mieć zarówno teoretyczne, jak i praktyczne implikacje, zwłaszcza w praktyce klinicznej z osobami starzejącymi się i starszymi oraz w programach edukacyjnych związanych ze zdrowiem i dobrostanem seksualnym w późniejszym życiu.

Słowa kluczowe: starsi dorośli, starzenie się, seksualność, intymność, skrypty seksualne, brak aktywności seksualnej, czynniki społeczno-kulturowe, subiektywność, badania jakościowe, analiza tematyczna.

Summary of a doctoral dissertation as a coherent set of three articles

Older Polish adults' narratives on their past and present sexuality. Exploring the intersection of socio-cultural background and sexual scripts theory.

Gabriela Gore Gorszewska, MA

I. Introduction

The fact that, contrary to the stereotypes, older adults¹ are not sexless is now well established in the literature. A growing body of research, mostly from the last two decades, has revealed and documented that sex remains an integral part of older individuals' lives, affecting their physical and psychological well-being, as well as life satisfaction (Fileborn et al., 2017; Flynn & Gow, 2015; Hinchliff et al., 2018; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Kleinplatz & Menard, 2009; Laumann et al., 2006; Tetley et al., 2018; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010). However, several gaps in the research on later-life sexuality can be identified.

Firstly, studies examining older adults' sexual activity has been dominated by the biomedical perspective. An over-emphasis of the impact of physiological factors on sexual functioning, with neglect of psychological, relational, and social determinants of sexuality, has been recognized (Delamater, 2012; Hinchliff, 2016; Træen, Hald, et al., 2017), despite the fact that understanding human sexuality would benefit from applying an interdisciplinary approach.

Secondly, a limited amount of qualitative research about sexuality and ageing from the subjective perspective of older people is available (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2019; Sinković & Towler, 2019). Qualitative methodology, which gains recognition in the field of social sciences (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008; Willig, 2013), is concerned with the detailed exploration of personal lived experiences, with a focus on participants' own opinion and meaning making, and allows for a thorough, in-depth analysis of selected phenomena. It plays an important role in the case of topics that are only now becoming the subject of scientific research and have not yet been fully developed into theoretical models. Yet, scholarship on later life sexuality is often characterized by impersonal surveys or third-party interviews (such as with caregivers or healthcare professionals). Unintentionally, researchers may be perpetuating the taboo of discussing sexuality in older age as a difficult topic. Therefore, it is

¹ There is no consistency in the literature as to the definition of an 'older adult'. Among studies on sexuality in later life, respondents' minimum age ranges from 50 to 65 years old, usually with no upper limit (see: Fileborn et al., 2015; Hinchliff et al., 2018; Ševčíková & Sedláková, 2020). In this project description I will interpret 'older adults' to be individuals aged 65+, and use the terms "older adults", "older women/men", and "older individuals" interchangeably.

crucial to provide a platform for older individuals to share their own views on sexuality and aging and introduce their perspective into academic debate.

Thirdly, there is a dearth of literature on older generation's sexuality in more conservative socio-cultural contexts. The majority of research – both quantitative and qualitative – explore the topic in Western cultures (e.g. Northern and Western Europe, Australia, United States) which, although not homogeneous, are believed to be more egalitarian and sexually permissive than Central or Eastern European post-communist countries (Halman et al., 2022; World Economic Forum, 2018). I believe it may be reasonable to deepen scientific insight into the sexuality of older adults with a strong conservative background, in which case Poland could serve as a good example.

Therefore, in order to start bridging these gaps, I undertook my doctoral research project. The scarcity of scientific qualitative research in the area of later-life sexuality in Poland influenced the adoption of an exploratory approach. Informed by the bio-psycho-social perspective on sexuality and by the Simon and Gagnon's sexual scripts theory (Simon & Gagnon, 2003, 1986), I used qualitative methods for data collection and analysis to explore how older adults' subjective narratives about their perceptions and experiences of sexuality can deepen scientific understanding of this phenomenon.

II. Methods and Material

This project was informed by a constructivist epistemological approach, which posits that reality is socially constructed by members of communities and claims that “human experience, including perception, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically” (Willig, 2013, p.7). Following from this, I consider sexuality as socially constructed, with cultural norms, meanings and social interactions affecting individuals' perception of themselves and interaction with others in sexual contexts (Longmore, 1998; Warner et al., 2020). Within the constructivist approach, people attribute varying meanings to their experiences, and each individual's understanding (account) is considered to be subjective but inherently valid (Ussher, 1999). Therefore, qualitative research within this approach focuses on participants' subjective ways of constructing meanings over the pursuit of revealing some objective truth. Knowledge is seen as contextually situated and produced – in the case of this research – between the interviewer and the interviewee, and should be understood as a representation rather than a factual account (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Participants and Recruitment

The empirical results in this dissertation are based on 30 semi-structured interviews I conducted with older Polish residents². The sample consisted of 16 women and 14 men, with age range between 65 and 82 years. Coming from an ethnically homogenous and highly religious Roman Catholic country, all but one declared as a religious person, all self-identified as heterosexual. Despite this homogeneity, the sample was relatively diverse in terms of relationship status, educational background and socio-economic status of the participants (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N=30)

Characteristics	N (%)
Age mean (SD)	71,4 (5,4)
Gender	
Women	16 (53)
Men	14 (47)
Marital Status	
Single	3 (10)
Divorced	11 (37)
Widowed	11 (37)
Married	5 (16)
Relationship Status	
No Partner	15 (50)
New Relationship	11 (37)
Long-Term Relationship	4 (13)
Education	
Primary	1 (3)
Secondary/ Vocational	18 (60)
Tertiary/ Higher	11 (37)
Employment	
Retired	20 (67)
Semiretired	6 (20)
Employed	4 (13)
Place of Residence	
Rural	3 (10)
Small/Medium Town	8 (26)
City	19 (64)

Study participants were recruited through posters distributed at health centres, pharmacies, University of the Third Age venues and in a retirement community, in two cities

² With the exception of Article 2, where findings from the Polish sample were compared and contrasted with the accounts of Czech older adults (for more details see section: *“Love is still the same, its expression changes”*. *Trajectories of intimacy in later-life*).

in southern Poland. The posters gave an invitation to contact the interviewer, and the study was presented as focused on older adults' experiences and feelings about their sexual and relational life. When contacted by a potential participant, the author provided additional information regarding the project and the study procedures and verified if the person met the age requirement (65 or over, no upper limit was set). Potential participants were ensured about the anonymity of the research and about confidentiality measures being taken, as well as informed about the anticipated length of the interview and the need for audio-recording. During the recruitment, it was emphasized that currently sexually inactive individuals were welcome as well and that their participation was of the same importance as that of sexually active individuals. With those who expressed willingness to participate, a meeting time and date was agreed on. Others, who were not certain or who had other commitments, were offered the possibility to contact the author at a later time. None of the participants cancelled the appointment, though several changes in dates occurred.

Data Collection

The present study employed a semi-structured interview design, utilizing an interview schedule that ensured coverage of all key themes. The structure of the interview was informed by the interview schedule from the Healthy Sexual Aging Study (courtesy of Professor Bente Træen), adapted to meet the specific objectives of this research project. This adaptation was based on a relevant contextual and theoretical literature and was further refined through a pilot testing phase, which resulted in modifications to several questions. The interviews were purposefully broad and addressed a number of topics: participants' sexual history and current sexual life, attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality in later life, sexual expectations for the future, body image in the context of aging, sexual problems and help-seeking behaviours (for details see Table 2).

Table 2. Interview guide: topics and exemplary questions

	Interview topics
1.	Opening questions Social background and situation
2.	Childhood and adolescence Closeness (emotional, physical) in the family of origin. Emotional climate concerning body, nakedness, and display of affection in the family of origin. Sexual education in the family of origin, at school. <i>Q: When you were growing up, how did your parents show each other affection? How did you experience seeing them showing this?</i> <i>Q: When you were growing up, where did your sexual education come from? School, your parents,</i>

	<i>other people?</i>
3.	<p>Sexual experiences throughout life Participants' sexual history and current sexual life. Sexuality and own body today. <i>Q: How would you describe sex life in your marriage/long-term relationship/in the past?</i> <i>Q: What likes and dislikes do you have about your body today?</i></p>
4.	<p>Beliefs and attitudes towards sexuality The meaning of sex now and in the past. The importance of sex and its role in life now and in the past. Participants' attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality in later life. <i>Q: Please describe why sexuality is important for you, or why is it not. How has this changed for you over the years?</i> <i>Q: What do you think about how sexuality in older age is portrayed in the media?</i></p>
5.	<p>Health and illness Participants sexual health / sexual problems (currently and in the past). Sexual health in later life in relation to public health services. <i>Q: About sexual problems recently, have you experienced any? How do you feel about them?</i> <i>Q: Do you remember discussing a sex-related issue with any doctor (recently or in the past)? What was your impression of that situation?</i></p>
6.	Closing questions

In conducting the interviews, I adopted a conversational style with the aim of fostering a rapport with the participants. This was deemed essential in light of the sensitive nature of the topic being discussed. To achieve this, I employed a flexible questioning strategy – deviations from a predetermined list of questions were allowed to maintain the natural flow of the conversation. Additionally, I encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences, even if they were not directly related to the central research interest. Throughout the interviews, I also made an effort to connect with the participants' biographies and ask questions related to their knowledge on certain topics (e.g. historical events, places). This was done to position the participants as experts in their own experiences and contributed to the rapport-building process. Finally, I ensured that adequate time and space was provided for any relevant topics that arose spontaneously from the interviewees. This enabled the participants to bring up new salient topics, thereby allowing me to acknowledge and address issues that were unique to each individual's biography.

After the interview, participants completed a brief demographic form, which contained questions about age, sex, sexual orientation, and marital status as well as questions regarding education, religious affiliation, and subjective health level. A compensation for the participants' time was secured at the amount of PLN 100 each. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Jagiellonian University (KE/10/042019).

All face-to-face interviews were conducted between January and May 2019. Each interview lasted between two and three hours and took place in the participant's preferred location, usually their home (approximately two-thirds) or my office. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself as well as my goals and motivations in order to ensure a feeling of security and to establish the credibility and trust essential for discussing a sensitive topic. In response to a considerable interest of the participants, who were familiar with quantitative measures only (e.g. surveys), I briefly explained the ways of handling and analysing qualitative data. Participants were assured that their names would be replaced by pseudonyms and that other identifying characteristics would be removed from the transcripts. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and to object to particular questions; they were also encouraged to bring in any other concerns. Informed consent to conduct and audio-tape the interviews was obtained from all participants. To facilitate rapport, the interviews began with questions regarding the participant's demographic background and relationship history, before asking more sensitive questions about their sex life.

Following the completion of the interviews, I debriefed all participants and received no reports of discomfort or distress, regardless of the sensitivity of the issues discussed. In fact, many participants reflected positively on the conversation, perceiving it as meaningful, gratifying, or even enlightening. While some admitted to experiencing moderate nervousness at the beginning, likely due to uncertainty about the progression of the interview and the sensitivity of the topic, this apprehension dissipated as the conversation progressed. Some participants acknowledged that this was the first time they had narrated their sexual histories and referred to the interview as a form of confession. My professional clinical experience (psychotherapist, sexologist) possibly contributed to my ability to accommodate queries and emotional reactions during the interviews, such as when participants recalled the loss of the partner or painful memories.

According to participants, my comparatively young age (in my 30s), similar to the age of their children or grandchildren, did not hinder their willingness to disclose sensitive information during the interviews. They identified my professional conduct and respectful yet friendly atmosphere as key factors that facilitated open discussion. Many female participants noted that the gender similarity between us enhanced their openness during the conversation. As for the male participants, although it cannot be ruled out that my gender impacted their narratives to a degree, men in this study on many occasions emphasized their sincerity and expressed a perception of me as a neutral and unbiased researcher. For example, one male participant stated "I'm telling you how it really is, because I see you as a researcher who pursues the truth".

The interviews were transcribed by a professional service, following the exclusion of all sensitive information (surnames, addresses, etc.). I verified selected transcripts (n=10) for accuracy against the original recordings.

Reflexivity

When there is a notable age difference between the interviewer and interviewee, and the experiences being discussed are impossible to share, it is recommended that the interviewer explicitly positions themselves as a respectful outsider and treats the interviewee as an expert (Thorpe et al., 2018). This approach was applied throughout the research project and was found to be effective. As a middle-class, educated woman in my mid-30s, I share some demographic characteristics with my interviewees, such as gender (with female participants) and cultural background (Poland). This allowed me to relate to certain aspects of their experiences and to have some level of concordance with their perspectives (insider perspective). However, given the age difference and the inability to relate to the experiences of sexuality in mid- and late adulthood, which was the focus of the research project, I have chosen to adopt the stance of a respectful outsider, combined with the role of a curious researcher. This approach was usually well-received, although on a few occasions when I asked a follow-up question (e.g. "why do you think so?") I was met with comments such as "You ask as if you don't know". In these cases, I explained that perceptions of a given topic are highly individual and that different people may understand it differently. As such, my follow-up questioning was intended to elicit a deeper understanding of their perspectives.

Over the course of conducting the interviews, I encountered instances where the participants would breach the interviewer-interviewee dynamics by asking direct questions towards me as a psychologist. These inquiries often pertained to psychological or emotional issues within their social circle (partner, children, relatives etc.) and sought my advice or suggestions for resolution. To keep the focus on the interview and maintain clear boundaries, in these cases I kindly redirected the conversation back to the research topics and emphasized my role as a researcher. I also offered to address any additional questions or concerns after the conclusion of the interview. Throughout the research process, I did not encounter any other instances of boundary crossing, such as inappropriate personal questions or requests for social engagement.

In order to exhibit a professional demeanor and respect towards my interview participants, I made a conscious effort to dress appropriately and modestly during the interviews. This involved wearing formal clothing when conducting interviews in the participants' homes and adopting a slightly less formal dress code in my office. Additionally,

I made sure to cover any tattoos that I have, as they may be associated negatively among some older participants. When interviews were conducted in the participants' homes I always introduced myself by presenting my doctoral ID, to avoid potential hesitancy associated with admitting a stranger into one's apartment. In terms of practical preparations, I ensured that all necessary materials were well-organized in an aesthetically pleasing folder and that remuneration (vouchers) were ready in an envelope with the correct date.

As a trained psychologist and psychotherapist with knowledge on the specifics of later-life sexuality, I attempted to mitigate my researcher bias during the interviews by adopting the aforementioned role of a curious outsider. However, during the analysis phase, I realized that my prior theoretical knowledge was influencing my interpretation of the data. For instance, my prior belief that sexuality plays a crucial role in successful aging affected my initial interpretation of narratives of sexual inactivity, leading to a difficulty in acknowledging the positive aspects of such experiences for some participants. To remain faithful to the participants' perspectives, I had to challenge my assumptions and intentionally set them aside, which eventually led to the discovery of affirmative narratives discussed in the third paper of this dissertation. Another instance of an initial bias that arose from my prior knowledge was related to the issue of older adults not seeking professional (medical, therapeutic) help when experiencing sexual problems. Initially, I interpreted their responses to align with existing literature that suggests that shame and embarrassment hinder older adults from discussing sex-related health issues. However, upon questioning the simplicity of this interpretation, I realized that there was a deeper issue at play – a lack of awareness regarding what constitutes a sexual problem/dysfunction, and having negative experiences of dismissive attitude of healthcare professionals³.

³ Findings on this topic, going beyond the scope of this dissertation, were published separately (Gore-Gorszewska, 2020).

III. Analysis and Discussion of the Results

The following sections present the three thematic areas that were the subject of research consideration within this research project. Each section provides a rationale for the respective topic of analysis, detailed description of analytical strategy, and the research findings, as well as conclusions.

“What do You Mean by ‘Sex?’” Traditional versus Evolved Meaning of Sexual Activity among Older Women and Men.

In the first part of my analyses, I wanted to explore and clarify how older adults understand “sex” and how it affects their sexual attitudes and behaviors.

There is no consistency, even across research, about what sexual activity means, especially when older women and men are concerned. Some studies specify that by sex they mean sexual intercourse, others provide a list of sexual behaviors to consider or leave it for the participants to decide. Imprecise definitions of “sex” and “sexual activity” may lead to inconsistent usage of these concepts, unexplained variability in participants’ answers, or affect the interpretation of the results.

Therefore, to refine the fundamentals of my study, I focused on the meanings of sex and their sources among older individuals. This part of my project aimed at understanding the ways in which older men and women from a conservative and highly religious cultural background (Poland) understand what sex is, how – and if – this understanding evolved, which sexual scripts (societal, interpersonal, intrapersonal) emerged over participants’ life course and how it affects their current sex life.

Transcribed data from 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Polish individuals aged 65 to 82 (16 women, 14 men) was qualitatively analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013). I followed six steps described by Braun & Clarke (2006) to ensure the quality of the analysis and the trustworthiness of the findings. Firstly, I read a number of transcripts repeatedly to familiarize myself with the data and note down the emergent ideas. Open-coding followed, in which relevant segments of the text were identified within the data set. The initial coding categories consisted of the interview questions and the core aims of this study (e.g., the meaning of sex, gender differences and similarities). To ensure the validity of initial coding, a subsample of transcripts ($n = 5$) was open-coded independently by an external party (psychologist, experienced in qualitative methodology) and the results were discussed between us until agreement was reached. By means of visual representation the codes were organized (sorted, collated, and combined) until a number of themes and sub-themes were identified and organized into an initial

thematic map. All identified themes were then reviewed against two criteria, internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to ensure that the data was coherent within themes while the themes were clearly distinguishable and did not overlap. Then I applied the thematic map to the remaining transcripts. Additional codes were identified while coding the subsequent transcripts, with the thematic map appended accordingly. The clearly defined and named main themes and sub-themes formed the final thematic map which reflect the complexity of participants' perspectives.

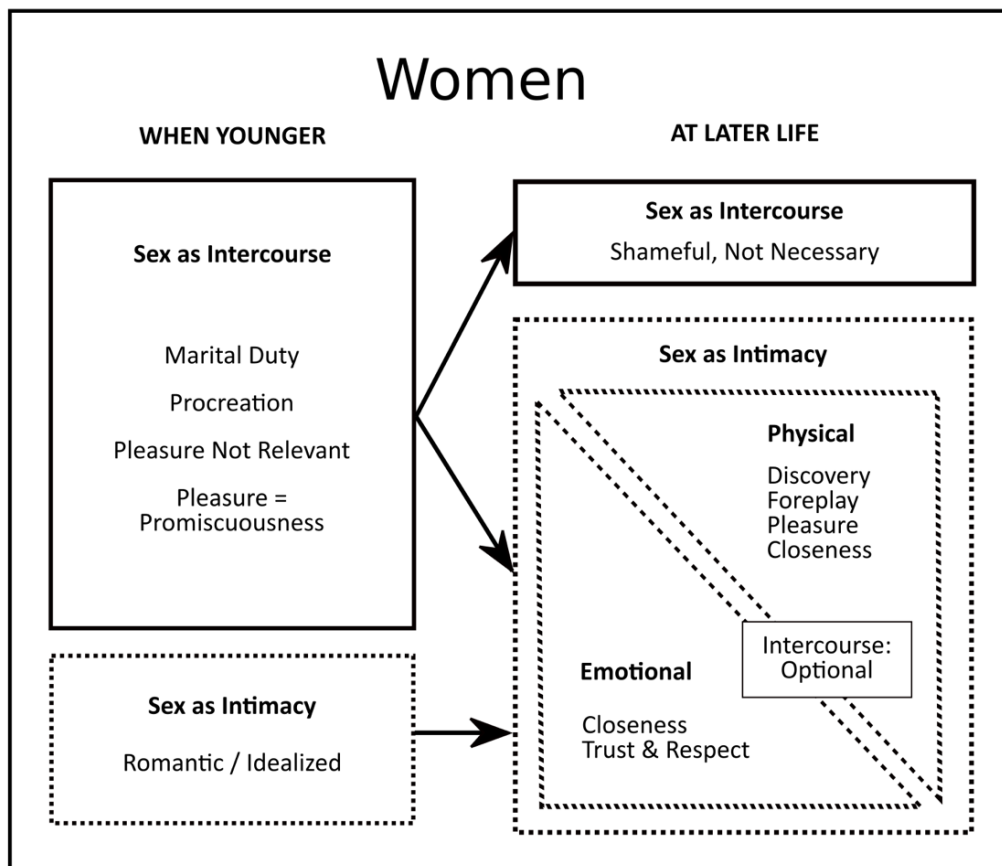


Figure 1. The meanings of sex for female participants: indicating the dominance of themes when younger and in later life, with key words describing the organizing themes' content.

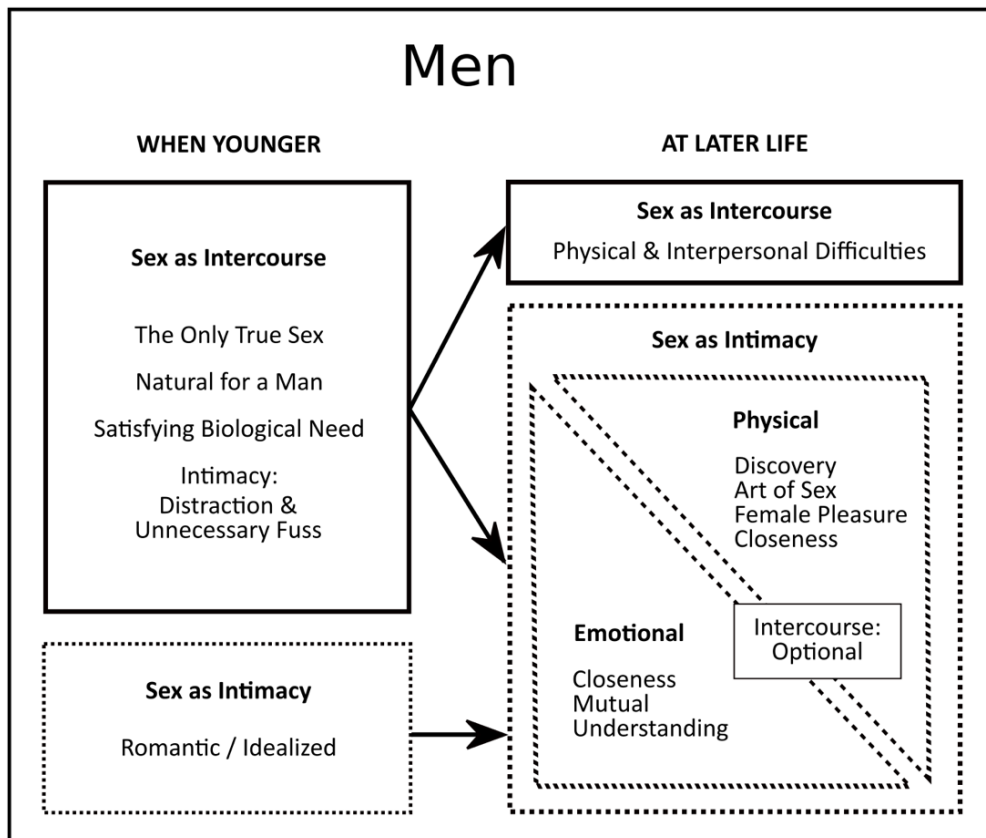


Figure 2. The meanings of sex for male participants: indicating the dominance of themes when younger and in later life, with key words describing the organizing themes' content.

The results demonstrate the diversity of opinions on what sex is: from penetrative intercourse, through various expressions of physical intimacy, to emotional intimacy as a central concept. Men and women in this study almost universally reported equating sex with intercourse for a substantial part of their lives, even if accompanied by notable distress. According to male participants intercourse was considered the only true meaning of sex, and simply natural for a man to satisfy a biological need. Female participants were also following traditional gendered sexual scripts and reported engaging in intercourse primarily to fulfill marital obligation or for procreation. Women's pleasure was irrelevant or considered shameful. Intimacy as an aspect of sex was hardly recognized, viewed as an idealistic, romantic fantasy.

Notable differences were observed in how the participants' understanding of sex evolved toward later life. Intercourse remained an essence of sex for a small number of women who universally considered it redundant or shameful at their age. For men, if sex was still equated with intercourse only, it was most often a source of problems (physical and interpersonal). For the majority of participants, however, the meaning of sex evolved in later adulthood toward intimacy-oriented partnered activity, encompassing foreplay and other

sexual behaviors, with a crucial discovery of female sexual pleasure. Two interrelated life events were most often associated with this change: ending a long-term relationship and re-partnering in later life. All participants who experienced the change from a narrow to a more broad understanding of sex, and from conservative and traditional to more equality-based and sex-positive sexual scripts reported a great improvement of the quality of sex life.

Drawing from these results I discuss the potential consequences of equating sex with intercourse and following gendered sexual scripts: how it may translate into older women and men's current sexual attitudes and behaviors. I also discuss what mechanisms may be at play when the meaning of sex evolves in later life and the traditional sexual scripts are left behind. This study results suggest that the path to achieve gender sexual equality among older adults from conservative societies may be complex and nuanced, requiring a counterbalance to the traditional cultural scripts of hegemonic masculinity. A careful comparison of women's and men's narratives indicates that a shift toward the other gender's understanding of sex may be essential to reduce the gender gap. As observed in this study, it seems beneficial for older men to redefine sex from egoistic to more partner- and relationship-oriented; for women, a shift toward more self-oriented sex may lead to increased knowledge about own sexual functioning and grant greater sexual agency, confidence, and decisiveness, leading to desirable sex in later life.

The results suggest that the participants' sexuality was strongly influenced by the socio-cultural norms of the times in which they were coming of age and exercising their adult sexuality. At that time, sexuality was a taboo topic, rarely discussed, and a lack of reliable sources of knowledge, such as publications or access to the internet, was notable. The identified sexual scripts were firmly embedded in the context of the dominance of traditional gender roles in the relationship and the orientation of sex around male sexual satisfaction, with a secondary (or even marginalized role for female sexuality). The socio-cultural context is explored further in the following article.

“Love is still the same, its expression changes”. Trajectories of intimacy in later-life.

The second article expands on the findings from my first study in two ways: 1) it explores further the topic of sexual intimacy in later life, and 2) analyzes in more detail the potential impact of socio-cultural factors prominent during my participants' adulthood on their sexual life trajectories. The aim was to understand how intimacy-related attitudes and behaviors evolved among my participants, and how they affect later-life sexual and relational functioning, while taking into account the individuals' socio-cultural background. Therefore, drawing upon historical research on sexuality in former communist countries (Herzog 2011;

Lišková 2018; Kościańska 2016), I used a cultural perspective to analyze older adults' narratives about their intimate trajectories over the life course.

I embarked on a qualitative, cross-cultural thematic analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with 50 heterosexual participants, comprising of 30 from Poland (16 women, with a median age of 70) and 20 from the Czech Republic (13 women, with a median age of 65)⁴. The analysis was guided by a modified version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, designed to facilitate the comparison of the two sets of data. Me and my co-author, we familiarized ourselves with the data collected in our own language by repeatedly reading the transcripts, taking notes, and writing down our initial ideas. Then we proceeded to coding, which was based on the notions that emerged from the interviews (inductive approach), while keeping the research question in mind. After coding a sub-sample of transcripts (eight from Poland and six from the Czech Republic), we began identifying patterns across the data and generated a preliminary set of descriptive candidate themes. These themes were translated into English, accompanied by illustrative quotations, and discussed with my co-author. We shared our initial notes and emerging themes, such as "sex-related expectations in later life" and "life-long experiences with sex and expressions of closeness". We then continued with the coding of another sub-sample of transcripts, accompanied by repeated discussions and identification of dominant and unique patterns. The reviewed themes were organized into a preliminary thematic map, which was used to navigate the analysis of the remaining transcripts. The thematic map was modified iteratively, to include new themes, such as "more intimate contacts thanks to male strategies to maintain sexual activity when dealing with age-related health problems". Finally, both my co-author and I reviewed the contents of the themes and transcripts and discussed the similarities and differences identified within the data, until agreement was reached on the final thematic map.

In the analysis, three different trajectories of intimacy were distinguished in the respondents' accounts. In general, the less pragmatically sex was perceived (i.e., with less focus on physiological need, reproduction, one's own pleasure prioritized over the affectionate aspects of sex), the more intimacy was present. Thus, for some older individuals intimacy has been an integral part of sex throughout their lives; for others, health-related necessity or a new-relationship context drove a later-life shift towards intimacy-oriented sex; and another group of participants maintained their lifelong representation of sex exclusively as intercourse, without the need for intimacy. I also found that across the whole sample

⁴ Czech data was collected by Anna Ševčíková as part of her research project, details of which can be found in Ševčíková & Sedláková, 2020.

intimacy in older age has gained novel and relevant characteristics for the participants, revolving around caring about each other, knowledge, and respect.

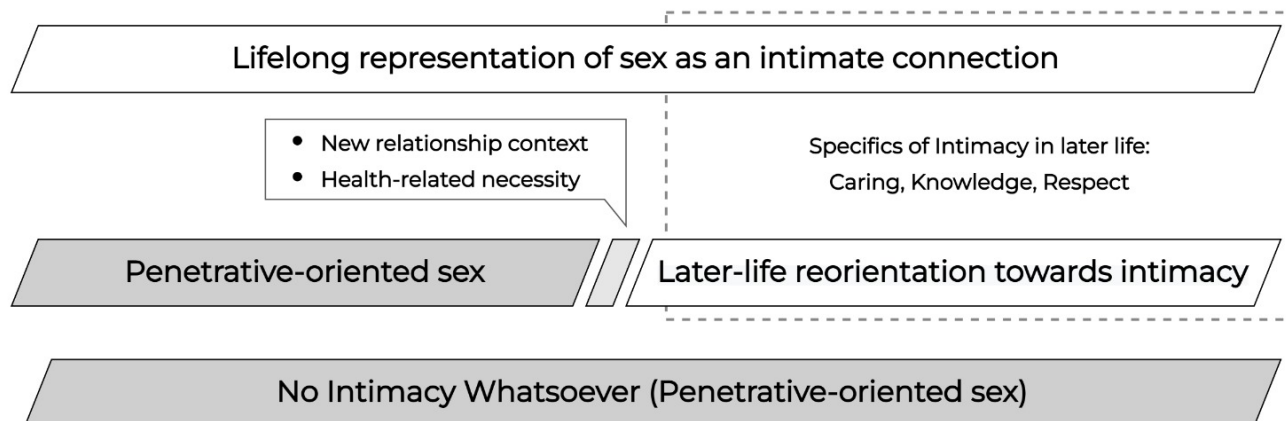


Figure 3. Thematic map capturing three types of intimate trajectories reported by the interviewees.

By comparing and contrasting the narratives from Polish and Czech older individuals, I was able to seek for notions unique for the Polish sample. Indeed, a number of specific findings were identified only among them. Firstly, I observed a disjuncture between an individual's perception of sex as an intimate connection between two people and the extent to which Polish participants had experienced it. Some women and men admitted that their longing for intimacy-oriented sexual contact was not possible due to an unfavorable relationship context. Secondly, several male participants exclusively in the Polish sample claimed that nothing but penetrative sex matters for them. They were adamant in their strongly physiological accounts of the instrumental role of sex in satisfying a man's need, a view that had persisted since their youth. Notably, the participants unanimously complained about the challenges they encounter, such as frequent refusals from women and difficulties in performing penetrative sex due to health-related problems: Yet, despite these difficulties and the related distress, they seemed to be unwilling to revise their approach towards later-life sex and to consider non-coital, more intimacy-oriented forms of sexual expression as an alternative. Thirdly, many female Polish participants voiced a strong connection between intimacy and respect: feeling respected as a woman and being treated as an equal partner was particularly prominent in their narratives, with gestures of intimacy offered by a male partner considered to be proof of this respect. Intimate behaviors in a relationship based on mutual respect was frequently mentioned as non-negotiable, paramount to engagement in sexual behavior in later-life, often in contrast to these women past experiences, when sex was more instrumental and served different reasons, such as marital duty, procreation, and satisfying the

husband's needs, and, for that reason, often lacked the component of physical and emotional intimacy.

I argue that the aforementioned findings, specific to the Polish sub-sample and absent in the narratives of Czech interviewees, may be interpreted to some extent by the gendered socio-cultural norms for sexual conduct that prevailed at the time in the communist, largely traditional and patriarchal Poland. Participants of this study were socialized according to the traditional norms of masculinity, femininity, and proper sexual behavior (intercourse-focused), with strongly accentuated 'natural differences' between women and men, and notable influence of Catholic teachings, resulting in adherence to gendered sexual roles within a relationship (Gal and Kligman 2000; Kościańska 2016; Lišková 2018). Taking these factors into account may help in better understanding the specificities of later-life sexuality among Polish older individuals.

Overall, the results of the study support the existing literature on sexuality over the life-course with three distinguished trajectories of intimacy and identified turning-point moments, potentially contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how the role of intimacy develops and changes in late life. It also offers insights on how intimate-oriented behavior may be beneficial, not only in terms of improved quality of sexual and relational life, but also with respect to older individuals learning new ways to bond and connect with their partners.

“Why would I want sex now?” Older women’s affirmative narratives on sexual inactivity in later life.

Third article takes a closer and more detailed look at one aspect of sexuality in late adulthood – discontinuation of sexual activity – which became prominent during the interviews. The existing research into sexual inactivity in older age has been informed by the assumption that older adults want to be sexually active but are often faced with substantial obstacles in this pursuit. In my study, however, I decided to leave this assumption aside and, guided by the participants’ insights (bottom-up approach), deepen my understanding of this phenomenon and identify potential other reasons for sexual inactivity in later life.

Considering the gender-specificity in sexual motives (Meston and Buss, 2007) and drawing from the data collected within my research project, I focused on a subsample of female narratives and qualitatively analyzed 16 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Polish women aged 65-82.

Results indicate that when not restricted by a set of options to choose from (such as “lacking a partner” or “experiencing health problems”), older women provide a variety of

narratives to explain why they do not engage in sexual activity (see: Figure x). Some have given up sex for good, with no regrets or feeling of a loss; for others, it may be a temporary decision, its duration dependent on meeting the right partner. Sexual (in)activity seems strongly connected to women’s sexual past and memories of their relationships, which resonates with the conclusion of Hinchliff et al. (2010) that personal factors seem to be central in shaping older women’s sexual experiences and expectations. In contrast to what has been reported in the literature, physiological (health-related) factors may play a less pronounced role in older women’s cessation of their sex life (Lindau et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2016).

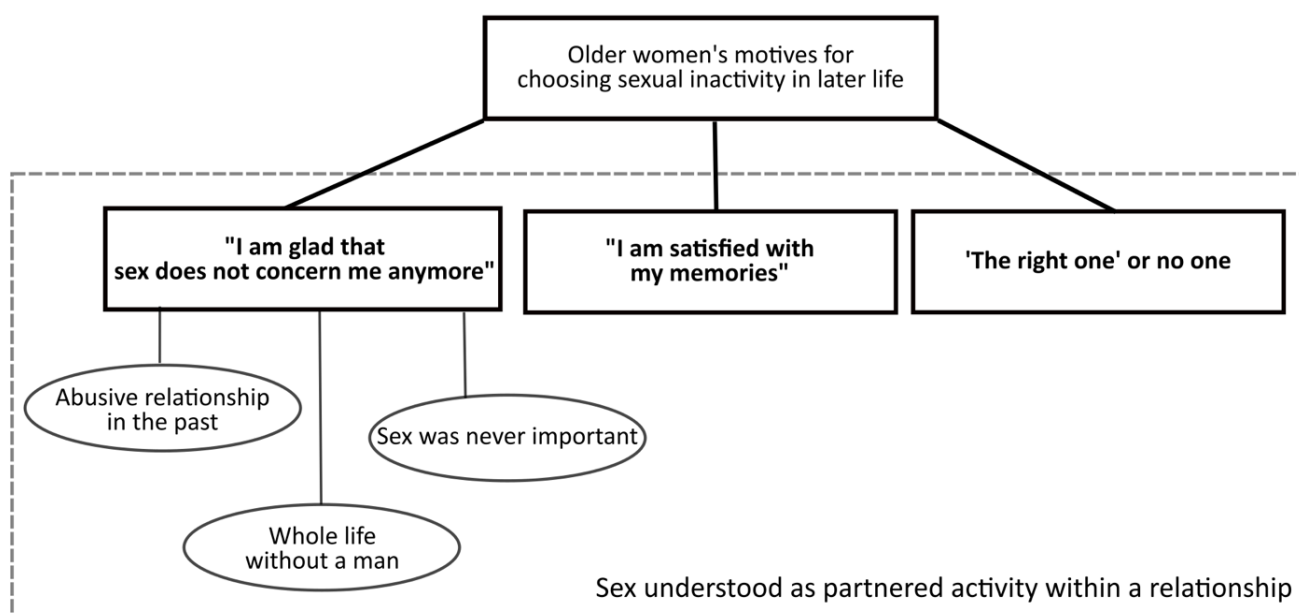


Figure 4. Final thematic map presenting the motives for choosing sexual inactivity as identified in the narratives of older women.

My study results indicate that both positive and negative sexual and relational experiences in the past may lead older women to gladly give up sexual activity. This is more obvious in case of life trajectories filled with negative and/or painful sexual connotations. Less prominent in the literature is the voice of women who embrace the end of their sex lives precisely because of their positive and fulfilling sexual and relationship experiences. I have found out that widows who do not wish to continue sexual activity do not necessarily follow the traditional script of ‘marital loyalty’ or grief-imposed abstinence. On the contrary, they share the discourse of past sexual fulfillment. The accounts presented in my study seem to correspond with the postulated possibility of attaining sexual satisfaction while remaining sexually inactive (Syme et al., 2019). It does appear that at least some older women might be satisfied with their sexuality, consisting of memories rather than current activity. This form of

experiencing one's sexuality in later life should be considered as equally valid in further research and in clinical practice.

Moreover, the results of my study suggest that a sense of sexual agency may empower older women in their decision to discontinue sex. The development of sexual agency is usually described in the context of enriching one's personal sex life, for example through increased self-awareness, greater knowledge about own sexual functioning, competence to negotiate with sexual practices with a partner (Hinchliff et al., 2010; DeLamater et al., 2019). However, it appears that for some women the development of greater sexual self-awareness, decisiveness and firmness can result in a decision to withdraw from a sexual life. This framing would place older women who have made the choice to give up sexual activity in a position of transgressing traditional sexual scripts, as opposed to those women who are still sexually active because of a marital duty or to satisfy a partner's needs.

Finally, based on this study results I argue that promoting sexual activity as an element of successful ageing should be applied with caution. In cases when sex has no positive connotations for an individual (negative sexual experiences in the past), cessation of their sex life may be favorable, perceived even as liberating. My findings corroborate some recent research in claim that sex is not always a necessary element in successful aging (Fileborn et al., 2015; Syme et al., 2019; Thorpe, 2019).

IV. Conclusion

The research carried out as part of this dissertation contributes to the existing international literature on psycho-social mechanisms related to sexuality in later life by providing insights from older women and man with a specific socio-cultural background. In this way it addresses the gaps identified in the field of research on late-life sexuality: the dominance of the biomedical perspective, a limited amount of research drawing from the subjective perspective of older people, and a scarcity of literature on older generation's sexuality in non-Western socio-cultural contexts.

Novel findings which may potentially enrich theoretical models of sexuality in older age and inform future research include: clarifying various meanings of sex and their implications for sexual attitudes and behaviors in older age, describing life trajectories related to intimacy, with associated consequences for later-life sexual and relationship functioning, identifying life events that change attitudes and perceptions towards sex, and deepening the understanding of factors related to later-life cessation of sexual activity.

Findings described in this dissertation have also potentially significant practical implications for educational programs aimed at enhancing sexual health and well-being in later life. They can guide clinical practices that support older individuals in maintaining a fulfilling sex life as they age. For example, in the context of therapeutic practice, various cognitive and behavioral interventions could be employed, such as empowering individuals to make informed decision about sexual activity based on their personal experiences (e.g. either to pursue or withdraw from sexual activity), educating them about the role of sexual activity in successful aging (optional, not necessary), helping them to clarify their own definition of "having sex" and whether it is similar or different to their partner's understanding, working toward greater flexibility of one's definition of sex to include a wider variety of behaviors into one's sexual repertoire. Therapies can also highlight alternative ways of being sexual that can promote sexual and relational well-being in older age, especially when faced with health-related sexual difficulties, examine intimate trajectories to understand patterns, and promote sexual agency to make independent decisions regarding own sexuality (especially among women). Particularly relevant in this context should be acknowledging the role of individual differences in life experiences and considering factors beyond the physiological that affect sexual functioning for both older women and men.

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Articles in the series


Article 1

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“What Do You Mean by Sex?” A Qualitative Analysis of Traditional versus Evolved Meanings of Sexual Activity among Older Women and Men

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ABSTRACT

Older adults remain sexually active well into later life; yet, there is no consistency in the literature about what sex means to them. The study described in this paper investigated the understanding of sexual activity as reported by 30 women and men from Poland, aged 65 to 82 ($M = 71$, $SD = 5,24$). Semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed in relation to sexual scripts theory and the participants' specific sociocultural background. The results demonstrate the diversity of opinions on what sex is: from penetrative intercourse, through various expressions of physical intimacy, to emotional intimacy as a central concept. The dominant perception of sex as intercourse among some study participants evolved into an intimacy-oriented and partner-focused activity, with the discovery of fondling and female sexual pleasure as components of sex. Certain life events – such as ending a long-term marriage or engaging in a new romantic relationship – were identified as facilitating this change. Notable similarities in older women's and men's perceptions of satisfying sex in later life were observed. Acknowledging the nuanced meaning of sex for this population can contribute to a better understanding of the specificity of older adults' sexuality.

Introduction

The fact that, contrary to the stereotypes, older individuals are not asexual is now well established in the literature. A growing body of research, mostly from the last two decades, has revealed and documented that sex remains an integral part of older adults' lives, affecting their physical and psychological well-being as well as life satisfaction (Brody, 2010; Flynn & Gow, 2015; Gott et al., 2004; Hinchliff et al., 2018; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010). Researchers have begun to question and challenge the pervasive stereotype of sexual decline in later life, indicating that many older adults continue to engage in various forms of sexual activity even in old age and that sexuality remains an important part of their life (Fileborn et al., 2017; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Kleinplatz et al., 2009; Laumann et al., 2006; Tetley et al., 2018). However, there is no consistency across the research about what sexual activity means, especially when older women and men are concerned. Imprecise definitions of “sex” and “sexual activity” may lead to inconsistent or vague usage of these concepts, which is discussed in the following section.

Studies examining older adults' sexuality have predominantly focused on the biology and physiology of sexual behaviors as well as on sexual health and dysfunction, mainly through quantitative analyses. A limited amount of qualitative research about sexuality and aging from the subjective perspectives of older people is available (see: Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2019; Sinković & Towler, 2019). The qualitative studies reported to date tend to explore only female or only male narratives within a study, which does not facilitate gender comparisons, and often include middle-aged adults in the sample (50 years old and above), which introduces narratives

of the younger generation into the discourse (Fileborn et al., 2017; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Sandberg, 2013; Thorpe, 2018). Study designs are frequently limited to the specific demographic subgroups of respondents, such as widowed older adults, people recently engaged in new relationships, or individuals in a long-term relationship (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004; Kasif & Band-Winterstein, 2017; Lodge & Umberson, 2012; Watson et al., 2017). Only a small proportion of qualitative studies give some insight into the sexual life of older adults from more conservative societies (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2019; Lagana & Maciel, 2010; Yan et al., 2011; Yun et al., 2014), while the majority explored the topic in Western cultures. These, although not homogeneous, are believed to be more egalitarian and sexually permissive than Central or Eastern European post-communist countries (Galland & Lemel, 2008; Halman, 2001; World Economic Forum, 2018), which may possibly be the result of a stronger impact of the sexual revolution in the 1960s in the West and less influence of the Catholic traditional values during the time when the current cohort of older adults was coming of age (Ayalon et al., 2019).

To address this gap in the literature, this study aimed to explore the meanings of sex for older women and men in the light of sexual scripts theory and culture-specific factors. Potential areas of interest in this study for researchers and practitioners dealing with sexuality in older age is the possible extent to which findings from studies conducted in more liberal countries can be carried over to more conservative grounds, along with the specificities of the conservative socio-cultural context that can be taken into account while planning

sexual health related interventions for older adults. The findings presented here are based on the analysis of qualitative interviews with heterosexual older adults and are focused on their understanding of sex. Specifically, this article compares and contrasts the ways in which older men and women from a conservative and highly religious cultural background (Poland) understand what sex is, how this understanding evolved (if at all), and how the ideas of sex they hold today affect their current sex life. Particular attention is paid to the societal sexual scripts that underpin the participants' past and present understanding of sex.

The Meanings of Sex

Two types of definitions of “sex” and “sexual activity” can be identified throughout studies with older adults. Fileborn et al. (2017) introduced a distinction between the “hierarchical” and “broad” understandings of sex. The first one is based on a narrow definition of sexual activity as exclusively penetrative intercourse and is widely used in quantitative studies. It is common practice for research on sexual and other difficulties to assess sexual activity operationalized as penile-vaginal intercourse (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2009; Smith et al., 2012; see also Fileborn et al., 2017). But even more qualitatively oriented studies, such as Meston and Buss's (2007) review on people's sexual motives, tend to interpret “having sex” as engaging in sexual intercourse. Results from qualitative studies confirm that this penetration-oriented understanding of sex is indeed present in some discourses of older women, men, and couples (e.g., Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2019; Lodge & Umberson, 2012; Loe, 2004; Syme et al., 2019; Tetley et al., 2018). Typically, for older adults who share the hierarchical view of sex, it is penile-vaginal intercourse that constitutes true sex. Other sexual behaviors, such as masturbation, elements of foreplay, or oral sex are usually considered as “lesser” sex (in accordance with the hierarchy of activities) or do not count as sex at all, merely as a substitute. This seems to be consistent with the heteronormative context of traditional gender roles and the sexual scripts prevalent in current older adults' youth, which defined sex predominantly in terms of male-female penetration and men's ejaculation (Montemurro, 2014; Træen et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2011).

Findings from other qualitative studies provide a body of evidence that the concept of sexuality changes with age and that for some older individuals the narrow definition ceases to accurately reflect how they understand sexual activity. Therefore, broad definitions of sex typically decenter the significance of genital sex and draw on the notion that sexual activity can be anything the partners consider as such. In some studies, older adults spontaneously differentiate intercourse from other forms of sexual activity and intimacy, usually stressing the greater importance of cuddling, kissing, and physical closeness over penetrative intercourse (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Kleinplatz et al., 2009). Studies on older men report that some of them redefine their ideas about sex from intercourse-oriented to intimacy-oriented and emphasize the role of emotional closeness and bonding (Fileborn et al., 2017; Sandberg,

2013). It has been found that some women see nonpenetrative sex as at least equally important as penetrative and perceive their current sexuality as more complex than it was at a younger age (due to the inclusion of intimacy and various sexual activities leading to female pleasure) (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Thorpe, 2018). Also, some quantitative studies tend to apply the broader definition of sex when exploring older adults' sexual life, for example, by defining sexual activity as “sexual intercourse, masturbation, petting or fondling” (Træen et al., 2019) or by using questionnaires/scales that list different types of sexual behavior (e.g., hugging, kissing, or mutual stroking) (Flynn & Gow, 2015; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010).

There are studies, both qualitative and quantitative, that do not specify the meaning of “sex.” It is frequent practice to assess variables related to sexual activity (e.g., frequency, interest, or quality) by asking questions such as “Over the past months, how often have you had sex with someone?” or similar, leaving it for the respondents to determine their own understanding of the term (Estill et al., 2018; Forbes et al., 2017; Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010; see also Fileborn et al., 2017). Only in rare cases, usually qualitative, can the meaning be determined by the context, as it was in the study by Hinchliff et al. (2018, p. 160, “they engaged in sex, which we assume means intercourse”). The fact that no definition of sexual activity is provided in a study, although not necessarily a disadvantage, is often noted as a limitation that may lead to variability in participants' answers or influence the interpretation of the results (Estill et al., 2018; Forbes et al., 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2019).

Gendered Sexual Norms and the Impact of Culture: The Polish Context

Societal norms, together with biographical differences and physiological factors, are now recognized as a complex set of factors that shape the sexuality of all groups, older adults being no exception (Hinchliff, 2016). With this in mind, gender norms and sociocultural characteristics can be expected to influence the individual understanding of sex to a certain degree. It is notable that a large proportion of research on the sexuality of older adults has been done in the Western culture countries. Qualitative studies that, to some extent, explored the meaning of sexuality for older adults were conducted mainly in Western or Northern Europe (UK, Sweden), Australia, and the USA (see: Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2019; Sinković & Towler, 2019). But as sexual attitudes and behaviors are believed to be largely shaped by the sociocultural context, the picture of older adults' sexuality emerging from these studies cannot be easily generalized outside of these cultures due to the specificity of participants' background.

When considering a culture as “conservative” or “liberal”, it should be noted that it is not a binary opposition, since societies are not homogenous and static, but fluctuate between traditional and modern values (Ayalon et al., 2019). However, taking into consideration various sets of values (gender quality, level of religiosity, dominance of patriarchal norms, emphasis on individualism or family values etc.) certain societies can be called more traditional than others¹ (Galland & Lemel, 2008;

¹In this article, whenever a culture or a society is labeled as “conservative” or “liberal”, it is to indicate that culture in question can be considered as leaning toward one end of the conservative-liberal dimension, rather than homogeneously conservative or liberal.

Halman, 2001). One of the dimensions on which these cultures differ is the equality of gender roles – and the related issues of sexuality. In cultures perceived as liberal (e.g., in Scandinavian societies), gender equality is more prominent and is reflected in more permissive views on sexuality (Petersen & Hyde, 2011; Træen et al., 2019). Conversely, one of the reasons behind describing a society as more conservative is observing high levels of gender inequality due to the dominance of patriarchal norms, and due to the notions of masculinity and femininity standing in strict opposition. In this context, masculinity implies sexual dominance, strong sexual desires, initiating role, and intercourse readiness, while femininity is often associated with sexual passivity, submissiveness, monogamy, and dependency (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Sandberg, 2013; Watson et al., 2017). This gender inequality seems to translate into gendered sexual norms that predominate in particular cultures.

Gendered norms about sex affect the sexuality of older adults in numerous ways (Wiederman, 2005). For example, older women who want to initiate and be in control of their sex life may either feel restricted and governed by dominant norms, or, if they express their sexual appetite and seek casual partners, be perceived as dangerous “cougars” (Fileborn et al., 2015; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014). In contrast, older men who articulate their need for sexual intercourse are more likely to be considered healthy and receive extensive pharmacological support to continue sexual activity in the form of penetration (see Gareri et al., 2014), than to be labeled as ‘dirty old men’. In contrast, older men with lower libido but higher need for emotional intimacy may feel inadequate for not meeting the dominant norms for masculinity (Petersen & Hyde, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). Although the impact of these strict gendered sexual norms on older adults’ sexuality surely varies, they should be considered as limiting the flexibility of perceiving one’s sexuality and may inhibit sexual expression among the aging population (Petersen & Hyde, 2010).

On the other hand, the literature reports that some aspects of gender differences decrease with age (Petersen & Hyde, 2011). A sexual double standard is believed to diminish or even disappear in later life couples, as they are more likely to put greater value on emotional intimacy and companionship than on sexual intimacy in their relationship (Lodge & Umberson, 2012). It is also argued that gender differences in sexual expression and sexual motives may be greater at an earlier age due to the gendered norms encouraging young men to follow their physical sexual drive and prompting young women to resist it; as people age, they become less affected by the physical aspects of sex (and related gendered norms) but more strongly affected by its interpersonal context (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2019; Petersen & Hyde, 2010, 2011).

In the light of the above, what seems striking is the shortage of research on older generation’s sexuality in more conservative societies. For example, little is known about how older adults from traditional European societies perceive sex today. One study that examined older women’s and men’s understanding of sexuality was conducted in China (Yan et al., 2011) and referred mostly to Confucian principles guiding the participants’ lives. A study on aspects of older adults’

sexuality conducted recently in Israel, while stressing the presence of traditional values in Israeli society, admitted that more than two-thirds of the sample had not been born or raised in Israel (Ayalon et al., 2019; Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2019). It might be reasonable to deepen scientific insight into the sexuality of older adults with a strong conservative background, in which case Poland could serve as a good example.

Poland is a large Central European country with a population ranking 6th in the European Union, and one of the most religious countries in the EU (Halman, 2001). According to the Global Gender Gap Report for 2018, Poland was ranked 42nd on the list of most egalitarian countries, compared, for example, to Sweden being 3rd, the UK being 15th, and Australia ranking 39th (World Economic Forum, 2018). Although the Polish population follows the general trend of aging in the developed West (Central Statistical Office of Poland [GUS], 2014), there is a lack of data on the sexuality of older adults in this country.

The distinctive sociocultural context of Polish older adults’ sexuality stems from the period between 1945 and 1989, when Poland was under a communist regime, opposed by the Catholic Church (Ingbrant, 2020). The early communist ideals of sexual equality eroded, replaced by a (male) hero worker image (Kenney, 1999). Women were encouraged by the state to also follow the path of socialist workers – the so-called “equality of genders” – but their main duty in the communist system was to be mothers for new socialist generations (Ingbrant, 2020; Kenney, 1999). They were expected to welcome this approach as innately rewarding and leading to self-realization (Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2015). After the Second World War, the Catholic Church emerged as the leading opponent of the communist regime (Ediger, 2005). In the spirit of Catholic values, heteronormative and conservative, the Church advocated that “women play a vital role in society as faithful and fecund wives, whose identity revolve around their family and whose needs are the needs of their families” (Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2015, p. 174). When current older adults were growing up, the joint influence of the regime and traditional religious teachings left little room for sex-positive attitudes (Lew-Starowicz, 2004). The lack of sexual knowledge and awareness combined with difficulties expressing one’s sexuality are a common theme among older Poles (Stankowska, 2008); despite coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, they were affected by the sexual revolution to a very small degree.

Older Individuals’ Sexual Scripts

The sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) was chosen to guide the analyses performed in the present study, as it provides a theoretical framework for the exploration of how growing up in Central Europe after World War II influenced current older adults’ sexual attitudes and behaviors. According to this theory, sexual scripts are “the ‘blueprints’ for sexual conduct, detailing with whom one will have sex, what acts one will perform . . . and for what reasons” (Muruthi et al., 2018, p. 84). On the societal level, members of a society learn the norms that regulate sexual behavior (e.g., “A woman who initiates sex is promiscuous and vulgar”; “Sex is not appropriate in older age”). On the interpersonal level, scripts are negotiated and adjusted between partners in sexual interactions

(e.g., “We are OK with having oral sex or just cuddling when one of us is not feeling well”; “My husband requires intercourse once daily, so I comply”). Finally, on the intrapsychic level, sexual scripts consist of personal fantasies, motivations, and subjective interpretations (e.g., “For me, sex should be fun”; “I’m a widow, I should not seek a new partner”) (see Muruthi et al., 2018; Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 2003).

Sexual scripts can reinforce or limit an individual’s sexual expression, which may be particularly visible in the case of the older generation. For example, a person may believe that physical intimacy takes many forms and can be still enjoyable at older age, and therefore he or she will adjust sexual activities to the partners’ health-related limitations; a different person may suppress his or her own sexual needs and desires if entering a new relationship – believed to be inappropriate – would be required to fulfill them. Scripts can be accepted or rejected by an individual – consciously or instinctively; an older woman may refuse to enter a relationship with a younger partner in a small community to avoid social ostracism, while another individual may purposefully engage in a later-life romance with no commitment in mind.

In light of the above, it should be stressed that although certain sexual scripts can be dominant throughout an individual’s life, they are not rigid rules that—once learned—are followed forever without questioning. On the contrary, as Masters et al. (2013) put it: “mainstream, traditional cultural scripts are not a given, but require maintenance and reinforcement at personal and dyadic levels to persist” (p. 410). Simon and Gagnon repeatedly used the processual language and referred to the “process of sexual scripting”, particularly in the intrapersonal context in relation to changes within an individual (self), but also within a society/culture and in a relationship (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). The concept of sexual scripts evolving within an individual has been explored in qualitative research, and these results demonstrate that the process of negotiating and (re) interpreting occurs most often at the disjuncture of cultural scenarios and individual’s scripts, leading to either accepting and conforming the dominant norms, transforming them or developing new sexual scripts among those who do not abide by social norms and expectations (Bertone & Ferrero Camoletto, 2009; Masters et al., 2013; Murray, 2018).

The scripts theory helps to conceptualize how sexual behavior in older adults might have been shaped by ageist (or other) societal norms.

The Current Study

To the best of the author’s knowledge, no qualitative assessment so far aimed at exploring both older women’s and older men’s meanings of sex in the European (or Western) cultural context. Unlike many qualitative studies in the area, the present study involved a sample of exclusively older participants (65 years old and above) of both genders. Considering that the majority of relevant studies were carried out in more liberal and gender egalitarian societies, little is known about the understanding of sexuality among older adults in more conservative settings. The current study aimed to start bridging these gaps.

Informed by the sexual script theory, which sees sexual attitudes and behaviors above all as social phenomena (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 2003), this study investigated the current meanings of sex among older adults and the development of these ideas. Given its regulatory influence on sexuality, the specific sociocultural background is considered when contextualizing patterns in the sexual narratives. Two specific research questions guided this study: (1) What meanings do older women and men attach to sex? (2) Which sexual scripts (societal, interpersonal, intrapersonal) emerge as predominant in participants’ narratives, potentially influencing their understanding of sex and their current sex life?

Method

Participants and Recruitment

This article is based on the findings from 30 semi-structured interviews with Polish women and men aged 65 and over. The sample consisted of 16 women and 14 men, all self-identified as heterosexual; all declared being religious (Catholic), but diverse in terms of educational background and socioeconomic status (Table 1). Participants’ ages ranged from 65 to 82 years ($M = 71.4$, $SD = 5.24$). As regards relationship status, half of the participants in this study ($N = 15$) reported not having a partner at the time of the interview, 11 (37%) were in a new relationship, and 4 (13%) were in a long-term relationship. Twenty participants (67%) were retired, 10 (33%) were still employed or semiretired (part-time job or freelancing after formal retirement) (see Table 1 for full demographic details). Given the previous lack of research on this topic in Poland, the sample was purposefully diverse in terms of relationship status, not limited to specific subgroups (e.g., singles, widowed older adults, long-term married couples).

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 30).

Characteristics	N (%)
Age mean (SD)	71.4 (5.24)
Gender	
Women	16 (53)
Men	14 (47)
Marital Status	
Single	3 (10)
Divorced	11 (37)
Widowed	11 (37)
Married	5 (16)
Relationship Status	
No Partner	15 (50)
New Relationship	11 (37)
Long-Term Relationship	4 (13)
Education	
Primary	1 (3)
Secondary/Vocational	18 (60)
Tertiary/Higher	11 (37)
Employment	
Retired	20 (67)
Semiretired	6 (20)
Employed	4 (13)
Place of Residence	
Rural	3 (10)
Small/Medium Town	8 (26)
City	19 (64)

Study participants were recruited through posters distributed at health centers, pharmacies, University of the Third Age venues and in a retirement community, in two cities in southern Poland. The posters briefly introduced the study and the researcher, along with an invitation to participate and contact information. When contacted by a potential participant, the author provided additional information regarding the project and the study procedures, and verified if the person met the age requirement. Potential participants were ensured about the anonymity of the research and about confidentiality measures being taken, as well as informed about the anticipated length of the interview and the need for audio-recording. During the recruitment, it was emphasized that currently sexually inactive individuals were welcome as well, and that their participation was of the same importance as that of sexually active individuals. With those who expressed willingness to participate, a meeting time and date was agreed on. Others, who were not certain, or had other commitments, were offered the possibility to contact the author at a later time. Several of them (five individuals) reconsidered their decision and eventually participated in the study. None of the participants canceled the appointment, though several changes in dates occurred. Three interviews conducted were not included in the final analysis due to the failure to obtain answers to the research questions.

Procedure and Measures

The interviews were semi-structured,² with an interview schedule to ensure that all of the main topics were discussed. The conversational style of the interviews allowed participants to introduce their own topics of interest, and enabled the author to address issues unique for each participant. As this was part of a larger study exploring the sexuality of older adults in Poland, the interview guide was purposefully broad and addressed several areas: participants' sexual history and current sexual life, sexual problems and help-seeking behaviors, attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality in later life, and body image in the context of aging. Participants' understanding of sex was inferred from their overall narratives and was based on the answers to a number of questions that addressed the topic, as pilot interviews revealed that this approach resulted in richer and more extensive data than using a single direct question. After the interview, the participants completed a brief demographic form, which contained questions about age, sex, sexual orientation, and marital status as well as questions regarding education, religious affiliation, and subjective health level.

All of the face-to-face interviews were conducted by the author between January and May 2019. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Philosophy Department Research Ethics Committee of the Jagiellonian University. Each interview lasted between two and three hours and took place in the participant's preferred location, usually at their home or in the author's office. The author introduced herself – as well as her

goals and motivations – in order to ensure a feeling of security, and to establish the credibility and trust essential for discussing a sensitive topic. In response to considerable interest from the participants, who were familiar with quantitative measures only, the author briefly explained the ways of handling and analyzing qualitative data. Participants were assured that their names would be replaced by pseudonyms and that other identifying characteristics would be removed from the transcripts. They were informed of their right to withdraw and to object to particular questions; they were also encouraged to bring in any other concerns. Informed consent to conduct and audio-tape the interviews was obtained from all participants.

After the interviews, all participants were debriefed and none expressed discomfort or distress, regardless of the sensitivity of the issues discussed. Many participants found the interview enjoyable and meaningful. Some acknowledged that they were narrating their sexual life for the first time. The majority of the participants noted that the researcher's comparatively young age (30+), similar to the age of their children or grandchildren, did not inhibit their disclosure. According to the participants, the interviewer's professional conduct, her friendliness, and the relaxed atmosphere facilitated open discussion. Many female participants admitted the author's gender (female) facilitated the conversation and enhanced their openness. As for the male participants, although it cannot be ruled out that the author's gender impacted their narratives to a degree, men in this study on many occasions emphasized their sincerity, resulting from perceiving the author above all as a non-biased, neutral researcher (e.g., "I'm telling you how it is, because I see you as a researcher who pursues the truth about sex in older age" M,75). Participants were compensated for their time with PLN 100 (approx. EUR 25).

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed by a professional service, following the exclusion of all sensitive information (surnames, addresses, etc.). Selected transcripts were verified for accuracy by the author against the original recordings. The thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen for its flexibility and not limiting the analysis to a predefined epistemology. For an exploratory study such as this, thematic analysis was particularly valuable, since it enables highlighting both similarities and differences across the data set and allows for generating unanticipated insights. The analysis followed six reflexive steps required to ensure the quality of the thematic analysis and the trustworthiness of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The author first read a number of transcripts repeatedly to familiarize herself with the data and note down the emergent ideas. Open-coding followed, in which relevant segments of the text were identified within the data set. The initial coding categories consisted of the interview questions and the core aims of this study (e.g., the meaning of sex, gender differences and similarities). A subsample of

²The interview schedule was adapted from the Healthy Sexual Aging Study, courtesy of prof. Bente Træen.

transcripts ($n = 5$) was open-coded independently by an external party (psychologist and psychotherapist, experienced with qualitative methodology) to ensure the validity of initial coding. Disagreements between the two coders were resolved in a discussion. By means of visual representation, the codes were organized (sorted, collated, and combined) until a number of themes and sub-themes were identified and organized into an initial thematic map. All identified themes were then reviewed against two criteria, internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to ensure that the data was coherent within themes while the themes were clearly distinguishable and did not overlap. The two coders consulted each other and discussed if the themes accurately captured the interview contents. The thematic map was then applied to the remaining transcripts. Additional *in vivo* codes were identified while coding the subsequent transcripts, with the thematic map appended accordingly. The clearly defined and named main themes and sub-themes formed the final thematic map (see Figures 1 and 2). The present analysis focused on recurring themes and patterns across the data while also considering accounts that contradicted or departed from these patterns, thus allowing the thematic map to reflect the complexity of participants' perspectives.

MAXQDA software was used for all data analyses. To keep a clear audit trail, notes of step-by-step analyses were made. In order to meet the methodological standards for qualitative research set out by the National Institute for Health and Care

Excellence (NICE, 2012) and to ensure the richness of data (Sinković & Towler, 2019), quotations supporting the analyses are provided for the reader.

Results

Three organizing themes were identified in the meaning of sex domain: (1) sex as intercourse, (2) sex as physical intimacy in many forms, and (3) sex as emotional intimacy. Figures 1 and 2 show the structure of the thematic material in female and male narratives, respectively, and the major changes in the interviewees' understanding of sex in younger vs. older age.

Figure 1 illustrates how—when younger—most female participants understood sex primarily in terms of sexual intercourse, exercised to fulfil marital obligation (satisfying husband's needs) or to have children. Experiencing pleasure was irrelevant or considered shameful. Intimacy as an aspect of sex was hardly recognized, and if it was, viewed as an idealistic, romantic fantasy. Notable differences are visible in how female participants' understanding of sex evolved toward later life. Intercourse remained an essence of sex for a small number of women who universally considered it redundant or shameful. Most women shifted toward intimacy-oriented sex, nuanced between its physical and emotional aspects. Sexual intimacy encompasses discovery of foreplay and other sexual activities that bring pleasure and enhance closeness, and feelings of trusting a partner and being respected by him. Intercourse was considered very optional.

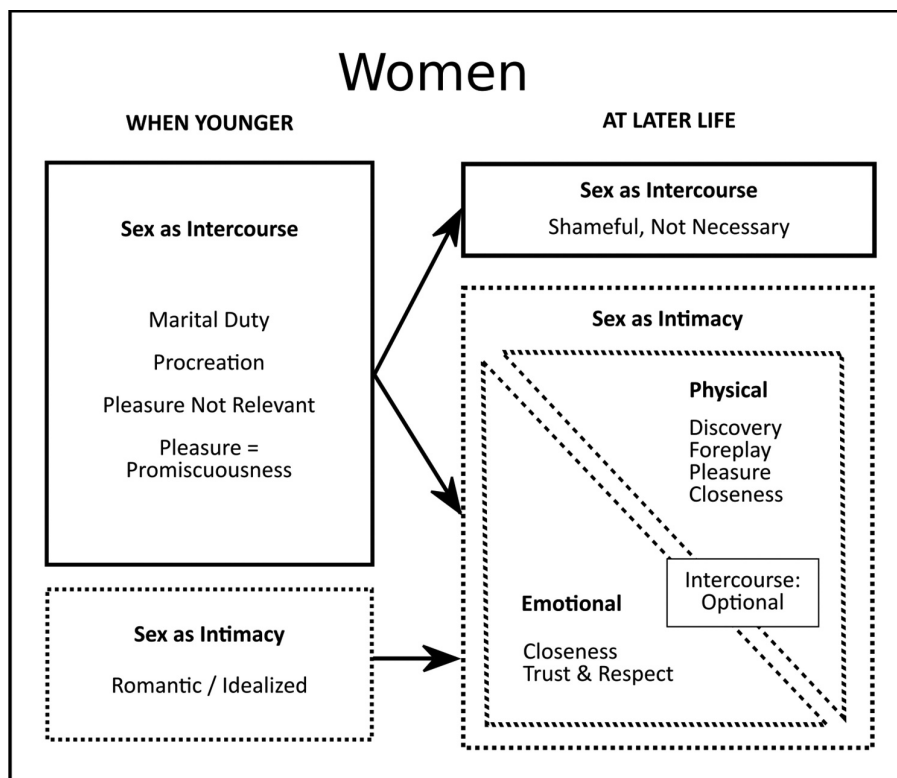


Figure 1. The meanings of sex for female participants: indicating the dominance of themes when younger and in later life, with key words describing the organizing themes' content.

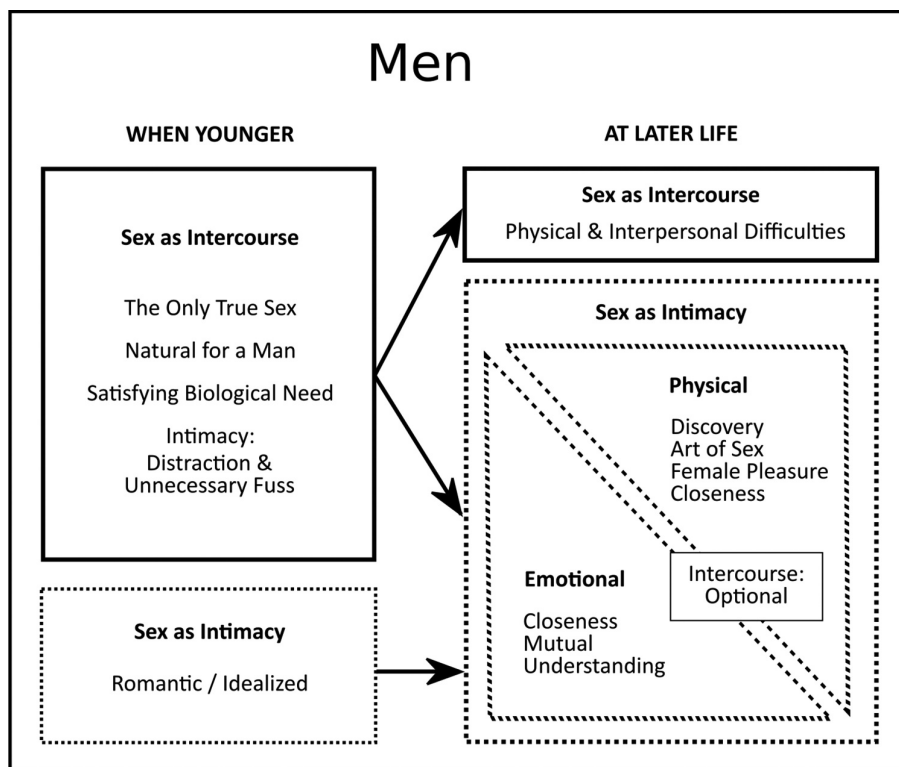


Figure 2. The meanings of sex for male participants: indicating the dominance of themes when younger and in later life, with key words describing the organizing themes' content.

Figure 2 illustrates how—when younger—most of the male participants equated sex with intercourse; it was considered the only true meaning of sex, and simply natural for a man to satisfy a biological need. Aspects of intimacy were considered a distraction, or—if appreciated by some—a romantic fantasy. Again, a notable shift can be observed in men's narratives about sex at later life. For most of the male participants the understanding of what sex is evolved toward intimacy, both physical and emotional, revolving around the discovery of their female partners' pleasure, various enjoyable sexual activities other than intercourse, and around the mutual closeness and understanding between partners. If sex was still equated with intercourse only, it was most often a source of problems (physical and interpersonal).

None of the participants reported a later life shift from intimacy-oriented meaning of sex toward understanding sex as primarily intercourse.

Sex as Intercourse

All participants raised the topic of penetrative sex or sexual intercourse and acknowledged its role in their sexual histories. Although both women and men discussed sex in this context, marked gender differences in attitude and overall evaluation of penetrative intercourse were observed.

Sex as Intercourse: Men

Male participants tended to interpret sex in terms of intercourse as only natural and self-explanatory: "When the evening comes, of course I want to be intimate with her – have intercourse I mean"

(M,66). Intercourse was often the primary form of sexual activity for these men. This had frequently been the case since a young age: "After I first had real sex with a woman, when I was inside her, I knew instantly that this was my thing. I still want the same and need the same, classic thing" (M,75). According to one male participant, all other forms of sexual expression (e.g., foreplay, fondling) were "just unnecessary fuss and distraction," positions other than missionary were "weird and too complicated," and emotional intimacy was labeled as "soap-opera-inspired" (M,67). Such comments were not uncommon among other men in this study. Two of them found the question on what sex was about confusing, and their replies were straightforward: "You ask like you don't know. Of course, a man wants to fuck. It's quite simple; what else do you want me to say? <laugh>" (M,80).

According to several male participants, there was no sex without penetration. This opinion was expressed in numerous variations, such as: sex being incomplete when men had to withdraw prior to ejaculation (*coitus interruptus*), sex not being real sex because of a woman's acute pelvic pain during intercourse, or sex being serious only when penetration was involved: "With her it was serious; we had intercourse. With others no, just touching and stuff" (M,76). Some men considered themselves sympathetic and compassionate when refraining from penetration due to their female partner's condition, yet they still emphasized the difference: "She told me there couldn't be... you know... penetration, due to her health issues. I'm a decent man so I respected her and her needs. Now we do sex-like stuff, but no true sex unfortunately" (M,70). Several men openly complained about the lack of penetrative sex,

elaborating on the negative emotional consequences such as frustration, disappointment, or melancholy: *"I have severe ED. With my wife we still do cuddling and kissing, but ... This can accompany sex but should never replace it! It's so frustrating"* (M,66).

The need for penetrative sex was admitted as challenging to fulfil nowadays for several men in this study, with this fact causing them notable distress: *"Getting a woman to have intercourse with me is difficult"* (M,80). Almost all male participants who followed the traditional script of sex as intercourse complained about frequent rejections from potential female partners to their direct intercourse proposals. This is captured well in the following quote: *"I'm constantly looking for a woman. When I meet one who seems 'willing' to me, I quickly ask: 'I have an apartment nearby. Would you like to go to my place and have sex?' But they usually refuse or leave and never call back. I don't know why; it was easier in the past. Older women are difficult. As if they stopped wanting to have sex"* (M,76). The interviewer was asked several times for advice on how to approach older women, and in all cases the men who asked were genuinely surprised with the suggestion that their potential partners might expect sexual activities other than penetration, and also rather skeptical about the idea: *"So you're telling me to play cat and mouse before I can get to the point?"* (M,75). These examples illustrate the persistence of a traditional penetration-oriented sexual script among some older men in this study.

Sex as Intercourse: Women

The narratives of female participants who continued to equate sex with penetrative intercourse were similar to male narratives in being dominated by traditional sexual scripts, but stood in contrast to male narratives in terms of the role of sex in life. Two common scripts identified within these women's penetration-oriented understanding of sex were "sex means procreation" and "sex for my husband." Both scripts stressed the somewhat limited role sex played in their own sexual functioning. The emphasis on the procreative meaning of sex was particularly prominent among female participants with a history of (sexual) abuse in marriage, who almost universally internalized the societal sexual script of motherhood: "Women have sex to have children". According to these women, sex was predominantly a "man's thing", causing women distress and making them feel objectified: *"I felt like an object. I knew there was only one thing he wanted to do to satisfy his physical desires"* (F,76). Solely penetrative sex was described as a "mere mechanical act," based on "low biological urges," often incomprehensible for a woman: *"He's pleasing himself; I don't know why he's doing it. I'm not having fun at all, I'm not comfortable. Why do I need it? Why should I go for it?"* (F,70). This participant indicated that her negative experiences were the result of sex lacking any foreplay or intimacy, and her partner being focused solely on his own sexual satisfaction. She also associated her overall negative experiences with lacking fundamental knowledge about male or female sexual functioning. This prevented her from enjoying intercourse since she did not know about other ways of engaging in sexual activity (e.g., stimulating herself, suggesting alternatives to her partner, etc.). In the absence of any other positive connotations of sexual activity,

procreation was the only reason for some women in this study to engage in sex.

Other female participants who shared a penetrative focus on sex but reported having a more positive relationship with their husbands considered physical sex as something that must happen for the benefit of marriage. Some called it "marital duty," "contribution," or "necessary suffering for the sake of the relationship". These women's narratives revealed that they had been following the cultural script of necessity: "A good wife must attend to her husband's sexual needs," which implies that a woman's responsibility is to satisfy men's desire. This pattern was common across women's narratives in this study and was attributed to generational factors. This is captured well in the following statement: *"In my generation, women have sacrificed themselves. They were sexually unhappy with their husbands, sexually they did not know what was going on at all, but they just thought it was necessary. You must be with your husband, you must endure. And that is how it was, they were suffering. Well, WE were suffering"* (F,70). The "suffering" referred to the nuisance of the sexual act itself, since in the case of these women, the interpersonal sexual scripts within their marriages were gendered and focused solely on male sexual needs and pleasure, leaving their own satisfaction behind.

Despite the lack of a hedonistic function of sex in these women's lives, they had never questioned the legitimacy of following the traditional sexual scripts. On the contrary, for several female participants in this study, the systematically reinforced societal scripts of motherhood and marital duty were internalized to the point of constituting these women's current sense of identity and pride: *"My mother taught me what a dutiful wife should be. I followed her advice and all my friends envied me. My husband never raised his hand to me, never cheated on me, never mentioned a divorce. He had no reason, I made sure of that [...] I slept with him when he needed it; it was natural, just like cooking dinner or ironing his shirts [...] I know I was an exemplary wife and that is why our marriage was perfect and lasted thirty nine years!"* (F,75). In this and similar cases, sexual activity was considered a chore, vital for the stability and success of the marriage, or alternatively – necessary in order to have offspring. Orienting one's life goals around being a mother and/or dutiful wife was why the scripts of motherhood and marital duty became dominant intrapersonal sexual scripts for several female participants in this study.

Sex as Physical Intimacy in Many Forms

When describing their current understanding of sex, a number of female and male participants referred to physical intimacy in various forms (fondling, kissing, touching, etc.): *"Not to jump on each other like animals, that's for sure. We take it slowly. We talk, we hug, stroke and kiss, all that"* (M,66). Intimacy and closeness were described as vital in sex, with intercourse playing a minor role: *"I believe the act of being together is the essence of sex. Bodies naked or not, penetration or not, but together"* (F,71). No gender differences were observed within this theme; the narratives of both women and men were consistent in relation to all sub-themes. Sex as mutual fondling and touching was often called by female participants "foreplay" for lack of a better word.

The Discovery of Fondling

The idea of sex as fondling was not discovered by many female and male participants until older age. A number of women admitted that with a new sexual partner they began exploring the sexual closeness that had been nonexistent in their previous relationships: *"I don't think there was any foreplay when I was younger. The sex was different then: rougher, straight to penetration. Now we do a lot of cuddling, so much tenderness, and it gives me an incredible amount of satisfaction"* (F,70). Some women explicitly admitted that their current sex compensated them for what they did not have in the past: *"Maybe he's compensating for all those years I didn't have any fun. He's so sensitive and we're partners in mutual fondling. It's great!"* (F,65). The discovery that sex is not only about sexual intercourse but also fondling and other pleasurable forms of physical intimacy had enabled many women interviewed in this study to truly enjoy sex and to experience sexual desire for the first time in their lives: *"If you asked me before if I missed sex or wanted it, I'd say not at all. But now I understand what I've been missing my whole life and what sex truly is. Now I just love to make love!"* (F,70)

Male participants admitted discovering fondling in their late life as often as women did. Activities such as passionate kissing, stroking, or oral sex were mentioned as the ones they discovered and explored, in terms of both how they were done and how much pleasure they could give. The meaning of sex changed profoundly for some men when a variety of sexual activities were added to what they used to consider a sexual act: *"My current partner is an amazing kisser. When she kissed me like that for the first time, I think it was then that I fell in love with her. There was no passionate kissing with my ex-wife, we hardly kissed at all"* (M,70). According to this man, sex with his ex-wife was *"traditional"* and mostly consisted of intercourse in the missionary position, which was satisfying for him at the time. Only after meeting his new sexual partner did he realize that there was more to it: *"There's so much more to explore!"* In this case, a woman broadened her partner's sexual repertoire and his understanding of what sex could be. In other cases, the discovery was attributed to joint effort from both partners experimenting in new areas of sexual expression: *"We have oral sex now; we use our fingers or hands a lot, we touch each other a lot, and it's beautiful. We had to learn how to do it from scratch, both of us, we didn't know it at all before"* (M,66). In one of the narratives, a male participant reported that, with his female partner, they went as far as experimenting with sex toys, but it all started with their mutual need for physical closeness and fondling: *"We hugged, undressed, and lay down. We started to refine our being together. The bedroom is our temple and we sleep naked. We improve our sex life constantly. We've never done such things before, and now I have a bag full of toys. To experiment with, to have fun, to feel great"* (M,68). These narratives indicate that a liberating interpersonal script of *"curiosity and exploring in sex"* has been internalized by some older women and men in this study, offering them a notable amount of positive sexual experiences and encouraging them to explore further.

Additionally, some female participants reported discovering that *"foreplay"* was an important aspect of sex not only for them but for their male partners as well: *"A man needs some*

preparation too, not just a woman. The more we tune our foreplay, the better. I think that this is the most important issue in sex. To fit, to figure out together what works for both of us" (F,70). This recognition has substantially improved their sex life, as it encouraged them to include various forms of physical intimacy in their sexual encounters and to make them a central part of their sex life. The belief that foreplay was only gratifying for women had caused them distress in the past, but after noticing the benefits of physical intimacy for their male partners, they opened up to new experiences.

The Fading Importance of Intercourse

The participants who understood sex as physical intimacy universally reported penetrative intercourse as nonessential. It was mentioned as occasional, almost coincidental, compared to the role of other expressions of intimacy: *"We have these ideas nowadays, a shower together, some food and champagne, sipping it gently from our wrinkled bodies, enjoying ourselves. Yes, intercourse is sometimes included <laugh>"* (F,66). Many women perceived physical closeness with no intercourse as valuable, satisfying, and rewarding in itself: *"We feel great with only hugging and kissing, and lying close together in bed or somewhere else <laugh>"* (F,65). Interestingly, corresponding remarks were also present in male narratives, where intercourse was welcomed, but not imperative, as it had been in the past: *"I used to think that if I didn't have intercourse, why should I even meet with a woman, there was no point. Well, this has changed. With my woman, we offer so much more to each other than just intercourse. We can hug, kiss, talk for hours, fall asleep and wake up together and that's it"* (M,66).

In several cases, health-related issues were mentioned as factors leading to practicing sex without intercourse: *"Sometimes I felt ill, but that didn't stop him from hugging and embracing me. It didn't have to come to intercourse, he was just touching me, caressing me, and it was enough"* (F,75). However, more often, the absence of intercourse was not related to any health problems but was rather the result of both partners being satisfied with other forms of physical intimacy and not needing penetrative intercourse, as in the following example: *"We constantly want to be closer and closer. This physical closeness is so natural for us and so rewarding. It doesn't really matter if we have intercourse or not. We lie in bed and stroke each other for hours. It's the best sex I've ever had"* (M,67).

Many female participants identified one societal script as particularly liberating and facilitating changes in their understanding of sex: *"Sex is not obligatory for you anymore; older people are expected to occasionally cuddle, hold hands, kiss, that's all."* Internalizing this script offered older women in this study a much-needed opportunity to enter a new relationship with no sexual involvement in mind, thus lifting the overwhelming pressure of the necessity of intercourse: *"When I met my current partner, I was 58 and I was convinced that sex didn't apply to me anymore. We started dating with absolutely no intention of getting intimate! What we both wanted was companionship. But with time, small gestures like holding hands or a kiss on the cheek led us to other gestures like cuddling, or falling asleep next to each other when watching TV, you know what I mean?[...] And we both discovered that we were*

comfortable with it. That we wanted even more. Slowly, step by step, we became intimate. Now we have sex two, three times a week, sometimes even with penetration. It's a miracle <laugh>. I never expected to have sex again, or that it would be so much fun!" (F,70). This example illustrates how in the favorable circumstances of a new relationship, an emotional bond with a partner created a safe base for exploring new ways of being sexual, and for a gradual redefinition of older women's sexuality. Yet, in all cases, the reintroduction of physical intimacy and intercourse into female participants' understanding of sex (and into their sexual repertoire) was secondary to the initial shift toward non-penetrative sex.

Discovering the Art of Sex

The discovery of new forms of sexual activity was valued highly by the participants who experienced it at some point in their later life. Both women and men in this study elaborated on how, in older age, they could enjoy a sexual encounter that lasted longer as it included "a wider assortment of feelings and everything, positions, all that you do around – cuddling, caressing, kissing" (F,70). This was named "a finesse in sex" by one man, who admitted discovering it late in his life and regretted that his previous sexual life had been lacking it: "I'm ashamed of how primitive, almost vulgar, the sex I had before had been" (M,66). He claimed he had felt he had been missing something in sex, yet he could not define it as it was too elusive. He finally discovered how subtle and fine sexual activity could be, so now he has come to call it "an art" and was very content with practicing it with his current sexual partner. Another male participant discussed the positive implications of his female partner willing to teach him "some new tricks": "I had no idea what the G-spot was. She led me to it. And she was very . . . well, I guess she was getting an orgasm at the time. I did it with my finger and it was beautiful. She was so aroused. Now I know and it's so much fun with all the stuff you can do together" (M,70).

Several men elaborated on how rewarding and sexually satisfying it was for them to see their female partners experience sexual pleasure: "I used my finger for penetration, and it was beautiful to see her being aroused. I was very happy and proud of myself, that I managed to get her to orgasm" (M,75). This man rejoiced at bringing his partner to orgasm in such a manner and also appreciated the enrichment of his sexual life as a whole. Similar comments were common among male participants who shared a broad understanding of sex and who had internalized the interpersonal script "sex should be enjoyed by both and pleasurable for both". It seems that the female partner's pleasure during sex can be surprisingly gratifying for an older male partner who, due to following the gendered sexual scripts, neither experienced it in the past nor considered it important. A sexual encounter enriched with female pleasure turns out to be more enjoyable than ever before for both partners, which seems to encourage older couples to experiment further. These experiences appear to influence the couple's interpersonal and intrapersonal sexual scripts toward more pleasure- and reciprocal-oriented.

Sex as Emotional Intimacy

"At an older age, sexuality evolves into closeness and friendship. There are no longer strong physical desires, but there are needs of a different kind" (F,71). This statement resonated in the narratives of many participants of both genders, for whom what constituted sex was, above all, emotional intimacy between partners. Their voices ranged from the core of sexuality becoming more emotional than physical ("Sex not for pure sex, but for a great need of emotional intimacy and closeness"; [F,72]), to sexuality slowly disappearing from one's life in favor of "simply being together with a person you love and respect" (M,75).

Sex and Mutual Understanding between Partners

According to the participants in this study, participative sex is inseparable from the bond and mutual understanding between partners. The notion of having (or not having) a partner who is "a perfect match" was woven into a large majority of the participants' narratives. Those who admitted having such a partner stressed how it facilitated intimacy and engagement in sexual activities: "I suddenly came across a person with whom I fit together so well emotionally and we understand each other in so many ways, so this aspect of life [physical sex], as it turned out, is not a problem at all, it's only a natural extension" (F,70). Sexual intimacy naturally follows the need for closeness, when partners get along well, according to another participant: "My current partner and I have great sex. It's all because we talk a lot and we are a match for each other. I feel good with her; we do a lot of things together, we get along in all things . . . When there are feelings and understanding, the physical closeness is natural" (M,66).

Mutual understanding seemed to be vital for older adults, and its role in desirable sex was twofold. Firstly, it was believed to be a prerequisite for engaging in satisfying sexual activity: "For sex, above all, there must be understanding and a bond between us: intellectual and emotional" (F,76). The lack of such a bond was frequently brought up by male participants, who complained about the poor quality of their past relationships due to constant misunderstandings on various issues: "It was not only about sex being good or not, but about all the other issues. We couldn't agree on anything, literally anything" (M,82). The inability to find common ground with a sexual partner was reported by many participants as the main reason for relationship breakdown: "Your sexual partner must be your friend, otherwise it won't work or it won't last" (F,66).

The second frequently mentioned role of mutual understanding in desirable sex was sex being a mode of communication between partners. Sexual activity was interpreted and cherished in terms of conveying feelings toward the other person through actions, not words. The interpersonal sexual script of "sex as mutual understanding and communication", which was quite prevalent in this study, can be characterized by one male participant's accurate summary: "I talk to my wife a lot; we discuss many things, and our sex life is one of them. Communication is crucial here: I know what she wants, and she knows what I want. On the other hand, sex is also a way to communicate. What is the message to your partner if you just

want to penetrate and ejaculate? Is she your sex doll or the woman you love and want to spend the rest of your life with?" (M,68).

Sex and Respect for the Partner

While mutual understanding was present equally often in male and female sexual narratives, women in this study tended to place special value on the notion of respect. They considered respect between partners to be particularly important in later-life sex, when *"we're growing old together, so let's fill our sexy hugging and kissing and touching with respect and kindness"* (F,69). Intimacy between partners who respected each other was perceived as beautiful and meaningful. Additionally, feeling respected as a woman and a partner was vital for older female participants to engage in sexual activity in the first place: *"Now, whenever I feel like being intimate, I can just tell my partner and we'll have a great time. I feel secure and safe with him, as I know he respects me as a person and a woman, but not 'his woman'. My wishes are important to him – I can feel it – and it makes intimacy so easy"* (F,66). Women reflected on the changes over time: in their youth, trust and respect had rarely been part of what sex meant for them, and sexual activity was initiated for a variety of different reasons (e.g., procreation, marital duty, preventing husband's infidelity, in rare cases genuine desire), whereas now, when and if they engaged in sexual activity was their choice, based on how they felt toward their partner and how they believed their partner felt about them. The intrapersonal script of "sex means respecting and being respected" had become non-negotiable for many of them.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to explore the meaning of sex for women and men aged 65 or older within a particular socio-cultural context. The findings demonstrate the diversity of opinions on what sex is: exclusively penetrative intercourse, an expression of physical intimacy, or emotional intimacy as a central concept. Men and women in this study almost universally admitted following conservative gendered sexual scripts for a substantial part of their lives, even if this was accompanied by considerable distress. For some, the perception of sex had remained unchanged throughout life, but for many, the meaning of sex had evolved in later adulthood, resulting in changes in the intra- and interpersonal sexual scripts and improved quality of sex life. Two interrelated life events were most often associated with this change: ending a long-term relationship and creating an emotional bond with a new romantic partner. The sexual narratives of men and women who had changed their understanding of sex showed substantial similarities, suggesting a closing of the gender gap – with older men shifting toward more partner-oriented sexuality and older women shifting toward more self-oriented sexuality. The findings add to a growing body of research investigating the specificity of older adults' experiences of later life sex by introducing some insights from the conservative sociocultural context.

What if Sex Still Means Intercourse: Following the Traditional, Gendered Sexual Scripts

Male participants for whom sex remained solely penetrative reported notable discontent with their current sexual functioning. The conservative, gendered cultural scripts that emphasize the sexual connotations of masculinity (especially the role of penetrative intercourse, Thompson & Langendoerfer, 2016) are believed to be dysfunctional, especially for older men, since obstacles such as erectile problems or lacking a partner may undermine the sense of manhood in those who experience them, and lead to a range of negative emotions (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Sandberg, 2013; Watson et al., 2017). This might be particularly problematic in highly conservative cultures, where most older men were socialized into traditional sexual scripts hardly "softened" by the sexual revolution. Prioritizing penetrative intercourse above other forms of sexual activity discouraged them from exploring alternative sexual expressions, similarly to the participants of a recent Israeli study (Ayalon et al., 2019). It also seemed to limit their ability to find a willing female partner. The results of this study show that some older men have maintained a meaning of sex which, although satisfying in the past, now may contribute to difficulties in forming new relationships, engaging in (satisfying) sexual encounters, and maintaining the traditional sense of masculinity, since a need for penetrative intercourse meets relatively little interest and appreciation among older women.

As for female participants, understanding sex as penetrative intercourse was in all cases associated with sharing the traditional scripts of motherhood and marital duty. With only reproduction or the need to maintain the relationship as the main reason for sexual encounters, with no mention of women's desire or pleasure and their active role in sex, these scripts resemble the "respectability script" analyzed by Bertone and Ferrero Camoletto (2009). Internalization of these scripts was universally followed by adopting the "asexual older woman" approach and ceasing sexual activity in late adulthood. Several components might potentially explain this attitude. Societal scripts for gendered sexual encounters used to be biased toward satisfying men's needs (Fileborn et al., 2017; Forbes et al., 2017; Potts et al., 2006). Thus, for women raised in a society with highly conservative views about sexuality, female sexual satisfaction was a neglected aspect of sex (Mikolajczak & Pietrzak, 2015; Yan et al., 2011). As Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (2009) established, the frequency of intercourse among Finnish aging women was positively correlated with experiencing pleasure during sex and being satisfied with their sexual life as a whole. This could potentially explain why some female participants in my study, dissatisfied and not enjoying sex, were eager to stop engaging in penetrative sex as soon as "the time came."

The same Finnish study showed that the frequency of intercourse was positively correlated with considering sexual life as important for the happiness of the relationship (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2009). The conviction about penetrative sex being a crucial aspect of marriage was widely shared by female participants in the current study, accompanied by the concern that refusing intercourse meant acting against the stability of

marriage. Older women who have followed the traditional script of sex as marital duty/procreation might welcome the societal script of “asexual old age” as a convenient justification for ceasing unwanted sexual activity without explicitly saying “no” to their husbands.

Interestingly, a recent British study (Tetley et al., 2018) also reported that some older women admitted having sex solely for their partner’s pleasure. However, the rationale given there was having deep feelings for a loving partner rather than feelings of duty or obligation, which dominated the narratives of some women in this study and has also been observed in China, another traditional sociocultural context (Yan et al., 2011). These two approaches may exemplify cultural differences, here in the form of considerably dissimilar intrapersonal scripts being built on the same societal expectation for women to engage in sex regardless of their own enjoyment or pleasure (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2019).

Even though sexual encounters were seen as a burden by some female participants, following the conservative scripts of motherhood and marital duty was not negatively assessed. Contrary to Syme et al.’s (2019) results, these scripts were not recognized as societal constraints on women’s sexual expression, but rather as a source of pride. Women who considered themselves fulfilled as mothers and dutiful wives believed the continuation of sexual activity into late adulthood was redundant and pointless. Ceasing sexual activity was only natural for them, and the stereotype of an “asexual older woman” cherished as a long-awaited relief from an important but rather tiring aspect of life (Gott, 2005; Loe, 2004; Rowntree, 2014). While these findings demonstrate the strength of some societal sexual scripts in conservative cultures, they also indicate that in specific circumstances it might be optimal for older women to follow gendered sexual scripts in their later life. As Syme et al. (2019) concluded, “researchers and providers should keep in mind that having no sex may be good sex for some” (p. 839).

Evolved Meaning of Sex: Leaving the Traditional Sexual Scripts Behind

A considerable shift in the meaning of sex in later life was reported by a substantial number of participants in this study – both women and men. Previous research on couples found that in late adulthood, emotional intimacy might replace sex in a relationship (Lodge & Umberson, 2012), which suggests a discrepancy between these two notions for some older adults. Similarly, narratives from Sandberg’s (2013) older male participants also indicated that they saw sexual activity and intimacy as somewhat contrasting concepts. However, emotional intimacy was perceived – and even explicitly named – as “engaging in sexual activity” by both women and men in the present study. This implies that emotional intimacy did not function as a substitute for what sex had been or “should be” but had become a truly new meaning of sex for some older adults (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004; Potts et al., 2006).

Two life events were identified as guiding the shift in the meaning of sex for both men and women in this study: the end

of a long-term marriage and entering a new romantic relationship. In a study by Rowntree (2014), Australian baby boomers³ perceived “breaking free” from unsatisfying relationships as generally liberating and being single again as boosting their sense of sexual freedom. Although corresponding voices were also heard in this study, a somewhat different effect of ending a long-term relationship was more pronounced. Most participants considered it a turning point that enabled them to retrospectively evaluate the quality of their sex life and start to consider other meanings of sex. This resonates strongly with what Menard et al. (2015) described as “revisiting sexuality, that is, re-examining limiting concepts and values around sexuality to open up and imagine anew the possibility of what sex could become” (p. 89).

Belonging to a culture dominated by traditional, Catholic values might be one of the reasons why evaluation and redefinition of sex was more prominent for my participants. For them, after being influenced by conservative sexual scripts for a significant part of their lives, the reinterpretation of what sex can be was pivotal in overcoming the pervasive cultural scripts, and an indispensable step on the path to eventually experience (and enjoy) sexual freedom. Notably, sex-positive sexual scripts were present mostly in the narratives of participants who had entered a new romantic relationship at some point in later life, while none of the participants remaining in long-term marriages reported similar changes. It is possible that for older adults from traditional cultures, the shift toward more liberal sexual scripts might be hardly possible without a radical change of one’s life situation, such as ending a long-term relationship and starting over.

All participants who experienced the change from a narrow to a more broad understanding of sex, and from conservative to more sex-positive sexual scripts (e.g., discovery of fondling, art of sex, mutual pleasure, respect) reported a great improvement of the quality of sex life. As literature suggests, entering a new relationship that is guided by evolved interpersonal scripts (focused on mutual experiences, equality, honesty, etc.) allows deeper and richer feelings between partners to develop and boosts their overall satisfaction (Ayalon et al., 2019; Fileborn et al., 2017; Syme et al., 2019). It has previously been reported that some older women in new relationships are pleasantly surprised by the level of sexual enjoyment with their new husbands (Watson et al., 2017) and that a partner’s encouragement to pursue sexual satisfaction reinforces women’s self-confidence (Montemurro, 2014). The results of this study corroborate these findings pertaining to older women. It also adds older men’s discovery that encouraging partners to seek sexual pleasure and experiencing their partner’s enjoyment gives them great satisfaction, sometimes even greater than their own climax. Breaking free from the traditional intrapersonal script of sex as only penetration may lead older men to modify their ideas of masculinity—from centered around their own sexual performance to being focused on mutual enjoyment (Fileborn et al., 2017), which further positively impacts their self-confidence as men and as sexual partners. It seems that transcending the limiting sexual scripts can

³Rowntree (2014) defined baby boomers as a generation born after the World War II, between 1946 and 1965, meaning the term applies to the older adults who are now 55–74 years old.

occur even without prior realization of shortcomings and might be, in line with Menard et al.'s (2015) suggestion, "a crucial step on the path towards optimal sexual experiences" (p. 83).

Common Ground: Interpersonal Meaning of Sex

This study results suggest that the path to achieve gender sexual equality among older adults from conservative societies may be complex and nuanced, as a counterbalance to the traditional cultural scripts of hegemonic masculinity is required. A careful comparison of women's and men's narratives indicates that what might be required to reduce the gender gap is a shift toward the other gender's understanding of sex. Indeed, it seems beneficial for older men to redefine sex from egoistic to more partner- and relationship-oriented, as was observed both in this study and in previous research (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2019; Potts et al., 2006; Sandberg, 2013; Syme et al., 2019). For older women, however, partner-oriented sexual activity might remain "other-focused" (Montemurro, 2014, p. 74), and centered around obligation or duty, as it often was in their past. A shift toward more self-oriented sex may increase their knowledge about their own sexual functioning and grant greater sexual agency, confidence and decisiveness (Jen, 2017; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Rowntree, 2014). This may eventually lead to an interpersonal-oriented approach, driven by pleasure and positive emotions, bringing partners together and strengthening their bond. Embracing a more self-serving approach to sexual activity and redefining it into positive experiences might be a possible solution for older women from highly conservative cultures to enjoy desirable sex in later life (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008).

This study aimed to reflect on and compare the accounts of older women and men within a particular sociocultural context about how they understand sex and what scripts guide their sexual behaviors. The findings presented here suggest that the narratives of older adults from a highly conservative culture may not be substantially different from what has been reported in more liberal countries. However, the current study adds several specific insights (ceasing sexual activity as optimal for some, radical change of one's life situation to initiate changes in sexual scripts, female sexual pleasure as rewarding for both partners, discovery of benefits of equality and participative sex, more self-oriented approach to sex for women) that may contribute to better understanding of the sexual functioning of older adults with a traditional sociocultural background and give practitioners more insight on how sexual and relational problems in older age could be addressed.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged and considered when interpreting the results of this study. A certain probability of bias in the recruiting process cannot be ruled out, as the participants were self-selected. In the case of investigating sensitive topics, there is a potential selection bias toward individuals who feel more comfortable discussing these issues than others (Fileborn et al., 2017). Indeed, several participants in this study

considered themselves more open and willing to talk about sex than their peers. However, there were also participants for whom discussing their sex life was not easy and who openly stated the difficulty. Their motivation to participate was either financial ("I thought I could use some extra money") or related to the need to disclose their sexual histories ("I needed to tell someone my story"). Other motivations included curiosity, information or advice seeking ("I was hoping I could ask you some questions"), and inclination to raise awareness ("The society should know more about sex at our age"). Therefore, despite the self-selection, the sample was not homogeneous in terms of openness and ease in discussing sexuality-related topics. Nevertheless, the potential consequences of the chosen recruiting procedure (e.g., oversampling of more sex-positive individuals) should be considered when interpreting the findings.

The question arises to what extent the participants were sincere and forthcoming in the interview situation. The fact that during the debriefing many participants described the interview as "my confession" might indicate an acceptable level of sincerity. As self-reporting measures rely on conscious ideas and on the information an individual chooses to share, there was no single direct question about the meaning of sex (Fileborn et al., 2015; Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2019). Instead, the participants' understanding of sex was extracted from their overall narratives, which enabled the participants to formulate new insights and express new thoughts arising during the conversation. It also enabled the researcher to grasp some of the less obvious (and perhaps not fully acknowledged by the participants) aspects of the notion. Nevertheless, the idea that the interview context might have shaped the participants' narratives and the subjective nature of the data collected should be taken into consideration.

Another limitation of this and most other studies with older adult samples (e.g., Fileborn et al., 2017; Tetley et al., 2018) is that the sample was exclusively heterosexual, even though there was no such requirement in recruiting. While this may limit the generalizability of the results to non-heterosexual older adults, this kind of sample does reflect the heteronormative social context of the current older generation in traditional cultures. On the other hand, this sample consisted of both female and male individuals and was diverse in terms of participants' level of education as well as economic and relationship status (Syme et al., 2019), which potentially makes the results presented here illustrative for older adults from diverse social backgrounds.

Conclusion

For some older women and men, the cessation of sexual activity may be welcomed and even needed considering their life and sexual history, the person's past experiences and their dominant sexual scripts. For other older individuals, a radical change in life, such as ending a long-term relationship and entering in a new romantic relationship, may initiate a move toward more sex-positive, intimacy-oriented scripts and the revision and reinterpretation of the meaning of sex in one's life. It has been apparent in this study that an individual's current understanding of sex and sexuality plays an important role in embracing or rejecting the stereotype of asexual old age and might outweigh gender differences and sociocultural context. In conclusion, educational

interventions focusing on sexual health in older age should take into account differences in the meaning of sex, as well as the intra- and interpersonal sexual scripts documented in this study.

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Author's Contribution

I declare that my contribution to the publication: Gore-Gorszewska, G. (2021). What do You Mean by "Sex"? A Qualitative Analysis of Traditional versus Evolved Meaning of Sexual Activity among Older Women and Men. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 58(8), 1035-1049, included: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing, review & editing, Funding acquisition.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G Gore-Gorszewska". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G'.

Gabriela Gore-Gorszewska

Kraków, 28.02.2023

Article 2

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Trajectories of intimacy in later-life: a qualitative study of Czech and Polish narratives

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ABSTRACT

Intimacy has been identified as an important component of satisfying sexual activity in later life. While the existing literature reports that the importance of intimacy increases with age, the mechanisms behind this process have not been extensively researched. Even less is known about later-life sexual intimacy among women and men from former communist countries. This study explored the nuances of sex and intimacy by interviewing 50 Polish and Czech women and men aged 60 to 82. Data were analysed thematically using an inductive approach. Three main themes were developed to represent the extent to which intimacy was part of participants' lives: 1) lifelong representation of sex as an intimate connection between individuals; 2) later-life shift towards intimacy-oriented sex for two main reasons: health-related necessities and a new relationship context; and 3) no intimacy whatsoever. The study findings indicate that a later-life refocus from an instrumental, penetrative-oriented view of sex towards a wider variety of intimate behaviours may be beneficial, not only for improving quality of sexual life, but also to gain new ways to express emotional connections between the partners.

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Introduction

Research on sexuality in later life has received extensive attention, particularly in the last two decades. Thanks to this effort, sex has been shown to remain an important part of older adults' lives with positive effects on their physical and psychological well-being (Buczak-Stec, König, and Hajek 2021; Smith et al. 2020). Many older adults continue to engage in various forms of sexual activity, either within monogamous relationships with a long-term partner or in a new relationship established in mid or later life (Erens et al. 2019; Karraker and DeLamater 2013; Ševčíková, Gottfried, and Blinka 2021). Relatedly, the literature suggests that closeness and intimacy may play a vital role in later-life sexual expression (Morrissey Stahl et al. 2019; Sandberg 2013).

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However, these have not been the subject of many studies. Thus, the present study sought to investigate how older people experience intimacy and how their experiences differ according to the cultural context. We undertake a qualitative, cross-cultural analysis of interview data from heterosexual older Czech and Polish people about trajectories of intimacy over the life course in order to understand how intimacy-related attitudes and behaviours affect their relationship and sexual functioning.

A multifaceted concept of intimacy is commonly equated with 'closeness' but also implies a more specific romantic or sexual dimension (Popovic 2005), leading to distinguishing two facets: emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy. Emotional intimacy has more connotations with feelings of love, closeness, sharing of feelings, connection with a partner, affirmation, and demonstrations of caring (Morrissey Stahl et al. 2019; Sinclair and Dowdy 2005). Sexual (physical) intimacy usually refers to acts of physical closeness, such as sensual touching, caressing, kissing and oral sex, which may accompany penetrative intercourse but do not rely on it to happen (Sandberg 2013; Hinchliff and Gott 2004). Such an understanding resonates with the erotic (non)intercourse scenarios described by McCarthy, Cohn, and Koman (2020) in which 'sensual, playful, erotic, and intercourse touch are all valued and introduce crucial dimensions of couple sexuality' (301). Overall, there is still no uniform and generally accepted model or definition for the construct of intimacy because cultural, gender and age differences may lead to different understandings (Hook et al. 2003; Popovic 2005). For example, sexual interaction in young women has been found to more likely revolve around the theme of emotional closeness compared to men of the same age, who tend to treat sex and intimacy separately, although these gender differences are less pronounced in more permissive cultures (e.g. Meston and Buss 2007; Ridley 1993).

Recent literature suggests that, for many older adults, physical closeness, affection and intimacy may be equally or more important than sexual activity per se (Fileborn et al. 2017; Sandberg 2013), and that experiencing closeness and intimacy improves the quality of their relationship and potentially sexual functioning (Erens et al. 2019). This is particularly important given that staying in a long-term relationship does not always guarantee continuity of sexual activity in later life. Higher age, a longer marriage, and poor physical health (one's own or the partner's) may lead to the avoidance of sexual interaction or to a complete cessation of sexual activity among older people (Carvalho et al. 2020; Hinchliff et al. 2020). However, research also indicates that there are individuals who adjust their sexual practices in response to the challenges of health-related sexual difficulties by revising the meanings associated with penetrative sex and by searching for alternative intimate behaviours to sexual intercourse, such as sensual touching, caressing, kissing and oral sex (Gore-Gorszewska 2021a; Hinchliff and Gott 2004).

In this respect, several studies provide evidence that an individual's attitudes towards intimacy are not fixed but may become more affirmative in late adulthood. For example, a recent study among US women aged 57-91 observed that, while all participants valued intimacy in their relationships (i.e. intimacy in a broad sense), most acknowledged that its importance over sexual passion grew over time (Morrissey Stahl et al. 2019). Similarly, older Swedish men recounted that, while their sexual activity at a younger age was predominantly focused on intercourse, at the time of the interview they more often engaged in sensuality-oriented intimate behaviours (Sandberg 2013).

Nonetheless, Fileborn and her colleagues (2017) critically point out that not all changes in sexual practices and adjustments are easily acceptable for older people. Some of them, following an internalised hierarchical definition of sex, still treat sexual intimacy as a 'lesser' form of sexual activity compared to the gold standard of heterosexual penetrative intercourse. For example, some couples reported being 'forced' to modify their sexual behaviour towards intimacy due to situational factors and health issues such as the progressive dementia of one partner (Holdsworth and McCabe 2018). Moreover, some older individuals differentiate sexual intimacy from emotional intimacy and perceive these two dimensions contribute in different ways to the quality of their relationship and sexual life (Gore-Gorszewska 2021a; Morrissey Stahl et al. 2019).

The existing qualitative studies that explore intimate behaviours in the ageing population, although undoubtedly informative, rarely address intimacy directly and tend to raise this topic alongside other aspects of later-life sexuality (Fileborn et al. 2017). They most often focus on specific issues (e.g. the couple's intimacy in relation to caregiving; Holdsworth and McCabe 2018); limit their sample to specific subgroups, such as long-term married couples (Hinchliff and Gott 2004; Ménard et al. 2015); or explore only one gender narratives without providing a joint perspective on possible gender variations in later-life intimacy (Fileborn et al. 2017; Sandberg 2013). In addition, the majority of studies investigate the topic in Western cultures (e.g. Australia, Canada, Sweden, UK), leaving potential sociocultural specificities unaddressed. Given these limits and diverse understanding of later-life intimacy, we propose to add a cultural perspective while jointly studying older female and male experiences with sexual and emotional intimacy.

Very few studies to date have provided insight into the sexuality and intimacy of older adults with a more conservative background such as those, for example, from post-communist European societies (see: Gore-Gorszewska 2021a; Ševčíková and Sedláková 2020). To contextualise, Central and Eastern European countries are, in general, considered less egalitarian, less liberal and less sexually permissive than their Western counterparts (Herzog 2011). Still, despite many similarities in the political and historical context, these societies are not uniform with regard to the public discourse on sexuality that prevailed before the collapse of communism (Herzog 2011; Kościańska 2016). For instance, during communist times, Czechoslovak gynaecologists tried to demythologise both the climacteric and ageing women's sexuality, and they were very much influenced by Master's and Johnson's ground-breaking study of human sexuality. Czechoslovak experts tended to provide recommendations on sexual techniques, while accentuating female self-actualisation and independence, which could have led to the enhanced quality of the sex lives of older Czech women (Bělehradová and Lišková 2021). Although Masters and Johnson's work had an impact on sexological expertise in other Central European socialist countries, such as East Germany and Hungary, in Poland public discourse on sexuality was grounded in Catholic morality and heavily influenced by guidance from popular sexology experts (Ingbrant 2020). Their work, although informative and progressive in some respects, linked sexual pleasure and fulfilment to traditional gender roles, stating that women's emancipation was the source of a double burden and that intercourse is the proper aim and culmination of the sexual act (Kościańska 2016).

Raising the issue of cultural nuances in the sexual discourses within which current older adults were socialised, this study aims to explore trajectories of intimacy and later-life intimacy among older women and men from two Central European post-communist countries, the Czech Republic and Poland. Both countries share a communist past, during which they underwent specific social changes, such as state-imposed secularisation, socialist emancipation, the repression of pro-democratic movements, and an emphasis on pro-family politics (Lišková 2018). Currently, both countries are relatively homogenous with respect to the ethnicity of their populations and are decidedly heteronormative, yet the level of religiosity and the position of the Catholic Church is significantly different. Poland is considered one of the more religious countries in Europe, with a strong emphasis on pro-family values (Gwiazda 2021). The Czech Republic is one of the most secular and atheist among European countries and Catholic values play a less prominent role in its society (Hamplová 2013). The present research embarks on the cross-cultural analysis of qualitative interview data from older heterosexual Czechs and Poles about intimacy and its changes across their life course with the aim of understanding how intimacy-related attitudes and behaviours affect older individuals' relationships and sexual functioning.

Materials and methods

Participants and recruitment

This study is based on an analysis of 50 semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 60 to 82 from the Czech Republic ($n = 20$, 13 women, median age = 65) and Poland ($n = 30$, 16 women, median age = 70). The sample was diverse in terms of relationship status, educational background, and occupational status (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics ($N = 50$). Gender Current Relationship Status

Characteristics	Total (%)	CZ (%)	POL (%)
Number of participants	50	$n = 20$	$n = 30$
Median age	68	65	70
Women	29 (58)	13 (65)	16 (53)
Men	21 (42)	7 (35)	14 (47)
Marital Status			
Single	3 (6)	0	3 (10)
Divorced	16 (32)	5 (25)	11 (37)
Widowed	16 (32)	5 (25)	11 (37)
Married	15 (30)	10 (50)	5 (16)
No Partner	23 (46)	8 (40)	15 (50)
New Relationship	15 (30)	4 (20)	11 (37)
Long-Term Relationship	12 (24)	8 (40)	4 (13)
Education			
Primary	2 (4)	1 (5)	1 (3)
Secondary/ Vocational	31 (62)	13 (65)	18 (60)
Tertiary/ Higher	17 (34)	6 (30)	11 (37)
Employment			
Retired	30 (60)	10 (50)	20 (67)
Semiretired	11 (22)	5 (25)	6 (20)
Employed	9 (18)	5 (25)	4 (13)

Czech participants were recruited at a hospital through a preventive cognitive health programme designed for ageing people, and subsequently through chain-referral technique. Polish participants were recruited through posters distributed at health centres, pharmacies, University of the Third Age venues, and in a retirement home in two cities in southern Poland.

Informed consent to conduct and audiotape the interviews was obtained from the participants. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards of Masaryk University in the Czech Republic and Jagiellonian University in Poland.

Data collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face by the authors in the Czech Republic and Poland (AŠ and GGG, respectively) between 2017 and 2019. Each interview lasted between one and three hours and was audio recorded. Being part of a larger qualitative study that explored the sexuality of older adults (in both countries separately), the interview guides were purposefully broad and included a set of questions across several domains related to the participants' sexual lives. Although the Czech and Polish interview structure differed in the sequence of questions asked during interviews and in the wording/phrasing of questions (while their meanings were consistent across countries), both focused on mapping sexual trajectories, changes in sexual expression across the life course, and the sources and outcomes of the changes, and resulted in the aggregation of comparable data. Detailed information about each study scope and procedures can be found elsewhere (Gore-Gorszewska 2021a; Ševčíková and Sedláková 2020).

Both authors identify as white, young women, who are trained in psychology and psychotherapy. Both are knowledgeable about the specifics of later-life sexuality (including sexual difficulties) and share the cultural background of their respective countries. These aspects facilitated the establishment of respectful atmosphere during the interviews, attenuating the age-gap, and understanding the notions and contexts raised by the interviewees. Female participants indicated that the gender similarity allowed them to be more open, while men claimed candour because they considered the interviewer to be a 'truth-seeking researcher'.

Data analysis

The main question asked by the current study analysis was: "How do older adults reflect on intimacy and its role in their sexual lives". The analysis of the transcribed interviews was guided by a form of thematic analysis, modified to adhere to the cross-country comparison of the two data sets. Thematic analysis offers a flexible and useful research tool for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (i.e. themes) in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). In this study, we used a bottom-up (inductive) approach and followed the steps required to ensure the quality of the analysis and the trustworthiness of its findings. The authors regularly discussed and negotiated each analytical step and the related outcomes.

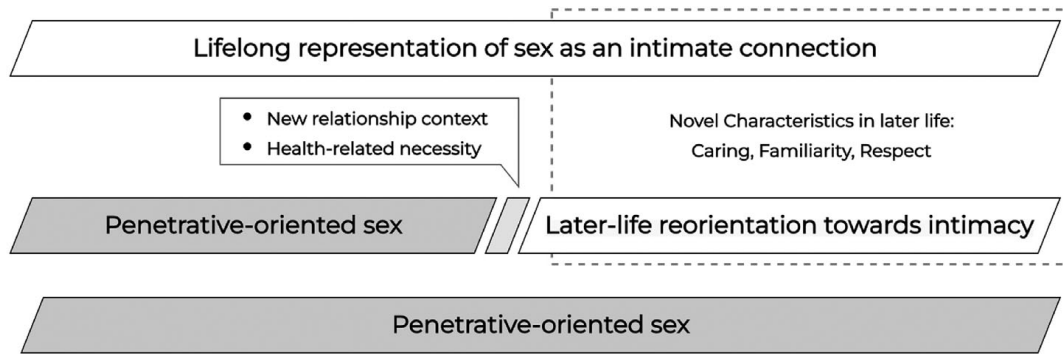


Figure 1. Final thematic map capturing three types of intimate trajectories reported by the interviewees.

Both the authors familiarised themselves with the data collected in their own language by repeatedly reading the transcripts, taking notes, and writing down their initial ideas. Then they proceeded to coding, based on notions that emerged from the interviews themselves while keeping the research question in mind. After a sub-sample of transcripts (six Czech, eight Polish) had been coded, the authors began to identify patterns across the data and generate a preliminary set of descriptive candidate themes. These were translated into English, together with the corresponding, illustrative quotations, and then discussed between the authors, who shared their initial notes and clusters of emerging themes such as ‘sex-related expectations in later life’ and ‘life-long experiences with sex and expressions of closeness’. Another round of coding for the subsequent sub-sample of transcripts was conducted in a similar fashion, accompanied by recurrent discussion between the authors, resulting in the identification of dominant and unique patterns.

The reviewed themes were then organised into a preliminary thematic map, which was used by both authors to navigate the analysis of the remaining transcripts. By going back and forth between coding and reviewing the themes, the thematic map was modified to include new notions such as ‘more intimate contacts thanks to male strategies to maintain sexual activity when dealing with age-related health problems’. The themes’ contents and previous transcripts were then reviewed by both authors. Finally, the authors discussed the themes and their structure and reflected on the similarities and differences they had identified within the data until agreement was reached for the final thematic map (see [Figure 1](#)).

Findings

By exploring nuances of sexual and emotional intimacy in the accounts of older adults from the Czech Republic and Poland, three general themes that represent the extent to which intimacy was part of the participants’ lives were developed: i) lifelong representation of sex as an intimate connection between two people; ii) later-life shifts towards intimacy-oriented sex; and iii) no intimacy whatsoever. We also found that, in both the samples, intimacy in older age had gained novel and relevant characteristics that are captured in the following themes: (a) caring about each other; (b) familiarity;

and (c) respect. Several cultural variations were identified with respect to the extent of participants' willingness to practise intimacy-oriented sex.

Lifelong representation of sex as an intimate connection between two people

Some women and men shared the perspective that sex and intimacy are inseparable, with intimacy pivotal in sexual encounters. A number of participants had always considered sex not in terms of instrumental, penetrative intercourse, but as a variety of affectionate behaviours that were expressions of the intimate connection between two partners in love: 'Something that happens between two people who have this special bond' (M67-PL¹). Another participant explained that throughout her whole life physical closeness had been so tightly linked to emotional and psychological closeness, that she could not imagine one without another: 'I have it [sex] connected with that psychic closeness ... I can't imagine that I would be mentally close to someone and at the same time it wouldn't work physically' (W62-CZ). In this context, partnered sex provides older people with the sense of unity and it is the ultimate way of confirming closeness and exclusivity between them.

Interestingly, in the Polish sample, we observed a disjuncture between an individual's perception of sex as an intimate connection between two people and the extent to which some participants had experienced it. One woman explained that she had always had 'these romantic ideals about sex as a special, sublime act, based on deep emotions and closeness, gentleness and the right atmosphere' (W66-PL), but she was unable to share such a connection with her husband, for whom sex was purely instrumental, focused on penetration and satisfying his sexual needs. Her narrative resonated with the accounts of several other Polish women and men, who admitted that their longing for intimacy-oriented sexual contact was not possible due to an unfavourable relationship context.

Later-life shift towards intimacy-oriented sex

Many participants in the study reported that, at some point in their lives, they experienced a change in their perceptions of intercourse, intimacy, and their joint role in a satisfying sexual relationship. While recounting that their younger years were dominated by a rather instrumental approach to sexual activity and a focus on penetrative sex, with age, our interviewees opened up to the possibility that other forms of sexual expression could satisfy their needs. A 71-year-old female interviewee explained how she currently saw intimacy and closeness as central to her relationship: 'I believe the act of being together is the essence of sex. Bodies naked or not, penetration or not, but together. This is what matters now' (W71-PL). It is worth noting that similar comments were made by male participants, as in this case: '[Intimacy] is a part of life. It's enriching. You feel like you are with your wife, and you don't have to have sex. You just lie together and simply make love' (M63-CZ). Akin to this, many other men elaborated on their later-life refocus from an instrumental view of sex to a broader variety of sexual, non-coital expressions.

Two main reasons were identified as drivers for this change: health-related necessity and new-relationship context. For some participants the shift was induced by necessity – when they faced age-related sexual problems, such as post-menopausal discomfort or erectile difficulties during penetrative sex. One male interviewee, who admitted having problems maintaining an erection, referred to a talk show in which an older Czech photographer, Jan Saudek, said that he used oral sex to deal with his erectile problems in the context of having a much younger wife: ‘Mr. Saudek replied that, so far, he has been licking [his way] out of it [a Czech euphemism for oral sex]. So, some women like it very much’ (M63-CZ). This participant reported using the same strategy (i.e. orally satisfying his younger female partner), especially when having difficulty in achieving a firm erection. At the same time, he acknowledged that he benefitted from his new approach towards sex. This and other similar narratives conform to the pattern we observed in this study: replacing penetrative sex by other sexual practices was initially considered by some participants as merely as a coping strategy in the face of health-related sexual problems. Over time, however, these gestures of intimacy became cherished as important and enriching elements of sexual life.

The second reason for developing a new, intimacy-oriented perspective towards sex was related to a relationship-status change. This was a turning point in which entering a new relationship at older age and resuming sexual activity may give rise to new patterns of sexual expression and a new interpretation of the sexual act. An illustrative quote comes from a woman who discovered non-penetrative forms of physical intimacy only after meeting a new partner at the age of 58: ‘In my marriage, well, I’d never experienced it (...) He [the new partner] is very open. Cuddling and being close is more important for him than just sex. (...) You could say that together we discovered how great it is to be intimate’ (W70-PL). She found this new way of being sexual very rewarding and regretted that her earlier sex life had been devoid of it, which was a widely shared notion of many women and men in this study.

The shift towards valuing intimacy above other forms of sexual contact was nuanced among participants, and our analysis revealed two distinct approaches within this theme. Some interviewees referred to penetrative sex as a pleasurable, albeit an optional part of their sex lives. While occasionally including it in their sexual repertoire, they were adamant that non-coital, intimate sexual activities—such as kissing, petting and oral sex—became more important, gratifying and enriching: ‘We take it slowly. We talk, we hug, stroke and kiss, all that. (...) Occasionally we have intercourse, but more often we are happy without it’ (M66-PL). Other participants were more ‘radical’ in their approach and elaborated on how sexual activity has given way to gestures of purely non-sexual physical intimacy, which became central in their later-life relationships. This was illustrated by a woman who described moments of intimate contact with her husband: ‘It is enough for me to just hug, to lie down and hold hands. It satisfies me ... sex doesn’t come in the first place. (...) A relationship, understanding, those things are far more important’ (W67-CZ). She stressed that these gestures were highly valued while being performed with no sexual intentions (not as an invitation to sex or foreplay) but simply for the feeling of being emotionally intimate together.

No intimacy whatsoever

In contrast to the approaches to sex and intimacy presented above, several male participants, exclusively in the Polish sample, provided a distinctly different view. According to them, only penetrative sex mattered, while other forms of sexual expression were ‘unnecessary fuss and distraction’ and emotional intimacy is redundant and overrated, ‘soap-opera-inspired’ (M67-PL). These men were adamant in their strongly physiological accounts of the instrumental role of sex in satisfying a man’s need, a view that had persisted since their youth. One interviewee straightforwardly claimed that, should his financial status allow it, he would ‘seek girls who needed a sponsor (...) or visit brothels to have sex with young, pretty girls’ (M75-PL) to fulfil his needs. Notably, the participants who represented this approach unanimously complained about the challenges they encountered, such as frequent refusals from women and difficulties in performing penetrative sex due to health-related problems: ‘I often struggle, you know, my [erectile] problems. It is frustrating, because finding a woman is a challenge to begin with. And then, when I have an opportunity, it doesn’t work!’ (M67-PL). Yet, despite these difficulties and related distress, these same men seemed to be unwilling to revise their approach towards later-life sex and consider non-coital, more intimate forms of sexual expression as an alternative.

While two male accounts within this theme were rid of any notion of intimate experiences or any desire for it, two other Polish narratives revealed ambiguity regarding the non-existence of the need for intimacy. For example, one participant who had had numerous sex partners in the past and claimed that all he ever wanted and all he currently needed was to have intercourse and to ejaculate, in such a way recalled his best sexual encounter: ‘It was with that one [name] I’ve told you about. In terms of satisfaction, well, it was definitely with her, because ... I had this ... feeling’ (M76-PL). Even when prompted, he was unable to specify this ‘feeling’, but he claimed: ‘This feeling ... yes. It made a difference, that it was with her’. This quotation suggests that the need for an intimate connection with a sexual partner may exist, but is either difficult to articulate or not recognisable, effectively preventing this man and like-minded men from seeking for it or acting upon it.

Intimacy and caring about each other

For many participants who acknowledged the importance of intimacy, physical contact with a partner seemed to gain additional value in later life. When participants were touched, kissed, caressed or brought to orgasm, they interpreted these acts as gestures of not only being loved, but also of being cared for by someone important to them: ‘Now [sex] is very unimportant [due to progressive vaginal atrophy]. I feel it’s not about sex and orgasms but about intimacy between the partners, so I can’t completely trivialise [sex] like that. Because he massages me, strokes me, he caresses me, yeah, when, when I want to, or when he sees that I’m sad’ (W68-CZ). This same woman emphasised how, through such gestures of intimacy, her partner communicated his care for her emotional well-being. Her statement points to the scope of caring that can be expressed and experienced in later life, suggesting that intimacy

conveyed via physical contact plays a crucial role in confirming the importance of older partners and bonding to each other.

Another, more distinct aspect of caring about the partner – consideration for their sexual needs – was also observed in this study. Specifically, male participants indicated that in later life they had, often for the first time, experienced a genuine desire to care about their female partner's sexual pleasure. When they followed their partner's wishes and began to engage in various forms of intimacy at the expense of penetrative sex, they found themselves experiencing gestures of sexual and emotional intimacy that they themselves found gratifying: 'I used to think that if I didn't have intercourse, why should I even meet with a woman. There was no point. Well, this has changed. (...) [with a current partner] we can hug, kiss, talk for hours, fall asleep, and wake up together and that's it (...). It is amazing' (M66-PL). Other male participants stressed how much, at present, they enjoyed such gestures of intimacy in the relationship context and how meaningful they found them, even if they had begun mainly out of consideration for the partner.

Intimacy and familiarity

The second important component in the portrayal of later-life intimacy was the reciprocal relationship between intimacy in a relationship and mutual familiarity of the partners. If built over the life course, this seemed to help maintain sexual intimacy in long-term couples: 'You already know what to touch, what to do to make it work, to make it pleasurable' (M61-CZ). This acquired knowledge supported older couples to stay sexually active and exchange pleasurable sex in later life.

In the case of new relationships, mutual understanding and familiarity seemed to legitimise the incorporation of sexual behaviour into a relationship established in later life: 'I suddenly came across a person with whom I fit together so well emotionally, and we understand each other in so many ways, so this [erotic] aspect of life, as it turned out, is not a problem at all. It's only a natural extension' (W70-PL). In this context, deepening mutual familiarity at a physical level was spontaneous and effortless. It was a novel experience for many interviewees who emphasised how engaging in physical intimacy fostered a change in thought ("we talk about everything") and led to an even better understanding between partners, thus strengthening their bond and facilitating greater physical closeness.

In relation to sex life in older age, it seemed to be particularly valuable for sexual pleasure that individuals began to appreciate their understanding of their partner's body, sexual wishes, and preferences: 'After three years of no partnered sex, it was surprising, because I just thought it might not work, that I couldn't, and so on. But [it worked out well] because he was, as a partner, so sensitive that he knew more about my body than I did' (W64-CZ). Some respondents considered the growing familiarity with partner's body a revelation and life-changing experience, as they had not had the opportunity to encounter this level of connection and understanding with their partners in past relationships.

Intimacy and respect

In terms of the novel characteristics of later-life intimacy, female Polish participants voiced a strong connection between intimacy and respect. Feeling respected as a woman and being treated as an equal partner was particularly prominent in their narratives and was mentioned as paramount to engagement in sexual behaviour in later-life. Gestures of intimacy offered by a male partner were considered to be proof of this respect: 'I feel secure and safe with him, as I know he respects me as a person and a woman, but not 'his woman'. My wishes are important to him – I can feel it – and it makes intimacy so easy' (W66-PL). This sentiment resonates with the accounts of women who perceived intimate behaviours in a relationship based on mutual respect to be meaningful and non-negotiable in later-life, often in contrast to their past experiences, when sexual activity was more instrumental and served different reasons, such as marital duty, procreation and satisfying the husband's needs, and for that reason often lacked the component of physical and emotional intimacy.

Discussion

Drawing on historical research on sexuality in former communist countries (Herzog 2011; Kościańska 2016; Lišková 2018), this study used a cultural perspective to analyse older Czechs' and Poles' narratives about intimacy and its changes across the life course. The aim was to understand how intimacy-related attitudes and behaviours evolved and how they affected older individuals' relationship and sexual functioning, while taking into account their sociocultural background.

In our analysis, we distinguished three different intimacy trajectories in respondents' lives. In general, the less pragmatically sex was perceived (i.e. via a focus on physiological need, reproduction, and one's own pleasure over the affectionate aspects of sex), the more intimacy was present. For some older adults, intimacy had been an integral part of sex throughout their lives; for others, new health and relationship conditions resulted in a later-life shift towards intimacy-oriented sex; and yet another group of participants maintained their lifelong representation of sex exclusively as intercourse, without the need for intimacy. These latter two trajectories of intimate expressions may point to the extent to which participants were socialised according to the traditional norms of masculinity, femininity and notions of proper sexual behaviour, with strongly accentuated gendered sexual roles within a relationship (e.g. norms for bearing children and satisfying the man's sexual needs; Gore-Gorszewska 2021a; Kościańska 2016; Lišková 2018).

The dominance of traditional sexual norms and their negative impact on later-life sexuality is perhaps most visible in the accounts of a group of male interviewees who rejected acts of intimacy entirely, considering them superfluous and unnecessary. Their lifelong attitude escapes even the hierarchical definition of sex proposed by Fileborn et al. (2017) because, for these men, nothing but sexual intercourse counted as sex. The fact that the 'No intimacy whatsoever' trajectory was present in only Polish male narratives, while absent in the Czech sample, may be attributed to some extent to the gendered sociocultural norms for sexual conduct and masculinity that prevailed at the

time in communist, largely traditional Poland. By contrast to Czechoslovakia (currently Czechia and Slovakia), where female self-actualisation and independence was promoted by sexology experts and resonated in state policies (Bělehradová and Lišková 2021), the official communist party line in Poland was grounded in patriarchal tropes, reinforced by traditional Catholic Church values, and bolstered by the discourse of Polish sexologists, whose work emphasised traditional gender roles and 'natural differences' between women and men (Gal and Kligman 2000; Kościańska 2016). In this respect, for some men from a conservative background, intimacy may be difficult or impossible to incorporate into the male self-concept (Prager and Roberts 2004) because of the disjuncture between intimate behaviours and societal views of strong, dominant masculinity. It is worth acknowledging that this observed tendency could also be apparent in men from other cultural settings that stress traditional, performance-oriented ideals of sex (Fileborn et al. 2017; McCarthy, Cohn, and Koman 2020; Traeen et al. 2019).

Notably, the penetration-focused attitude seemed to persist among some older men, not only despite the intimacy-oriented expectations of their potential female partners, but also despite experiencing dissatisfaction with the quality of current sex life and frustration due to erectile problems. This may illustrate the negative health-related consequences of holding entrenched conservative beliefs about sexual conduct in later life. Given that in older age the prevalence of somatic illnesses, including sexual problems, increases (Traeen et al. 2017), and the fact that many older individuals, particularly in more traditional cultural contexts, struggle with reaching out for professional help (Gore-Gorszewska 2020), placing less emphasis on penetration and more on the intimate components of sex could provide a much needed solution for maintaining a satisfying sex life despite naturally occurring health-related sexual problems. In addition, because older adults typically identify primary care physicians as their primary source of help for sexual difficulties (Hinchliff et al. 2020), healthcare professionals should consider the sociocultural context of internalised sexual norms as a factor that potentially influences sexual behaviour in later life when offering support to their older patients.

Elaborating on previous findings about the increasing role of intimacy in later life (Morrissey Stahl et al. 2019; Sandberg 2013), our study identified re-partnering and a health-related necessity as the main factors that drive the shift towards intimacy-oriented sex. These two disruptive conditions seem to represent turning points that provide older people with an opportunity to question and reframe their life-long perspective on sexual expression. According to Carpenter and DeLamater (2012), certain transitional moments may dramatically alter sexual expression and require the negotiation of new forms of sexual behaviour (i.e. adopting or rejecting sexual scripts and the socially learned sets of guidelines that govern people's sexual lives). Also, a lack of societal expectations to engage in penetrative sex after entering a new relationship in later life has been voiced by older women as liberating (Gore-Gorszewska 2021b). Therefore, it may be plausible that the lack of emphasis on intercourse in newly formed later-life relationships may release older adults from the assumed necessity of following a gold standard of heterosexual intercourse, and thus create an opportunity to develop, practise and appreciate intimate closeness or to appreciate

intimacy as a source of pleasure and comfort (Fileborn et al. 2017; Gore-Gorszewska 2021a; Ševčíková and Sedláková 2020).

The present study has also identified caring by the partner as a prominent category, accentuated in many narratives as emerging at older age. We propose that caring could be interpreted on several levels. Firstly, gestures of sexual intimacy can be seen in terms of the time and attention given to the well-being of the partner, which signals their importance. This facet of intimacy resonated particularly strongly in the narratives of the interviewed women who, according to traditional norms, have been socialised into the dominance of penetrative sex to serve the satisfaction of male sexual needs (Gore-Gorszewska 2021a). In their opinion, gestures of intimacy made them feel empowered and important to their partners, who — instead of having their needs met through sexual intercourse — were attentive to them. Secondly, we can interpret caring for a partner's sexual needs as a beneficial activity in terms of the satisfaction that is experienced when a partner feels sexual pleasure in response to the other's actions. Particularly prominent here was the voice of male participants, for whom this was a novel experience in late adulthood. The focus on male sexual satisfaction (while ignoring the female partner's pleasure), practised earlier in life, was likely the result of following traditional sexual scripts and gendered sex roles that were modelled at home and reinforced at the societal level. Although Czech sexology – and state policies – were more focused on female sexuality than Polish ones, the centrality of penetrative intercourse among the older generation has been preserved until today (Steklíková 2014). This may explain why shifting the attention from male to female sexual pleasure was perceived by participants as such a novelty. Lastly, care, as an emphasised aspect of intimacy, may be unique to later-life sexuality. Specifically, the theory of socioemotional selectivity proposes a reorientation from pragmatic towards emotional goals at older age (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles 1999). This refocus may facilitate enriching later-life intimacy with a dimension of caring.

The results of the study support the existing literature on sexual intimacy with the three intimate trajectories and identified turning-point moments, potentially contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how the role of intimacy develops/changes in late life. On a practical level, and in line with the clinically oriented Good Enough Sex model (McCarthy, Cohn, and Koman 2020), which promotes healthy couple sexuality and the reinforcement of relationships, the implications of our results include the benefits of integrating intimacy and eroticism in maintaining a satisfying sexual life in late adulthood. While intimacy can help in managing age-related changes in sexual functioning in older age, modifications to one's sexual repertoire can also lead to enrichment and growth, rather than being limited to counteracting sexual problems. More testimonies about the positive outcomes derived from the change towards intimacy-oriented sex should be publicly communicated and incorporated into guidebooks and other forms of support on later-life sexuality.

Limitations

Although the main strength of this study was that it provides novel cross-cultural insights on intimate trajectories in later life, several limitations should be considered.

The article draws on findings from two studies that were initially conducted separately. This led to some unavoidable discrepancies. For example, the sub-samples were not entirely homogenous – Czech participants were smaller in number and slightly younger. Also, the interview guides were not identical, specifically in terms of the wording of questions and their sequence during the interview. Nonetheless, given that distinct patterns were identified across the sample, the narratives collected in both countries correspond in terms of the content. Finally, the observed nuances in intimacy-related attitudes and behaviours may be, to some extent, attributed to recruitment bias (i.e. participants' self-selection) and the voices of less forthcoming older adults may be under-represented.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study examined and identified several ways in which intimacy was perceived and exercised in older adults' lives, with an emphasis on the potential influence of the sociocultural context and societal norms on sexual conduct. The results indicate that a later-life refocus from an instrumental, penetrative-oriented view of sex towards a wider variety of intimate behaviours occurs in traditional cultures, and may be beneficial, not only in terms of improved the quality of sexual and relational life, but also with respect to older individuals learning new ways to bond and connect with their partners.

Notes

1. Man, aged 67, from Poland. Interviewees coded by their gender (man/woman), age and country of origin (Poland/Czech Republic).

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Author's Contribution

I declare that my contribution to the publication: Gore-Gorszewska, G., & Ševčíková, A. (2022). Trajectories of intimacy in later-life: a qualitative study of Czech and Polish narratives. *Culture, Health, and Sexuality*, 1-16., included: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing, review & editing, Funding acquisition.

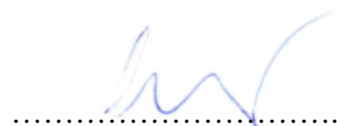
I estimate my contribution to about 60% of the work.



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ARTICLE

‘Why would I want sex now?’ A qualitative study on older women’s affirmative narratives on sexual inactivity in later life

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Abstract

The existing research tries to understand the reasons for discontinuing sex in later life with the assumption that people want to be sexual. Although the growing body of literature informs that sex remains an integral part of older adults’ lives, a substantial number of older adults declare not being sexually active. This study aimed at exploring motives for deliberately choosing sexual inactivity among older women. Semi-structured interviews with 16 Polish women (aged 65–82) were thematically analysed in relation to the sexual scripts theory and the participants’ specific socio-cultural background. Three main themes regarding the reasons for cessation of their sex life were identified: ‘I am glad that sex does not concern me anymore’, ‘I am satisfied with my memories’ and ‘The right one’ or no one. The results indicate that some women give up sex for good, with no regrets or feeling of a loss; for others, it may be a temporary decision, its duration dependent on meeting the right partner. Developing sexual agency may encourage discontinuing their sex life – a choice perceived as optimal and liberating. Personal factors and the memories of marital relationships seem to shape older women’s (a)sexual expectations. Acknowledging these nuances may contribute to a better understanding of older women’s sexual functioning; implications for consideration in further research and practice are also discussed.

Keywords: older adults; sexual inactivity; qualitative methodology; sexual scripts; older women; successful ageing

Introduction

In the last decades, the topic of older adults’ sexuality has become prominent (Kleinstäuber, 2017). In response to previously dominant constructions of older adults as ‘asexual’ or ‘sexless’, a notable part of recent research on sex in later life investigated the potentially beneficial role of maintaining sexual activity on good health and relationship wellbeing (Gott and Hinchliff, 2003; Fileborn *et al.*, 2015; Thorpe *et al.*, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2016; Watson *et al.*, 2017). Qualitative research

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has shown that the majority of older adults value sexual activity, believing that it helps in remaining vital, despite the process of ageing – which has been termed as the ‘fighting ageing through sex’ attitude (Hinchliff and Gott, 2008; Gewirtz-Meydan and Ayalon, 2019). In addition, sexual activity is sometimes presented as a way of fighting loneliness or, in the case of partnered older people, as means to maintain, and even improve, the relationship (DeLamater *et al.*, 2019; Gewirtz-Meydan and Ayalon, 2019). Continuing sexual activity in later life can also be a way to distance oneself from ‘the stereotypical portrayal of an [older] person with an illness, a physical dysfunction, and a dependence on the others’ (Ševčíková and Sedláková, 2020: 977). These findings implicitly suggest that sexually inactive older individuals may feel lonely, old and unattractive, are of poor health, or unconcerned with the deteriorating bond with their partner.

Despite these findings, quantitative studies show that a notable percentage of women and men report ceasing sexual activity in later life. This study aimed to explore older adults’ motives behind this, to deepen the scientific understanding of factors potentially associated with continuing or discontinuing sex among the ageing population. Guided by the assumption that some people may not consider the cessation of their sex life in negative terms, the findings presented here are based on the analysis of qualitative interviews with older women and are focused on affirmative narratives on their sexual inactivity. Specifically, this study is meant to investigate psychological, relational and societal factors which may lead some older individuals with a traditional socio-cultural background to accepting or even enjoying discontinuing their sex life at some point. Particular attention is paid to the societal sexual scripts revealed in the participants’ narratives.

Sexual inactivity in later life – undesirable necessity or a welcomed path?

The number of older adults reporting discontinuing sexual activity varies greatly between genders, age groups and studies, partially due to different operational definitions of sexual activity (from sexual intercourse to various forms of partnered and solo sexual activity) (Nicolosi *et al.*, 2006; Træen *et al.*, 2019). In a large multi-country study of sexual attitudes and behaviours in individuals aged 70–80, 46 per cent of men and 79 per cent of women reported not having had sexual intercourse in the past 12 months (Nicolosi *et al.*, 2006). Other studies have found that among participants aged 65–75, 35–60 per cent of men and 45–75 per cent of women had not had any kind of sexual activity in the past year (*see* Træen *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, in a national probability sample in the United States of America, 14 per cent of men and 39 per cent of women aged 55–64 years reported not being sexually active (in the past six months), but the proportions were substantially higher (38 and 64%, respectively) in the 65–74 age group (Lindau and Gavrilova, 2010). Frequency of masturbation also decreases with age. The last British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL-3) established that over half of men aged 55–64 and only one-third of men aged 65–74 reported masturbating in the previous four weeks; for women, the proportion was one in five and one in ten, respectively (Mercer *et al.*, 2013). According to a recent cross-cultural European study (Træen *et al.*, 2019), 35–58 per cent of male and 60–73 per cent of female participants aged 60–75 declared

not masturbating in the last month. Overall, sexual inactivity appears more common with age (Lindau *et al.*, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2016).

Several factors leading to sexual inactivity in older age have been well-documented. Lack of a partner was found to be the strongest predictor of sexual activity cessation, particularly for older women (Træen *et al.*, 2017). Increasingly common with ageing, declining partner's or personal health was also repeatedly reported (Gott and Hinchliff, 2003; Lindau *et al.*, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2016; Tetley *et al.*, 2018). When considering gender differences, ageing women typically report partner-related reasons for sexual inactivity (Lindau *et al.*, 2007; Hinchliff *et al.*, 2010; Tetley *et al.*, 2018; DeLamater *et al.*, 2019), while men are more likely to attribute their inactivity to personal health-related reasons (Beckman *et al.*, 2008; Schick *et al.*, 2010; Tetley *et al.*, 2018). Relationship factors (*e.g.* duration or quality of a relation, level of marital happiness) are also known to impact older partnered adults' sex life (Karraker and DeLamater, 2013). Sex negative attitudes (sexual ageism) shared by older adults or others around them (*e.g.* their family, friends, health-care professionals) are also associated with discontinuation of sexual activity or with experiencing various types of challenges in expressing one's sexual desires (Bradway and Beard, 2015; *see also* DeLamater, 2012; Gewirtz-Meydan and Ayalon, 2019). Several quantitative studies found that positive attitudes towards sex are significant predictors of sexual intercourse among older adults (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 2009; Fischer *et al.*, 2021).

However diverse, the range of factors described may not represent all relevant cases and leave some older adults' experiences unaddressed. A recent cross-cultural study that investigated reasons for sexual avoidance, defined as 'an active decision to refrain from sexual activity' (Carvalho *et al.*, 2020: 175), reported an unexpected finding. Offered a set of possible reasons for sexual avoidance (relationship problems, worries about sexually transmitted infections, own or partner's sexual difficulties, health problems, *etc.*), a substantial number of older participants (31% of women, 24% of men) marked 'other reasons' as their answer, leaving the researchers to question their assumptions. The authors noted this as a limitation of their study and called for qualitative research to understand the phenomenon better (Carvalho *et al.*, 2020: 181–182).

Recent research tends to approach the reasons for sexual inactivity in later life with the assumption that people want to be sexually active. It may be true for many older adults, and it is a reasonable counter-narrative considering that older individuals have been previously constructed as almost solely sexless. Is there, however, a possibility that some older people may actually prefer to be sexually inactive and enjoy it? Lagana and Maciel (2010), who investigated sexual desire among older Mexican-American women, reported that some of them expressed no wish to continue being sexual. Those women either considered it as part of ageing – suggesting the acceptance of the 'asexual old age' script – or provided other psychological or socio-cultural reasons for their lack of interest in sex. Some referred to negative past experiences with men, others reported marital discord, lack of a suitable sexual partner or a repulsion towards sexual activity in general (Lagana and Maciel, 2010). In a study on sexual wellbeing among middle-aged and older Americans (Syme *et al.*, 2019), a number of participants reported feeling well about their sexual inactivity. Moreover, some female participants voiced that having erotic memories

and/or sexual fantasies, but no sex, was completely satisfying (Syme *et al.*, 2019). The narratives of Australian single women aged 55+ on sex and dating revealed that many of them valued their own independence over sex and intimacy attainable within a relationship, declaring themselves to be ‘single by choice’, although still experiencing downsides of being without a partner (Fileborn *et al.*, 2015: 74). The authors identified that sexual norms, ‘past relationship experiences, and the social and political context in which [the participants] came of age’ were likely to shape older single women’s attitudes towards their relationship status in later life (Fileborn *et al.*, 2015: 70). In another study, after interpreting reported lack of sexual desire in later life as a coping mechanism, Ayalon *et al.* (2019: 58) noted that an alternative is also possible: ‘moving away from the current model of sexual functioning in old age as a “must” also means that some older adults may simply resign to indifference toward or no interest in sex’. Similarly, Carvalheira *et al.* (2020: 183) concluded that it should ‘not be assumed that sexual activity will be the preferred choice for all older individuals’; welcoming sexual inactivity may be – in certain cases – an adaptive and positively self-evaluated behaviour.

Some qualitative findings provide insights on the diversity in lived experience of older adults, which are valuable in understanding the subtlety of continuing or ceasing sex in later life. In a study on the importance of sex for British women aged 50 or over, Hinchliff and Gott (2008) present women’s sexual discourses as simultaneously concurring and opposing the ‘asexual old age’ stereotype. Their findings revealed a sense of sexual agency exercised in deciding when and how to fulfil participants’ sexual needs, therefore negotiating their sexuality between the societal constructions of sexless old age on one side, and sex as crucial for staying healthy and feeling young on the other side. Thorpe (2019: 970), who explored how the diverse sexual pasts of older Australian women affect their later-life sexual subjectivities, unfolded the tensions between societal expectations and ‘the often contradictory ways in which being old and sexual is given meaning in women’s everyday life’. Drawing on the expected effects of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, Thorpe’s interviewees shared narratives on transgressing restrictive social roles in sexual and relational domains, but also narratives on not being able to do so, *e.g.* maintaining the traditional, normative understanding of sex as partnered, heterosexual intercourse. Some of the Australian women whose self-awareness regarding sexual desire and needs increased in later life ‘noted that their heterosexual relationships in older age were sexually disappointing or difficult to find’ (Thorpe, 2019: 982), which – together with negative sexual experiences in the past voiced by other participants – left some of them with rather ambivalent attitudes towards casual sex or new relationships in later life. Another Australian study on older adults’ emotions associated with changes in their sex life captured accounts of ‘being comfortable in my own skin’, understood as the sense of sexual ‘freedom, confidence and agency ... gained with age’ (Rowntree, 2014: 154). It was expressed by participants not only in the context of feeling sexually liberated to engage in (and only) desirable sexual activity, but also in relation to choosing ‘to live alone rather than tolerate unsatisfying relationships’ (Rowntree, 2014: 155). In the case of some female participants, sexual freedom was exercised in abstaining from sexual activity as a form of asserting one’s desires, instead of following patriarchal norms of being expected to satisfy one’s partner sexually (Rowntree, 2014).

Building on the literature presented above, if we acknowledge that sexual inactivity in later life might not be merely an undesirable result of health- or partner-related barriers, but a welcomed choice stemming from a set of psychological, relational and societal factors, the shortage of scientific literature attempting to understand this phenomenon becomes obvious.

Sexual scripts and the specific socio-cultural context of Poland

The sexual script theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) was chosen to guide the analyses and to provide the theoretical framework for this study. According to this theory, we should distinguish between three interrelated levels of sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, 2003; Montemurro, 2014b): societal scenarios, interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts. Societal scenarios can be understood as norms that regulate sexual behaviour within a society (e.g. appropriate sexual objects, aims, even feelings). On an interpersonal level, an individual needs to shape and adjust the material of a relevant societal scenario into a script of specific behaviour (specific sexual interaction). Intrapsychic scripting is ‘a private world of wishes and desires [which] must be bound to social life’ (Simon and Gagnon 1986: 100) – the space where individual sexual desires are linked to societal meanings.

Sexual scripts are not rigid rules of sexual conduct, but rather a process of constant development, re-writing and negotiating of meanings. According to Simon and Gagnon (1986, 2003), a lack of congruence between societal and personal levels of scripting is possible. They attribute it to an individual life trajectory (e.g. life events, experiences) or not enough coherence in socio-cultural expectations (e.g. contradictory societal scripts of ‘asexual old age’ and ‘sex as crucial in successful ageing’). As documented in some qualitative research, an individual’s personal scripts might conform to the dominant societal norms or – if a disjuncture is too great – might evolve and go above and beyond the conventionally shared meanings (Masters *et al.*, 2013; Murray, 2018; Gore-Gorszewska, 2020). It may be particularly interesting in older adults, for whom the accumulation of life experiences along with the socio-cultural transformations that have occurred over the course of their lives have potentially presented more opportunities for sexual script change.

The distinctive socio-cultural context of Polish older adults’ sexuality stems from the post-Second World War period. Under the real-socialist regime, women were encouraged by the state to join the workforce (in the spirit of revolutionary gender equality) and, at the same time, expected to be mothers to a new generation of socialist youth (Mikołajczak and Pietrzak, 2015). The Polish Catholic Church cemented its sociocultural influence by becoming the main opposition to the real-socialist regime (Ediger, 2005; Ingbrant, 2020). Yet, in the spirit of faith-based – heteronormative and conservative – values, the Polish Catholic Church advocated, with striking similarity to the regime, that women should ‘play a vital role in society as faithful and fecund wives, whose identity revolve around their family and whose needs are the needs of their families’ (Mikołajczak and Pietrzak, 2015: 174). This situation did not leave much room for alternative scripts, such as the one brought about by the so-called sexual revolution in the West.

At the time when participants in the current study reached sexual maturity, the dominant cultural scenarios encouraged them to fulfil a gendered set of marital

obligations, often discouraging female sexual autonomy and agency. Women's personal sexual scripts were developed and negotiated in the context of a blend of real-socialist and Catholic traditional morality, gender inequality (revolving around the notion of sex as the women's marital and procreational duty), and irrelevance of female sexual pleasure (Mikołajczak and Pietrzak, 2015; Ingbrant, 2020).

The current study

To the best of my knowledge, there have been no direct attempts to explore qualitatively the motives for not wanting sex in older age. As presented earlier, much of the research into sexual inactivity in older age has been informed by the understanding that older adults want to be sexually active but are often faced with substantial obstacles in this pursuit. More nuanced analyses of older adults' complex narratives on their sexual inactivity are usually interwoven with other topics of research and draw on the experiences of older adults from Western cultures. This study, therefore, (a) seeks to build on and elaborate the existing findings by (b) focusing on the affirmative narratives on sexual inactivity in later life (c) among older women with a more traditional socio-cultural background, (d) with the aim of contributing to better understanding of the phenomenon in question and illuminating the area in between the dichotomy of 'asexual old age' and the 'sexy oldie' stereotypes.

This study analysis is centred exclusively on female participants' experiences and narratives. As gendered differences on the meaning of sex or preferable types of sexual encounters have been observed, and the traditional sexual scripts give various instructions to women and men on how to be sexual, what to pursue and what sexual behaviour is (im)proper (Hinchliff and Gott, 2008; Masters *et al.*, 2013; Gore-Gorszewska, 2020), it is reasonable to expect that the motives for sexual inactivity in later life may be different for ageing women and men. Relevant male narratives about not being sexual in older age are explored in a separate study.

Methods

Participants and recruitment

This article is based on the findings from 16 semi-structured interviews with older Polish women aged 65–82 (mean = 70.5, standard deviation = 4.89). Coming from an ethnically homogenous and highly religious Roman Catholic country (Halman, 2001; GUS, 2015), all but one declared as a religious person; all 16 women self-identified as heterosexual. Despite this homogeneity, the sample was relatively diverse in terms of relationship status, educational background and socio-economic status of the participants (*see Table 1*). While participants' current relationship status varied between being single or partnered (in new or long-term relationships), the majority of women (N = 14) had had a period of sexual inactivity in later life, which they referred to during the interviews.

Study participants were recruited through posters distributed at health centres, pharmacies, University of the Third Age (U3A) venues and in a retirement home, in two cities in southern Poland. The posters gave an invitation to contact the interviewer, and the study was presented as focused on older adults' experiences

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Characteristics	N	%
Mean age (SD)	70.5 (4.89)	
Marital status:		
Single	2	12.5
Divorced	2	12.5
Widowed	10	62.5
Married	2	12.5
Relationship status:		
No partner	8	50.0
New relationship	6	37.5
Long-term relationship	2	12.5
Education:		
Secondary/vocational	11	68.8
Tertiary/higher	5	31.2
Employment:		
Retired	13	81.25
Semi-retired	2	12.5
Employed	1	6.25
Place of residence:		
Rural	1	6.25
Small/medium town	6	37.5
City	9	56.25

Notes: N = 16.

and feelings about their sexual and relational life. Individuals who contacted the interviewer were provided with concise information about the project and study procedures, and asked their age (65 or over, no upper limit was set). It was emphasised that current sexual activity was not a prerequisite for study participation. Candidates were also given assurances about anonymity and confidentiality measures, as well as informed of their right to discontinue the interview at any time. None of the participants who accepted the invitation cancelled their appointment, but several interviews needed to be postponed for several days or, in two cases, even weeks.

Data collection

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted by the author. Being part of a larger study exploring the sexuality of older Polish individuals, the interview guide was broad and addressed a number of topics¹ (see Table 2). The conversational style of the interviews allowed the participants to introduce their own topics of interest and enabled the author to address issues unique to an individual

Table 2. Interview guide: topics and exemplary questions

1. Opening questions: Social background and situation.
2. Childhood and adolescence: Closeness (emotional, physical) in the family of origin. Emotional climate concerning body, nakedness and display of affection in the family of origin. Sexual education in the family of origin, at school. <i>Q: When you were growing up, how did your parents show each other affection? How did you experience seeing them showing this?</i> <i>Q: When you were growing up, where did your sexual education come from? School, your parents, other people?</i>
3. Sexual experiences throughout life: Participants' sexual history and current sex life. Sexuality and own body today. <i>Q: How would you describe your sex life in your marriage/long-term relationship/in the past?</i> <i>Q: What likes and dislikes do you have about your body today?</i>
4. Beliefs and attitudes towards sexuality: The meaning of sex now and in the past. The importance of sex and its role in life now and in the past. Participants' attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality in later life. <i>Q: Please describe why sexuality is important for you, or why is it not. How has this changed for you over the years?</i> <i>Q: How do you feel about how sexuality in older age is portrayed in the media?</i>
5. Health and illness: Participants' sexual health/sexual problems (currently and in the past). Sexual health in later life in relation to public health services. <i>Q: About sexual problems recently, have you experienced any? How do you feel about them?</i> <i>Q: Do you remember discussing a sex-related issue with any doctor (recently or in the past)? What was your impression of that situation?</i>
6. Closing questions.

biography. The interviews were conducted in the participants' choice of venue (usually their house or the author's office). All interviews lasted between two and three hours and were audio recorded after obtaining the participant's informed consent.

At the beginning of each interview, the author introduced herself and explained the study goals in order to establish the credibility and trust essential for discussing a sensitive topic. In response to considerable interest about handling qualitative data, participants were assured that their names would be replaced by pseudonyms and that other identifying characteristics would be removed from transcripts. To facilitate rapport, the interviews began with questions regarding the participant's demographic background and relationship history, before asking more sensitive questions about their sex life. After the interview, the participants completed a brief self-administered demographic form. They were compensated for their time with PLN 100 (approximately €25/ US \$30). All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University.

None of the interviewees expressed any discomfort or distress after the interview. On the contrary, many reflected on the conversation as meaningful, gratifying or even enlightening, although some admitted being moderately nervous at the beginning, mainly due to uncertainty about how the interview would progress (sensitivity of the topic, their first experience of participating in a qualitative scientific study). Some acknowledged that this was the first time they had narrated their sexual histories and referred to the interview as their 'confession'. According to participants, the interviewer's comparatively young age (30+) did not inhibit disclosure. When the age difference between parties in an interview is notable, and the experiences discussed during the interview are impossible to share, it is recommended that young researchers explicitly position themselves as respectful outsiders and treat respondents as experts (Thorpe *et al.*, 2018). This approach was exercised in the current study and, indeed, the interviewees acknowledged that the respectful yet friendly atmosphere, together with the researcher's gender (female), greatly facilitated the conversation and enabled them to be more open. The interviewer's clinical experience (psychotherapist, sexologist) was important to accommodate possible queries and emotional reactions during the interviews.

All interviews were transcribed by a professional service, following the exclusion of all identifying information. Eight randomly selected transcripts were reviewed by the author against the original recordings for quality assurance purposes.

Data analysis

The main question guiding the current study was: 'What are the reasons for sexual inactivity in later life among older women?' A thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013) was chosen, with an inductive approach. For exploratory studies, thematic analysis is of particular value, because it allows for minimal *a priori* assumptions (no theoretically informed coding frame) and enables the 'discovery' of (different) meanings directly from the data. The study was informed by a constructivist epistemological approach, which sees knowledge as contextually situated and produced between – in this case – the interviewer and the interviewee (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), with a focus on participants' subjective ways of constructing meanings rather than seeking to reveal underlying truths (Charmaz, 2006).

The analysis followed six reflexive steps required to ensure the quality of the thematic analysis and the trustworthiness of findings (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The author familiarised herself with the data through multiple readings of all the transcripts and noted the initial ideas. The coding process then followed. The coding labels encompassed the notions that emerged from the participants' accounts, most often in the form of *in vivo* codes (inductive approach). A sub-sample of the transcripts (N = 5) was open-coded by an independent researcher (a psychologist familiar with qualitative methodology) to ensure the coding validity. Differences between the two coding outcomes were resolved through discussion. The codes and corresponding statements were collated and combined into a number of themes, then reviewed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The reviewed themes were then applied again to the transcripts. In the process, which was characterised by going back and forth

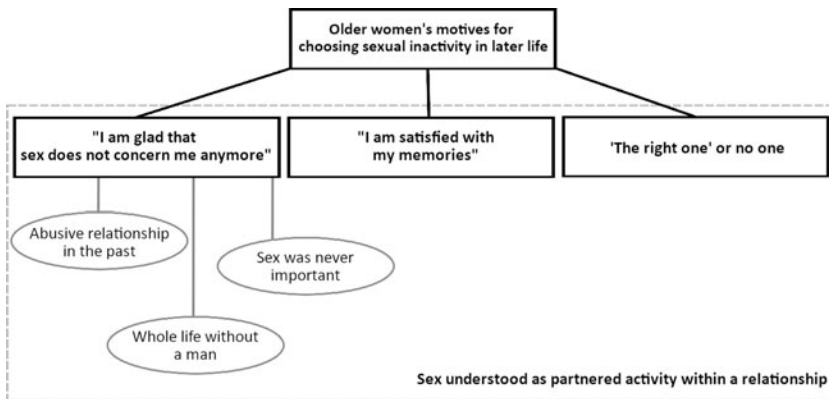


Figure 1. Final thematic map presenting the motives for choosing sexual inactivity as identified in the narratives of older women.

between coding and reviewing the themes, several themes were modified and finally organised into a thematic map (Figure 1). Analytical rigour was maintained throughout the recurrent discussions between the author and independent researcher in order to meet the methodological standards for qualitative research (Sinković and Towler, 2019), and step-by-step notes were made, documenting the research process and substantive findings. MAXQDA software was used for all data analysis.

To ensure the richness of the data and to allow the reader to evaluate the elements of the analysis and its interpretative conclusions, direct quotations from interviews are provided. The quotations were translated from Polish by the author and verified by a professional translator.

Results and discussion

The participants' accounts of their sexual inactivity were organised into the following three main themes: (a) 'I am glad that sex does not concern me anymore', (b) 'I am satisfied with my memories', and (c) 'The right one or no one'. During the analysis, it became clear that the narratives were firmly anchored to past relationship experiences and individual evaluation of current lifestyle. Women's life trajectories analysed in this study were complex, with sets of interwoven motives for not wanting sex in later life. However, it was usually possible to identify a dominant theme in each life story.

All three themes were framed within the participants' universal understanding of sex as a partnered activity within a relationship; although their definitions of sex were rather broad, beyond penetrative intercourse only. When prompted about masturbation, most women reported not practising it earlier in life and not considering it within their current sexual repertoire:

Well ... not really. I have never done this ... Honestly, I wouldn't even know where to start. No, somehow it doesn't seem right. (Zuzanna, 66, married)

Similarly, casual sex did not seem to be an option that the interviewees would consider. The majority equated engaging in sexual activity with being in a committed (formal or informal) relationship and usually also living with a sexual partner:

I wouldn't be able to have sex with someone to whom I don't feel anything, about whom I don't know anything, with whom I am not in a relationship, and so on. Unacceptable. (Dorota, 65)

Whenever a question about sex was asked, the participants responded with the implicit assumption that it requires a romantic heterosexual relationship.

'I am glad that sex does not concern me anymore'

One distinct motive for older women to welcome sexual inactivity in later life was when they considered themselves happier on their own than with a partner. This group of participants greatly appreciated their current lifestyle – single, active and independent. Within this theme, three specific sub-themes (life trajectories) were identified.

Abusive relationship in the past

Negative sexual and relational experiences in the past marked the first trajectory. Given that many women had no sexual experiences outside marriage, sex was automatically linked to a husband figure and to the emotional climate of marital life, which in several cases were notably negative. Julia, a 70-year-old widow explained: 'My life was ... I went through hell. I lived with a psychopath ... He was merciless, immoral, [he had] no consciousness, no feelings'. Her husband abused her physically and emotionally, with long-lasting effects on her self-esteem and psychological wellbeing. Regarding their sex life, Julia recalled: 'It was impossible to satisfy his needs. I felt like an object, I knew there is only one thing he cares about [ejaculation, own pleasure]. Would you like to be an object?' (Julia, 70) It took Julia many years to recover from these memories and find some joy in life. A similar narrative came from Helena, a widow who had struggled with a heavy-drinking husband who had many lovers. She found him repulsive and despised having sex with him, which resulted in her avoiding sexual contact, unless for procreation:

When I got married, I wanted children. Apart from that, no [sex]. I never felt [sexual] pleasure. I had more joy in giving birth to children than in making them. How can one have the pleasure of getting close to such a dirty, terrible person [husband]. No talking, no feelings, nothing. I knew he has others [women], that he didn't want me ... How could sex be pleasurable? How could I wish to undress in front of him, to look at him naked, when he was disgusting? (Helena, 76)

Both women shared traumatic sexual experiences during their long-term marriages and very clearly stated that widowhood was liberating for them. They declared that they appreciated currently living on their own, socialising and engaging in various activities. Having only negative and painful memories of sex and their sexual partners, they expressed no desire to engage in sexual activity in later life.

It appears that in certain life scenarios the cessation of sexual activity might be optimal. Lagana and Maciel (2010), who investigated sexual desire among older Mexican-American women, observed that the respondents with a history of intimate partner abuse reported neither sexual desire nor sexual fantasies in later life. Similarly, Carvalheira *et al.* (2020) recently reported that older partnered women who were dissatisfied with their relationship were more likely to actively avoid sex. It can be hypothesised that such life trajectories may be more prevalent among older women with conservative socio-cultural background, whose sexuality developed under the dominance of patriarchal norms, gender inequality, double standards and masculinity-oriented sexual societal scripts (Galland and Lemel, 2008; Petersen and Hyde, 2011; Watson *et al.*, 2017). This may also explain why the interviewees' accounts of liberation from unsatisfying relationships did not encompass enjoying sexual freedom, as observed in other studies (Montemurro, 2014b; Rowntree, 2014). Given that painful sexual and/or relational experiences may be common to women across cultures, this factor should be acknowledged as a possibility in cases of older women embracing the cessation of sexual activity in later life.

Whole life without a man

Living for a long time without a sexual partner was another life trajectory resulting in female participants claiming to be not interested in sex and happy on their own. 'A whole life without a man, I couldn't even imagine to be with a man now', stated Elżbieta, a 77-year-old, who has never been in a long-term relationship. Her last sexual experiences (at the age of 40) were with a partner who left after discovering she was pregnant. Similarly to Elżbieta, several other participants referred to the common expression 'use it or lose it', indicating that they had already lost it – their sexual desire – yet without an overwhelming feeling of a loss: 'There was no time for men in my life, and I do not particularly regret it', said 82-year-old Bożena. She divorced after five years of marriage, when she realised that her husband had schizophrenia but was unwilling to treat it. Like many single mothers, she had to be self-sufficient. She focused on her child and earning enough to support the two of them, leaving her sex life aside:

The first 10–15 years of bringing up a daughter and working to support us both, of course I did not have the energy or time to think about men or sex. And over the next 10–15 years, this has become established. I was promoted at work, so there was more money, but also more responsibilities ... There were some casual relations, but more of a social kind. I admit I have had several men, but I can't say that the world has turned upside down (laugh). It [sex] was nothing special. This only confirmed that I was not interested in this aspect of life. And it stayed like this ever since. (Bożena, 82, divorcee, single)

Her narrative illustrates how a set of life challenges, reinforced by the internalised societal norm that pursuing personal happiness (including sexual fulfilment) should not be a priority for a mother, has set Bożena on a certain path. Now, after reflecting on her lifecourse, she noted that should she have at some point met a man who would 'turn her world upside down', perhaps she would currently

see things differently and be in a sexual relationship. Since it had not happened, Bożena asked a rhetorical question: 'If I haven't had [enjoyable] sex for 40 years and I am perfectly fine with it, why should it bother me now?'. This statement captures the overall tone of narratives supporting this theme – viewing sexual activity as expendable. In these cases, it is likely to be the consequence of experiencing unfulfilling sexual encounters, and, over time, disassociating sexual activity from well-being and achieving life satisfaction.

In addition to unfavourable life circumstances, which pushed several of the interviewed women – like Bożena – towards prioritising specific duties over sex, there was a notable absence of a hedonistic aspect of sexual expression in their narratives. Whereas experiencing pleasure has been found to be strongly associated with maintaining an active sex life (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 2009), it should be noted that female sexual satisfaction was a neglected or irrelevant aspect of sex within societies with highly conservative views about sexuality (Yan *et al.*, 2011; Mikołajczak and Pietrzak, 2015). Both women and men in older generations admit to being influenced by the traditional sexual scripts focusing on male sexual gratification and the submissive female role of dutiful wife, whose own desire or pleasure was unimportant or even inappropriate (Montemurro, 2014a; Gore-Gorszewska, 2020). Thus, prioritising other responsibilities over sex may have robbed some women of the opportunity to learn about and pursue the hedonistic aspect of sexual activity. Taken together, this could explain why some older women – who have not had a chance to enjoy sex earlier in life – report discontinuing sexual activity with no regrets. The societal script of 'asexual old age' may be welcomed and comforting for some women who have already closed and forgotten their sexual past lacking positive sexual experiences.

Sex was never important

The third trajectory resulting in older women enjoying their present life without a sexual partner was revealed in the narratives of women for whom sex was never an important aspect of life. Dorota had two significant relationships in her life: first in her thirties, with a partner who eventually left her for another woman, and the second when she was between 45 and 59 years of age. She recalls the second relationship, which ended when her partner died, as satisfying; they were 'a match as a couple, socially and intellectually'. They engaged in various sexual activities, which Dorota said she enjoyed, especially after menopause when the risk of pregnancy disappeared. Yet she claimed:

It [sex] was never that important for me. Companionship, yes, mutual understanding. I knew he likes sex so we had it, but I could easily have survived without it. It was very optional for me, very ... Like icing on a cake. I was always more about the cake; icing was for him (laugh) ... Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed it, never sacrificed myself. But I think I enjoyed it mostly because he loved it. (Dorota, 65, single)

Dorota's account reveals interesting contradictions. On one hand, she refers to sex as a non-essential activity she was exercising primarily for her partner, suggesting a script of sex as 'a marital duty' or 'an external experience', observed among some older women (Kasif and Band-Winterstein, 2017; Gore-

Gorszewska, 2020). Yet Dorota claims differently – that she enjoyed being intimate, experienced orgasms and never considered sex as a sacrifice for the sake of a relationship. She seems to be drawing from a script about women gaining pleasure out of sex by giving pleasure to a man, yet she also admits to receiving sexual pleasure during sex herself. Her account creates an intriguing case where sexual activity can be pleasurable and at the same time have a rather low priority in one's life.

When asked about her sex life now and expectations for the future, Dorota stated with stark honesty that she does not want sex anymore. According to her, when she looks at her partnered life from the current perspective:

The sex – physical and the intimacy – was nice, but there were also the downsides of being in a relationship ... and this difficult time when he was ill and then he was gone. I was depressed, so sad. Lonely ... Eventually I got over it and I'm happy again with my life. (Dorota, 65, single)

Dorota's narrative reveals how being single – and enjoying the lifestyle associated with it – boosted her self-confidence, self-esteem and overall happiness. Despite many fond memories of partnered life, she sees no place for sex in her current life and has no wish to be in a relationship in the future. This and similar narratives suggest that even if sex was part of a woman's earlier life, but was not considered an important aspect of it, there is no reason to expect late adulthood to bring major changes to this attitude.

The first theme, 'I am glad that sex does not concern me anymore', opposes the 'sex as crucial in ageing successfully' societal script. While there is evidence suggesting the benefits of sexual activity on physical and psychological wellbeing in later life (Woloski-Wruble *et al.*, 2010; Štulhofer *et al.*, 2018), the current and other studies indicate that it might not always be desirable (Lagana and Maciel, 2010; Fileborn *et al.*, 2015; Carvalheira *et al.*, 2020). The emphasis on sexual function as part of successful ageing may put pressure on older adults who do not feel the need to be sexual anymore (Katz and Marshall, 2003; Syme *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, it overlooks the fact that in some cases sex might not be regarded as a cherished aspect of personal history. The narratives of this study's participants provide a nuanced insight by encompassing the accounts of older women whose current sex(less) expectations were shaped by their – not always joyful – sexual past.

When asked about potential reasons or benefits for later-life sexual activity, the participants commonly referred to maintaining vitality and escaping loneliness. Yet at the same time, they challenged this perception:

Interviewer: Why do you think people get together in later life, like that friend you mentioned?

Helena: Because they do not know what to do with their time, maybe lack of money, maybe they don't want to be alone? Not everyone is OK with being on their own. Me, I *can fend for myself, and I am never bored. I have friends, I travel, I'm active*, I always have something to do. I am by no means lonely. (Helena, 76)

Helena's and other women's narratives revealed that there are personal histories in which *joie de vivre* and overall satisfaction flourished after sex ceased to be a part of life. In such narratives, being single is not perceived as worrying but rather as well-deserved freedom and independence. For some women, being active, busy and in good health was possible precisely because of their decision to leave their partnered and sexual life behind. Most of these women proudly declared that they fulfilled their role as a mother and grandmother, and currently pursued other life goals, hobbies and interests (*i.e.* physical activity, socialising, travelling, engaging in seniors' activity centres and the education they provide). Investing time and energy in a sexual relationship was perceived as time-consuming and suboptimal in comparison to their current lifestyle:

I have so many things to do, on my own and with friends, and it's so much fun, that sex is at the very, very bottom of my list, honestly (laughter). (Edyta, 72, widow, single)

It cannot be ruled out that the interview context played a role and participants may have positioned themselves as content with their current lifestyle in order to gain the interviewer's approval. However, the overall tone and the details of their life narratives support the assumption that they indeed feel satisfied, despite the lack of a partner and their sexual inactivity.

Similarly to the participants in the Fileborn *et al.* (2015: 71) study, many of the women interviewed who remained single 'privileged their independence and other life goals above the sexual intimacy and satisfaction that could (potentially) be gained through starting a new relationship'. These narratives are in contrast with some other qualitative findings. For example, Ševčíková and Sedláková (2020: 975) observed that some older adults maintained sexual activity 'to feel and act vigorously, vitally, and youthfully' or to avoid loneliness. Others expressed concerns that the cessation of sex would make them feel old, unattractive and lonely (Gewirtz-Meydan and Ayalon, 2019; Ševčíková and Sedláková, 2020). It appears that the discrepancy between perceiving sex as crucial for feeling alive and functional, and seeing sex as redundant or even impairing one's wellbeing, can be explained by focusing on older women's past experiences. It is to be expected that sex will not be a preferred way of improving later-life wellbeing if it was a non-essential, insignificant or undesirable aspect of earlier life.

I am satisfied with my memories

Another distinct motive for embracing sexual inactivity in later life emerged from the interviews with several widowed participants and could be summarised with the phrase: 'I am satisfied with my memories.' This theme's underlying narratives were bursting with vivid feelings for the late husband and positive memories of marital life, clearly indicating why it is impossible for those widows to redirect their interest towards a new partner. When answering a question about the possibility of entering a romantic or sexual relationship in the future, Krystyna replied:

(Looking at her husband's photograph on the wall) I don't know if I could cheat on you, darling. No one would be like him ... You see, my husband was a perfect

man for me; both physically, he was tall, dark haired, very masculine; and as a life partner. (Krystyna, 71, widowed)

It should be noted that Krystyna and several other women with comparable experiences and precious memories of their late husbands were not only referring to the beginning of their marriage, but also to later time-points. Their stories, however, were not idealised; they included reminiscences of ups and downs in the relationships, disagreements and even discoveries of infidelity. Some interviewees admitted that their marital sex life was not always satisfactory for them, but this did not seem to affect their overall evaluation:

The more complete, fulfilling, the marriage was, the less things that would otherwise be sexually interesting are appealing to you. You have nothing to search for since you already had it in your marriage. And I had a perfect marriage. I have to say that I have lived through these years [of marriage] very fruitfully, cheerfully, happily. So now I am not looking for anything, a new partner to live together or to have sex, I do not need anything else. (Teresa, 75, widowed)

Teresa reflected on her marriage as ‘fulfilling’ – sexually, emotionally, relationally – and elaborated on how she felt satisfied, even ‘complete’, with no urge to continue her sex life. Her narrative demonstrated the power of marital memories. Remembered favourably, their past sex life is reflected in current satisfaction, despite the absence of physical sex. Wiki, a widow who explicitly stated how much she used to enjoy sex in both of her marriages, explained:

Interviewer: Do you currently have sexual needs, to be with a man?

Wiki: Not really. Jesus, what I’ve had, I’ve already used up my potential. I had crazy times in bed with both of them [husbands]. But now I have the feeling that I’ve had enough of it. When I was younger, married, I had energy and strength to enjoy sex. It is like with travelling: you explore the world and at some point you have enough, you don’t want to travel any more, just settle down. So now I’ve settled down sexually. I like my memories, but that’s it, no more. Does it make sense? (Wiki, 69, widowed, single)

Wiki’s metaphor is illuminating; despite positive past sexual experiences she considers the sexual chapter of her life closed and has no desire for it to continue. A certain change in the perception of sex can also be seen in her statement. From this participant’s later-life perspective, sexual activity – important earlier in life – gives way to satisfying sexual memories. Wiki’s whole narrative, including body language throughout the interview, supported her claim that she feels happy and content about what appeared to be a well-deserved sexual retirement.

In contrast to Wiki, two widows admitted occasional sexual desire. However, both firmly stated that experiencing these feelings or needs were always triggered by memories of sexual intimacy with their late husbands and were adamant that they were not wishing for sex with someone else:

I feel the same [sexual] need [as before]. What do you think, that when I see a romantic film, it does not bring back memories? That it doesn't move me? It certainly does! But I wouldn't go with another man. I couldn't ... If he touched me somehow more intimately, if he tried to approach me, if he gave me the look, I would have slapped him. I just couldn't imagine myself being intimate with another man. (Krstyna, 71, widowed)

Missing sexual intimacy experienced by these women does not motivate them to seek a new relationship. The fabric of their sexual desire is made of erotic memories about a particular partner, making it seemingly impossible to imagine a new lover and unwilling to start new chapter of their sex life.

These deeply emotional narratives challenge some of the well-established societal sexual scripts. According to the stereotype of 'asexual old age', still prominent in more conservative societies (Sinković and Towler, 2019), women are not expected – or even supposed – to be sexual in later life (Hinchliff and Gott, 2008; Thorpe, 2019). In line with this, older women who ceased being sexual at some point are naturally assumed to conform to this script, particularly when coming from a sociocultural background where the primary purpose of female sex was reproduction or fulfilling a partner's sexual needs (DeLamater, 2012). Narratives of widows in this study offer an alternative to this assumption. Despite not seeking out new partners, they consider themselves sexual beings and actively reminisce about their intimate past.

In contrast to what Kasif and Band-Winterstein (2017) reported, none of these widows seemed to be abstaining from sexual activity due to social constructions. While it may be attributed to the interview context and participants' reluctance to discuss such influences, even when gently prompted the widows made no reference to factors like inhibitions originating from family expectations (to remain sexless when widowed) or obligations to remain loyal to the late husband's memory. Instead, strong emotional attachment and still vivid feelings of love and commitment to the late husband were woven into their narratives. Although two widows' accounts resonated with what Radosh and Simkin (2016) described as 'sexual bereavement' – mourning the loss of sexual intimacy – there was no indication that a normative factor (e.g. societal scripts, feeling of grief or guilt) prevented them from forming a new sexual partnership. Even though the script of 'faithfulness to one, lifelong relationship' may be common among older women from traditional backgrounds, it might be argued that a strong and positive emotional bond with a late partner has the power to change the meaning of sexual inactivity in one's later life.

To summarise the second theme, a number of women in this study who were sexually inactive were nevertheless satisfied with their sex life due to positive past sexual experiences. Comparable findings are found in a recent study by Syme *et al.* (2019) who observed that for some mid-life and older women, who faced challenges in their sex life, sexual memories or fantasies can provide a refuge and even generate sexual satisfaction. What the current study adds is that some older women may feel sexually satisfied even after definite cessation of their sex life, provided that they cherish their sexual history. These findings are supportive of the wellbeing paradox: the notion that older adults' subjective wellbeing does not necessarily reflect an objective decline in many life domains (Hansen and

Slagsvold, 2012). In contrast, a decline in sexual activity (including sexual abstinence) can be accompanied by a feeling of genuine satisfaction that is embedded in a broader perspective on satisfactory intimate life and reinforced by positive erotic memories. Indeed, it appears that ‘sexual wellness is attainable at any level of functioning’, including sexual inactivity (Syme *et al.*, 2019: 839).

‘The right one’ or no one

The interviewed women’s narratives indicated that the most common reason for older women’s sexual inactivity – a lack of partner (Træen *et al.*, 2017) – might be more nuanced than the straightforward statement: ‘I don’t have a partner, thus I don’t have sex.’ As can be observed in the accounts that follow, there is a crucial difference between lacking a partner and lacking a desirable partner. While quantitative studies do not make this distinction, some qualitative findings suggest that this may be salient for older women (Rowntree, 2014; Fileborn *et al.*, 2015). It has been observed, for example, that ‘a perceived lack of “decent” older men coupled with unwillingness to compromise on relationship standards’ led some older Australian women to remain single despite declaring an interest in forming a new relationship with ‘the right one’ (Fileborn *et al.*, 2015: 74). The current study corroborates these findings by demonstrating the circumstances in which older women may prefer the cessation of sexual activity to having sex with a partner who does not meet their expectations.

In contrast to the accounts representing the previous theme, several interviewees mentioned that they would be interested in a new relationship. However, they emphasised how sex would only be possible with someone who meets numerous stringent criteria – sensible economic status (pension, own flat), reasonable health (‘I won’t be a nurse’), gentleness and having interests similar to hers (‘so we understand each other, and we can talk, spend time together, have fun’). None of the women were willing to engage with ‘just anyone’ to be sexual again, although they were acutely aware of the gender disproportion in older age cohorts and the corresponding challenge of finding the ideal partner. Eliza, a 65-year-old divorcee, currently partnered but sexually inactive, clarified that sexual needs have not disappeared from her life. On the contrary, they are still present but not as overwhelmingly as they were when she was younger. Eliza claimed that being more reasonable and considerate, even pragmatic, at this stage in her life, was the reason why she did not want to engage fully with her current partner:

Above all, equal material status. A relationship cannot be based on what only a woman has. Equality, then we are partners ... I’m not that desperate for sex and intimacy to fall for a man that I would have to support for the rest of my life. (Eliza, 65)

Many participants shared similar thoughts on how, in later life, they began to recognise a sense of equality among partners as vital for intimacy, and therefore how they would only consider men who are willing to respect their independence and equal status in a relationship as ‘the right one’.

Meeting the right person has, in some cases, the power to reconstruct individual sexual scripts, as was the case of Maria, a 65-year-old widow, who recently found a new sexual partner. She recalled being physically and emotionally abused in her marriage, which led her to two decades of sexual inactivity:

My marriage was not made of roses, more like thorns ... He [husband] was never gentle, in bed or else ... I used to run away from home when he was drunk. (Maria, 65)

This affected her attitude towards sex since she had no sexual experiences outside of marriage. After leaving her husband she found peace as a single mother and admitted not wanting sex ever again in her life. She claimed to have no sexual desire nor any intention to enter a relationship. However, after her current partner – whom she initially considered ‘just a friendly person’ – proved to be reliable, gentle and caring, she considered having sex again. Meeting ‘the right man’ was precisely what changed her attitude and sparked her interest in sexual intimacy. But, as Maria claims, had she not met him she would surely follow the ‘asexual old age’ script.

Waiting for the right partner, while being content with sexual inactivity, seemed to be the option facilitated by being ‘blessed with the lack of urge’ – as Sylwia (70, divorcee) put it. She resumed engaging in short-term relationships following a period of sexual celibacy. Because of her reportedly low sexual desire, Sylwia confided that she is able to enjoy sex only when she feels like it and only with a carefully chosen partner:

First of all, I respect myself and I will not go fast, no ‘sex on a first date’. Why would I, there is no desperate need. I want to get to know a man a little bit, talk to him. If there is a spark, if talking with him is fun, if there is something to talk about, because he is intelligent, but he also seems sensitive, only then I can go on with this relationship. (Sylwia, 70, divorcee)

To be sexual, Sylwia prefers to form a relationship, and must know a man well to enable her to decide whether he is intellectually and emotionally engaging enough to become her partner. She expects a longer and deliberate commitment, which allows the partner to learn her preferences, and to also meet her standards at the later stages of a relationship:

I enjoy sex nowadays, because I know what I want. I don’t need a lot [of sex] but I have found out that it can be pleasurable, and now I know what I like and how I like it. So, I’ll show him or tell him, and either the guy follows, or he can get lost.

In her opinion, low sexual desire puts her (and some other older women) in a favourable position, because they can freely decide whether and when to have sex. In addition, it may be easier for them to see whether a potential partner is ‘the right one’. A similar perspective was voiced by Katarzyna, who straightforwardly explained why sex is optional in her life:

I am not desperate [for sex]. On the contrary, there will be sex only when I want it and how I want it, or no sex at all. (Katarzyna, 70, widowed, partnered)

This quote illustrates how lower sexual desire coupled with recognising their own sexual preferences may allow older women to be more prudent and demanding regarding potential sexual partners.

The third theme, represented by accounts of preferring sexual celibacy when faced with the lack of desirable partners, can be interpreted as a reflection of older women's sexual agency and their transgression of traditional sexual scripts. Firstly, they use the 'asexual old age' stereotype to their benefit – it liberates them from the traditional expectation of sex as 'a wife's duty' ('I don't *have to* do it anymore; I simply *can* if I want to'). Secondly, they consider their 'lower sexual desire' as something positive – a release from the urge to pursue sexual fulfilment. This perspective may be supported by accounts of older women who admit fulfilling sexual needs can sometimes be challenging, frustrating or distressing (Hinchliff and Gott, 2008; Kasif and Band-Winterstein, 2017; Ayalon *et al.*, 2019). Finally, the fact that some older women would not unconditionally accept sex, but name a set of requirements for a potential partner and relationship, indicates development of a sense of sexual agency that many of them were lacking earlier in life (Mikołajczak and Pietrzak, 2015; Gore-Gorszewska, 2020). Their narratives resonate with what Montemurro (2014a) described as women's 'sexual subjectivity' or the process of developing sexual self-acceptance that enables making autonomous decisions about one's sexuality and acting confidently. It has been reported that older women usually exercise their sexual agency through remaining sexually active despite their advancing age (Hinchliff and Gott, 2008; DeLamater *et al.*, 2019). However, as observed in the current study, some women seem to demonstrate that an increased sexual agency may also result in the decision to abstain from sex. This increased confidence in exercising a choice about whether to be sexual echoes the concept of sexually 'liberating' ageing described by Gott and Hinchliff (2003) and Rowntree (2014).

Conclusions

Based on the assumption that sexual inactivity might be a welcomed life trajectory, this study aimed to explore and understand the motives for embracing sexual inactivity among older women. The results indicate that when not restricted by a set of options (such as lacking a partner or experiencing health problems), older women provide a variety of narratives to explain why they do not engage in sexual activity. For some, sex seems to have been given up for good, with no regrets or feeling of a loss; for others, it may be a temporary decision, its duration dependent on meeting the right partner. Sexual (in)activity seems strongly connected to their sexual past and memories of their relationships, which resonates with the conclusion of Hinchliff *et al.* (2010) that personal factors seem to be central in shaping older women's sexual experiences and expectations. In contrast to what has been reported in the literature, physiological (health-related) factors may play a less-pronounced role in older women's cessation of their sex life (Lindau *et al.*, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2016). Although this study addressed a specific topic and only

explored female accounts, it offers several potentially interesting findings and implications for consideration in further research and practice.

Firstly, the life trajectories of the interviewed women suggest that promoting sexual activity as an element of successful ageing should be applied with caution. In cases when sex has no positive connotations for an individual, cessation of their sex life may be favourable, even liberating. As shown in recent research, sex is not always a necessary element in successful ageing (Fileborn *et al.*, 2015; Syme *et al.*, 2019; Thorpe, 2019). Life trajectories filled with negative sexual experiences can occur regardless of an individual's sociocultural context and should be considered in both research on sexuality in late adulthood and in educational and therapeutic interventions aimed at older adults.

Secondly, the results of this study illustrate that a sense of sexual agency may empower older women in their decision to discontinue sex. The development of sexual agency is usually associated with enriching one's personal sex life (e.g. through increased self-awareness, greater knowledge about sex, competence or courage to negotiate with a partner) (Hinchliff *et al.*, 2010; DeLamater *et al.*, 2019). However, it appears that for some women the development of greater sexual self-awareness, decisiveness and firmness can result in a decision to withdraw from a sexual life, as has been observed in this study. It may be speculated that such an attitude would be more prevalent in women whose sexual past was dominated by sexual scripts oriented towards male pleasure and female submissiveness, and who lack positive sexual experiences. Interestingly, this framing would place older women who have made the choice to give up sexual activity in a position of transgressing sexual scripts, as opposed to those women who are still sexually active because of a marital duty or to satisfy a partner's needs. The call for including the sense of sexual agency in conceptualisations of female sexual expression (Montemurro, 2014a) seems essential, but it is important to also acknowledge the possibility that some older women may be happier not being sexual.

Thirdly, it seems that both positive and negative sexual and relational experiences in the past may result in older women gladly giving up sexual activity. This is more obvious in the case of life trajectories filled with negative and/or painful sexual connotations. Less prominent in the literature is the voice of women who embrace the end of their sex lives precisely because of their positive and fulfilling sexual and relationship experiences. The current study indicates that widows who do not wish to continue sexual activity do not necessarily follow the traditional script of 'marital loyalty' or grief-imposed abstinence. On the contrary, they share the discourse of past sexual fulfilment. The accounts presented in the current study seem to correspond with the postulated possibility of attaining sexual satisfaction while remaining sexually inactive (Syme *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, it does appear that at least some older women might be satisfied with their sexuality, consisting of memories rather than current activity. This form of experiencing one's sexuality in later life should be considered as equally valid in further research and in clinical practice.

Finally, despite the limited sample size (which is not uncommon among qualitative studies; Fileborn *et al.*, 2015; Kasif and Band-Winterstein, 2017; Watson *et al.*, 2017), the interviewees demonstrated a diversity of sex(less) expectations and reasons for opting for sexual inactivity. The study corroborates previous

findings that questioned the validity of perspectives that treat older women as a homogeneous group and/or their sexuality as a uniform phenomenon (Hinchliff and Gott, 2008; Rowntree, 2014; Fileborn *et al.*, 2015). While some participants considered the sexual chapter in their life closed, their accounts did not adhere to the narrative of societal constraints or expectations prescribed by the traditional sexual script. It was personal motivations and individual lifecourse events, rather than societal norms, that appeared to guide these women towards ceasing sexual activity.

Although the main strength of this study is that it provides novel insights on affirmative narratives on sexual inactivity among older women, several limitations should also be considered. The recruitment procedure (participant self-selection) has likely resulted in over-representation of individuals who are more comfortable with discussing sexual issues. Although some participants admitted having difficulties talking about their sex life, the voices of less-forthcoming older adults might still be underrepresented. Also, the sample was exclusively heterosexual despite the fact that sexual orientation was not part of the inclusion criteria. This is most likely the consequence of the heteronormative socio-cultural context of older Polish generations; thus, it remains unknown if the experiences of non-heterosexual older women are different. Nevertheless, the sample was diverse regarding age range, relational status and marital histories, suggesting the views presented here are not limited to a specific demographic and may be potentially transferable to other contexts. Finally, the interview context and the interviewer could have potentially influenced participants' accounts. However, the fact that women in this study openly shared their – also painful – experiences and on occasion referred to the interview as their 'confession' can be viewed as a sign of frankness. Participants also emphasised their openness in the research context ('I'm telling you how it is so you can understand'), suggesting the beneficial effect of the interviewer's respectful outsider status.

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Note

1 The interview schedule was adapted from the Healthy Sexual Aging Study, courtesy of Professor Bente Træen (see Schaller *et al.*, 2020).

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Author's Contribution

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "GGore-Gorszewska". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Gabriela Gore-Gorszewska

Kraków, 28.02.2023