

# The Perception of Sexuality in Older Adults and Its Relationship with Cognitive Functioning

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**Objectives:** Investigating whether cognitive functioning is associated with the perception of one's sexuality in old age. **Design:** Cross-sectional analysis, using observation cycle 2005/2006 of the population-based prospective cohort of the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam. **Setting:** Municipal registries in three Dutch regions. **Participants:** 1,908 older adults (mean [standard deviation] age: 71 [8.87] years; 54% women). **Measurements:** Sexuality and intimacy were assessed using four questions. Four cognitive domains were assessed: general cognitive functioning (Mini-Mental State Examination), memory performance (Auditory Verbal Learning Test), processing speed (Coding Task), and fluid intelligence (Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices). Multinomial regression analysis was used, with sexuality as outcome. The interaction effect between gender and sexuality was also tested. **Results:** Lower fluid intelligence was associated with perceiving sexuality as unimportant; lower general cognitive functioning was associated with perceiving sexuality as unimportant; and lower immediate memory recall was associated with evaluating sexual life as unpleasant. Associations were also found between lower fluid intelligence, processing speed, and general cognitive functioning, and agreeing with sexuality no longer being important. Lower processing speed, general cognitive functioning, and delayed memory recall were associated with disagreeing with a remaining need for intimacy when getting older. Finally, the association between fluid intelligence and perceiving sexuality as important, and the association between immediate memory recall score and evaluating sexual life as pleasant, was only significant in women. The association between lower general cognitive functioning and perceiving sexuality as unimportant seemed stronger in women compared with men. **Conclusions:** Higher cognitive functioning was associated with the way in which older people perceive their current sexuality. (Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2013; ■:■-■)

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## *Cognitive Functioning and Perception of Sexuality*

Many beliefs about sexual behavior in older populations are based on personal and stereotyped views of aging and sexuality. Older persons are generally expected to no longer be capable of or be lacking interest in sex when, in reality, many elderly persons consider sexuality to be important and wish to remain sexually active as they age.<sup>1,2</sup> Even though cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have demonstrated that sexual activity decreases with age, the epidemiologic data on sexual activity in older persons are limited and derived from studies that do not include the oldest old, rely on convenience samples, and are very small.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the limited data confirm how roughly one-third of older adults report a continuance of sexual and intimate relationships and desires throughout their lives.<sup>4–7</sup> Later studies also confirm the continuance of sexual activity at age 65 years and older.<sup>8–10</sup> Lindau et al.<sup>3</sup> found a continuance of sexual activity in a sample of 3,005 older adults. Of the respondents, 73% ranging in age from 57–64 years, 53% ranging in age from 65–74 years, and 26% ranging in age from 75–85 years reported sexual activity. Hyde et al.<sup>11</sup> studied the prevalence of sexual activity in men ranging in age from 75–95 years and found that 50% still considered sex to be important. Furthermore, 30% of the men reported still being sexually active. Even with physical changes and illness, the decline in sexual activity is often less than expected.<sup>12</sup> For example, after being diagnosed with dementia, 22.5% of the couples reported remaining sexually active.<sup>13</sup>

Sexual behavior, intimacy, and sexuality are intertwined, and with increased life expectancy, sexual health has assumed its place among the numerous factors considered essential to identity in midlife and successful aging.<sup>14</sup> The World Health Organization defines sexuality as follows: “Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.”<sup>15</sup> This broad definition applies to all age groups.

Although data have shown continued sexual activity as individuals age, little is known about the way sexuality is perceived by the elderly population or how important it is in later life. One study compared the attitudes toward sexuality and perception of sexuality in later life over a 30-year period among 70-year-olds and found increased positive attitudes to sexuality and a higher proportion reporting sexuality to be important in life.<sup>16</sup> Other studies have shown that older adults continue to express their sexuality in terms of kissing, touching, caressing, and responsiveness.<sup>17–19</sup> However, most research about sexuality and sexual feelings has focused mainly on prevalence data of sexual activity instead of sexuality (as defined earlier).

In addition to physical changes, the aging process is strongly associated with cognitive functioning, which declines when aging “normally” and in some progressively due to dementia.<sup>20</sup> To the best of our knowledge, the influence of cognitive decline on the perception of sexuality in older adults has thus far not been studied. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to investigate whether cognitive functioning is associated with the way sexuality in later life is perceived and rated in a population of elderly people. We hypothesized that individuals with higher cognitive scores would perceive sexuality at this age to be important. Cognitive performance was assessed on four cognitive domains. In addition to general cognitive functioning, we also measured memory performance, processing speed, and fluid intelligence.

Little is known about the differences in men and women with regard to their perception of sexuality in later life. Prevalence data indicate that women are significantly less likely than men at all ages to report sexual activity.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, an exploratory analysis was performed to determine possible differences given our expectation that sexuality is more important for men compared with women.

## **METHODS**

### **Sampling and Study Design**

Data from the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (LASA) were used. LASA is an ongoing

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