

# Pathways to pleasure:

## Flexibility as a route to sexual pleasure as women age



UNIVERSITY OF  
GEORGIA

Kate Morrissey Stahl, PhD, LCSW, CST; Jerry Gale, PhD, LMFT; Denise C. Lewis, PhD; Doug Kleiber, PhD

### INTRODUCTION

The older adult segment of the population is growing (Easterbrook, 2014), with women making up more of this group. People in the United States also are healthier into older ages, and this combined with changes in social norms are making sexual expression an increasingly significant issue (Easterbrook, 2014), and yet we culturally are more likely to downplay the importance of sexual pleasure for women's wellbeing and to moralize about female sexual expression (Gott, 2005; Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013). Exploration of narratives that counter hegemonic narratives of decline are thus important (Gullette, 2011).

### RESEARCH QUESTION

What factors are associated with satisfaction with one's sexual life as one ages?

### METHODS

The researcher conducted interviews with sixteen women currently living in the state of Georgia in the United States, with one identifying as transgender bisexual. Five women were in the 55 to 64 age range, five in the 65 to 74 range, and six 75 or over. In a variation of Seidman's in-depth interview design (Seidman, 2013), two interviews were conducted to create time between interviews for the participants and the interviewer to reflect on the first interview. The age requirement was 55 and above in keeping with sexuality literature, which puts old age at 55 because of menopause.

Themes emerged from the qualitative data leading to four major dimensions supporting sexual pleasure over the lifespan.

For a more detailed writeup of the study: Morrissey Stahl, K., Gale, J., Lewis, D.L., & Kleiber, D. (2018). Pathways to pleasure: Older adult women's reflections on being sexual beings. *Journal of Women and Aging* 30(5), 1-19.

### RESULTS

The participants described having to challenge cultural rules to create a supportive environment for sexual expression. Having access to Novel contexts in which to learn, cultivating Intimacy with partners and with oneself, being Creative with sexual activities, and Extending one's sense of sexual possibility into advanced age (NICE) supported sexual pleasure as women aged.

#### Novel contexts in which to explore

Finding novel contexts meant "getting out of the bubble" of family and the culture in which one was raised to have a broader experience of sexual expression. "I was asked and my boyfriend was asked to be in a sexual, a sacred sexual group, and we did that. ... It was fabulous." Helen, 68

#### Intimacy with partners and with one's sexual self

"My daughter gave me a mother-daughter talk before I married my last husband, and she was like 'Mom, are you sure about this? I don't sense bells and whistles.' So I looked at her, I was like 'well honey, you know, no I'm not sure, but I think this is a good thing. And you know it's not bells and whistles, it's more like a deep gong.' ... It seems like, you know, passion is so intense, it's so powerful and physical and, you know, all of those wonderful things about it, but then you know, the deep gong is truly, you know, kind of a soul connection, I think, and um...that you, just, your hearts are open to one another in a really different way. The body isn't as demanding, getting in the way I guess" (laughs). Karen, 76

#### Creativity in trying different activities

"That's the whole thing with me, is explore. ... I just said 'let's just play and see how it feels' (laughs). But just being open to exploring is what's really cool." Frances, 68

#### Extending sexual possibilities and planning into older age

"I'm very happy with loving myself. You know, my partner, my husband died nearly five years ago, and um, I've had a happy sex life even so." Laura, 75

### IMPLICATIONS

In a culture in which women's pleasure is often thought of as secondary to men's pleasure (Nagoski, 2013), pursuing pleasure at times meant breaking someone's rules, which required flexibility. Sorting out how to claim pleasure was an ongoing process of learning for the women in this study. More often than expressing regret about particular sexual actions, the participants expressed a fear of being judged for exploring. For many participants, this fear or shame was managed by not sharing their stories even with friends. This fits with the literature stating that women's sexual pleasure is the subject of more moral oversight than men's (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013; Gott, 2005). Many had rarely discussed types of sexual exploration in which they had engaged.

The story of female pleasure is important for a number of reasons, but especially because it is so often a story left out about women as they age. This study offers a counter narrative to trends that pathologize female sexuality in order to treat it or commodify female sexuality in order to exploit it. Although challenges to women's pleasure exist, and those also were present in the interviews with participants, what is perhaps more striking is the power of the search for pleasure and wholeness in spite of forces that would oppose it.

Themes that emerged from the data supported the idea that sexual pleasure over the lifespan is associated with sexual flexibility, which we define as the ability to choose actions based on one's sexual values while remaining in full contact with both painful and pleasurable dimensions of experience.

### SELECTED REFERENCES

- Gott, M. (2005). *Sexuality, sexual health and ageing*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Jolly, S., Cornwall, A., & Hawkins, K. (Eds.). (2013). *Women, sexuality and the political power of pleasure*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Moustakas, C. (2001). Heuristic research: Design and methodology. In Schneider, K.J., Pierson, J.F., & Bugental, J.F. (Eds.). *The handbook of humanistic psychology: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 263-273). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Nagoski, E. (2015). *Come as you are: The surprising new science that will transform your sex life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). New York: Teachers College Press.