

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

## Successful Aging and Changes in Sexual Interest and Enjoyment Among Older European Men and Women

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Despite the popularity and analytical relevance of the concept of successful aging, little efforts have been made to address its relationship to sexuality in older individuals.

**Aim:** To explore the relationship between successful aging and the (retrospectively assessed) change in sexual interest and enjoyment in the past 10 years, using a new multidimensional model of successful aging.

**Methods:** The data for this study was collected in 2016 using national probability-based surveys in four European countries (Norway, Denmark, Belgium and Portugal). In total, information from 2,461 sexually active and inactive participants aged 60–75 years was used for analyses. Multigroup structural equation analysis was employed to address the associations between key constructs.

**Main Outcome Measure:** The dependent variable was a composite (two-item) indicator of change in sexual interest and enjoyment in the past 10 years; a multifaceted model of successful aging predicted the change by country and gender.

**Results:** Tested cross-culturally, the proposed model of successful aging demonstrated a good fit to the data. Furthermore, its metric characteristics enabled direct comparisons across gender and national cultures. Controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, higher successful aging scores were consistently related to lower reduction in sexual interest/enjoyment among men and women across the 4 countries.

**Clinical Implications:** Given an increased life-expectancy and focus on healthy aging in many countries, the findings about the associations between sexual expression, quality of life and aging well are valuable to professionals working in the area of healthy sexual aging.

**Strength & Limitations:** This is the first study to systematically address the relationship between successful aging and sexuality. Furthermore, it provides a multidimensional measure of successful aging for a wide range of sexologic studies. Among limitations, possible self-selection bias (toward more sexually permissive and sexually active participants) and the fact that the findings are restricted to older heterosexual individuals, should be considered.

**Conclusion:** Without stigmatizing the absence of sexual expression in aging individuals, the findings from this cross-cultural study point out that sustained sexual interest and sexual enjoyment are linked to successful aging in both genders. **Štulhofer A, Hinchliff S, Jurin T, Hald, GM, Træen B. Successful Aging and Changes in Sexual Interest and Enjoyment Among Older European Men and Women. J Sex Med 2018;XX:XXX–XX.**

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**Key Words:** Successful Aging; Sexual Interest; Sexual Enjoyment; Cross-Cultural Assessment; Gender

Received July 9, 2018. Accepted August 20, 2018.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsxm.2018.08.011>

### INTRODUCTION

Successful aging is a widely recognized concept in social gerontology. With roots in the US, it has gained popularity over the last 30 years and now has a significant influence on the way service providers, policy makers, and older people themselves view the process of aging.<sup>1</sup> While there is no single agreed definition of successful aging,<sup>2</sup> the concept is often described in terms of an absence of disease, the presence of good physical and mental health, participation in social events, and satisfaction with life.<sup>3</sup>

Although a successful aging perspective aims to conceptualize the totality of the (positive) aging experience, sexual aspects of aging have not been systematically linked to this concept. Despite the fact that sexual activity and satisfaction are recognized as beneficial to psychological well-being and physical health in older age,<sup>4–6</sup> the relationship between sexuality and successful aging has been addressed only recently, in only a preliminary fashion.<sup>7,8</sup>

In the context of an increasing aging population in the developed world and recognition of the sexual rights of older adults,<sup>9</sup> a systematic exploration of the potential links between sexual expression and successful aging is timely. In this study, we analyzed survey data from 4 European countries (Norway, Belgium, Denmark, and Portugal) collected from aging men and women to explore the structure of associations between a successful aging model and change in sexual interest and enjoyment.

### Successful Aging

Early conceptions of successful aging focused on personal happiness, life satisfaction, and the avoidance of disrupting or harming other people in society.<sup>10,11</sup> The concept of successful aging has shifted since its first appearance in the latter half of the twentieth century, influenced in large part by the theories of Rowe and Kahn,<sup>12</sup> who developed a successful aging model to counteract the predominant view within gerontology of older age as a time of disease and disability. In recognition that some older people are “nonpathological,” their aim was to challenge negative ageism and the taken-for-granted connection between older people and physical and mental decline. The Rowe and Kahn model includes three main components: (i) health, (ii) high cognitive and physical function, and (iii) engagement with life.<sup>12</sup> As Stephens<sup>13</sup> pointed out, this model is widely used and has had a significant influence on policy, intervention, and research. The successful aging model has helped to create positive narratives of aging that promote health and happiness in older age. However, considering that “individual and collective phobias about the very process of growing older” remain highly visible in contemporary societies, the model has been criticized for failing to completely “erase the stereotypical representations of old age.”<sup>14</sup> Although there have been numerous empirical applications of the successful aging perspective,<sup>15</sup> there is no consensus about its definition and, consequently, operationalization.<sup>1,16,17</sup>

### Sexuality and Successful Aging

In early theorizing about successful aging, Palmore<sup>18</sup> noted that the 3 strongest predictors of life satisfaction identified in the Second Duke Longitudinal Study were social activity, health, and sexual enjoyment. Interestingly, sexuality-related issues have not featured strongly in attempts to theorize successful aging since then. Indeed, only a few academic and clinical researchers have called for theories and models of successful aging to incorporate sexual activity and function.<sup>19,20</sup> Despite the recognition that sexual expression should be an integral part of healthy aging, research linking sexuality and successful aging is limited.

In a sample of 127 Israeli women aged  $\geq 45$  years (the majority of whom were in the 55–65 age group), Woloski-Wruble et al<sup>8</sup> explored the associations between life satisfaction and sexual activity and satisfaction with one’s sex life. Although their study was conceptualized using the Rowe and Kahn model, the authors did not operationalize successful aging, but used the Life Satisfaction Index as a proxy. After reporting that life satisfaction was significantly correlated with sexual satisfaction, the authors concluded that women’s satisfaction with their sex life “is an important contribution to achieving successful aging.”<sup>8</sup>

In a similar study, Thompson et al<sup>7</sup> explored the associations among self-rated successful aging, indicators of physical and psychological health, sexual function, sexual activity, and sexual satisfaction. In their community-based sample of 1,235 women aged 60–89 years, of whom 53% were married or in an intimate relationship, the authors found that their single-item measure of self-rated successful aging (a construct not defined in the questionnaire) was significantly correlated with sexual desire and sexual activity. Clearly, preliminary evidence suggests a relationship between sexuality and successful aging in older adults.<sup>5</sup>

### The Current Study

Considering the dearth of research on successful aging and sexuality, the aim of this study was twofold. First, we focused on the construction and validation of a multidimensional model of successful aging. Considering that the inclusion of a health component (often defined as the absence of disease) in the Rowe and Kahn model and other models has been criticized for failing to take into account that a substantial proportion of older individuals seem to age successfully despite not being completely healthy,<sup>21,22</sup> the model proposed in this study focused on life satisfaction instead of on health. Building on the standard 3-dimensional conceptualization,<sup>12</sup> we tested a model composed of 3 dimensions: (i) social connectedness, (ii) absence of depression, and (iii) life satisfaction. The first and third constructs indicate (positive) engagement with life, whereas the second construct is a rough proxy for psychological health. To a degree, these 3 dimensions cover the social and psychological health facets suggested by Carver and Buchanan.<sup>16</sup>

Our second aim was to systematically address the association between successful aging and sexuality. The role that sexual expression can play with regard to health and well-being in older age is becoming more visible in public health discourses. For example, the Canadian government has begun to advocate sexual activity, through public health promotion material, as an element of an aging well agenda.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it is imperative to examine how successful aging connects with changes in sexual interest (desire) and sexual enjoyment, and in what way. To answer these questions, we assessed the relationship between successful aging and the changes in sexual interest and enjoyment in the past 10 years, while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. Considering that the social regulation of sexuality is often culture-specific, even in the Western world,<sup>24</sup> in this exploratory study

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