



# Older widows' perspectives on sexuality: A life course perspective



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Sexuality is a significant component in human experience and has an important impact on the individual's general well-being. Life course events and the social construction of sexuality lead older widows to reflect upon their sexuality.

**Purpose:** To explore and describe the ways in which older widows construct and perceive their sexuality along the life course.

**Method:** A phenomenological-qualitative approach was conducted. Data collection was performed through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 widows, between the ages of 62–91, followed by content analysis.

**Results:** Three major themes emerged: (a) Approaching sexuality: Conservative vs. progressive attitudes; (b) Multiple ways of perceiving sexuality: Constructing a sexual identity along the life course; and (c) Sexual self-perception: Integrating late life and widowhood.

**Conclusion:** Sexuality among widows in later life includes continuity and change processes. In the context of social construction, sexuality is a subject that should be examined in greater depth.

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## Introduction

Sexuality is a central component in the human life cycle, a source of physiological, psychological and psycho-social needs (Araujo, Mohr, & McKinlay, 2004; Cort, Attenborough, & Watson, 2001). Sexuality may be a positive experience, which leads to physical and emotional wellbeing, as well as a negative encounter that leads to distress (Robinson & Molzahn, 2007; Taylor, Pugh, Goodwach, & Coles, 2012). In spite of the great significance of sexuality on human life, studies on sexuality among older widows are scarce. In the social context, the subject is, at best, a muted issue; at times, it is even considered something of a curiosity (Hajjar & Kamel, 2003; Kane, 2008; Kessel, 2001). With the general increase in life expectancy and the growing rate of older widows, in particular (Israeli Population Reference Bureau, 2014), it is essential to learn more and raise awareness about sexuality in the context of older widows. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to explore and describe older widows' perspectives on sexuality along their life course.

### Sexuality and human life/sexual self-perceptions

Historically, sexuality was first related solely to the physiological aspect, (Eyler, 1997; Tiefer, 1996). Over the years, however, this definition

has been expanded to include the emotional components of love and affection, and the intimacy components of friendship, affection and human contact (Araujo et al., 2004; Cort et al., 2001).

The World Health Organization refers to *sexuality* in terms of health, and defines it as an “integration of the somatic, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of sexual being in ways that are positively enriching and that enhance personality, communication and love” (WHO, 2010). This definition is supported by studies showing the correlation between sexual experiences and health and overall wellbeing. Moreover, sexual experiences in old age have been found to decrease physical and mental distress (Meade & Sikkema, 2007; Taylor et al., 2012). Sexuality is clearly shaped by cultural, social and political contexts (Caplan, 2013; Seidman, 2003; Twigg, 2004). Accordingly, sexuality and its diverse implications largely depend on time and place. In addition, its significance may undergo various changes from an individual's early years to late life and from one culture to another.

Literature dealing with the individual's perception of her own sexuality refers mostly to her satisfaction level in relation to sexual activities that culminate in orgasm, especially intercourse. However, post-modern approaches claim that sexuality is not equivalent to intercourse. Tenderness and non-coital sexual activities should be considered as well (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Daniluk, 2003). Furthermore, the individual's subjective definition of sexuality and the role that sexuality plays in her current life is more significant in understanding her sexual experiences than any objective measures (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). Therefore, this study focuses on exploring the sexual self-perceptions of older widows along their life course (Fig. 1).

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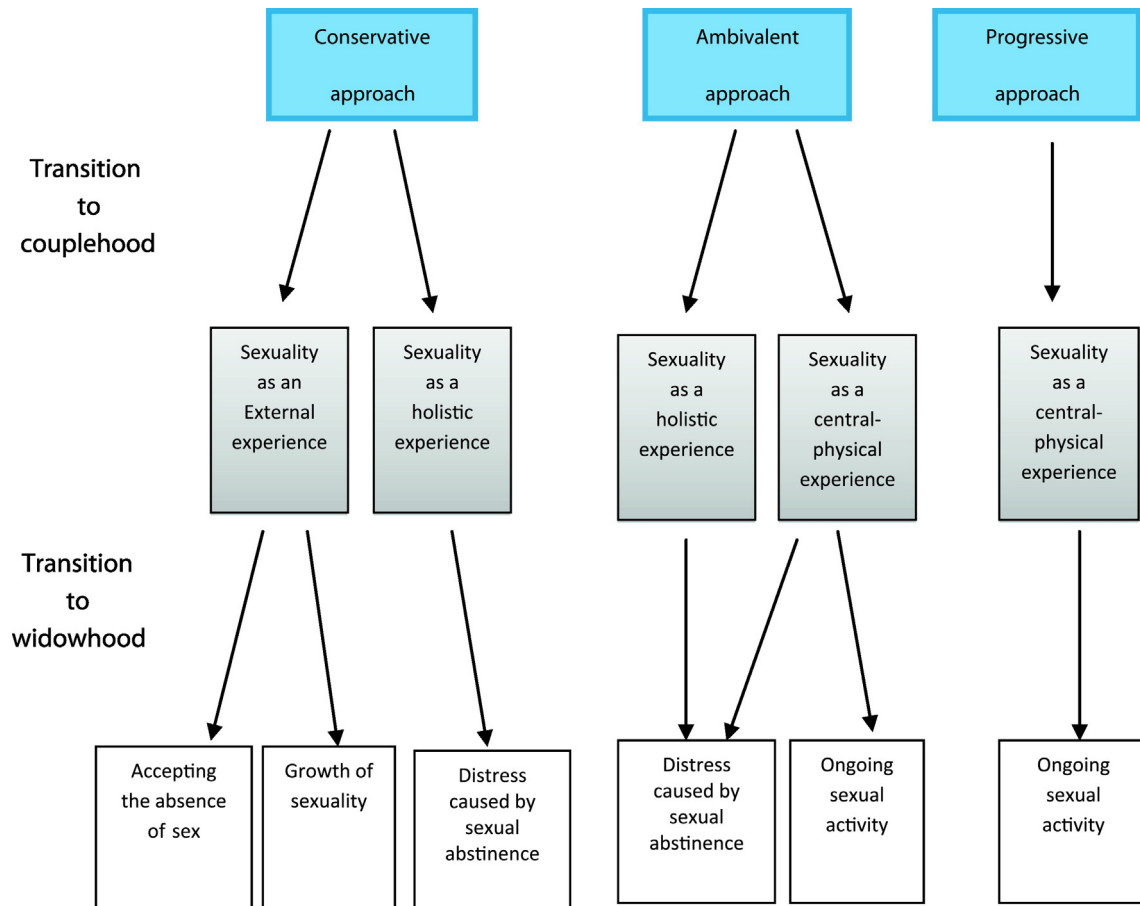


Fig. 1. Summary of sexual perceptions of older widows along the life course.

### *Sexuality and widowhood: a life course perspective*

Sexuality is part of every individual's life from birth, while one's sexual self-perceptions are shaped over the entire life course. According to the life course perspective, sexuality relates to life events trajectories that are interlocked, both within and across life stages. Thus, sexuality must be examined in accordance with historical and socio-cultural contexts (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003).

The first significant trajectory in an individual's sexual self-perception occurs during adolescence and is expressed by increased awareness (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009). The transition to couplehood provides essential components such as love and intimacy (Byers, 2005; Kupperbrusch, 2003; Sharlin, Kaslow, & Hammerschmidt, 2000). Late life often challenges sexuality, due to significant life events such as retirement and the 'empty nest' syndrome/experience. These events may lead to an increased interest in sexuality resulting from more free time and a more independent lifestyle without live-in children (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). In contrast, one's sexual expression may decrease, as a result of possible conflicts between spouses (Burgess, 2004; Carpenter, 2010). An additional challenge relates to routine aging processes, including physiological changes (e.g., decreased hormone levels) and health conditions (e.g., diabetes and heart disease). These may influence the frequency of sexual activity and sexual expression (Clarke, 2006; Karraker, DeLamater, & Schwartz, 2011; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). While the above changes have an impact on older people's self-perceptions about their own sexuality, sexual needs remain, and must be considered and satisfied to ensure individuals' ongoing wellbeing (AARP, 2010; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). In this context, gender findings show that older women attribute less importance to their sex life compared to older men and younger

women (Lindau et al., 2007; Waite, Laumann, Das, & Schumm, 2009; Walsh & Berman, 2004).

For most women, the state of widowhood is considered a turning point and a significant life event, which leads to dramatic changes. The main adjustments relate to the widows' roles, daily routine and the meaning they give to their new way of life. In the context of sexuality, widowhood among older women becomes the main reason for decreasing - and even completely ceasing - to engage in sexual activity (Hartmann, Phillipsohn, Heiser, & Ruffer-Hesse, 2004; Lindau et al., 2007; Waite et al., 2009; Walsh & Berman, 2004). A survey conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP, 2010) found that 98% of older single women reported living without sexual contact during the last six months. Two-thirds did not experience sensual kisses, embraces or caressing of any kind, and less than 0.5% reported having sexual intercourse at least once a week, compared to more than 50% of women of the same age who had a spouse. Other studies emphasize the continuation of desire and sexual needs among older widows and report an increase in masturbation (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Karraker et al., 2011).

### *Sexuality, older widows and social constructions*

Over the last decades, the social construction of sexuality has shifted from a conservative to a more progressive approach. This transition is expressed by the perception that sexuality is a respectable and legitimate issue (Branaman, 2010; Floyd & Weiss, 2001; Higgins, Zheng, Liu, & Sun, 2002). Postmodern discourse emphasizes perceptual changes occurring in four dimensions: gender, age, family and sexuality itself (Branaman, 2010). The consequences of gender perceptions are

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