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Why Do Older Adults Have Sex? Approach and Avoidance Sexual Motives Among Older Women and Men

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Although many older adults reportedly maintain an active sex life, limited research has focused on the reasons they engage in sex. The present study identified and described sexual motives in the second half of life reported by 47 older adults. Twenty-four men (51%) and 23 women (49%) aged 60–91 ($M = 66$, $SD = 8.1$) were interviewed. In-depth interviews were thematically analyzed using the theory of motivational approach-avoidance and personal-interpersonal motivational framework. Five main themes were identified: (a) to maintain overall functioning, (b) to feel young again, (c) to feel attractive and desirable, (d) from lust to love, and (e) from “getting sex” to “giving sex.” Investigating sexual motives in the second half of life can improve the understanding of older adults’ sexual behavior, function, and satisfaction.

Although the meaning given to sex by older adults varies, many older people consider sex as an important aspect of their lives (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003) and continue to engage in sexual activities even in old and very old age (Lindau et al., 2007; Lochlainn & Kenny, 2013). How older people define sex and the importance attributed to it can be impacted by the physiological changes in older ages that can alter sexual responses and inhibit or enhance sexual function (Bachmann & Leiblum, 2004; Araujo, Mohr, & McKinlay, 2004; Rosen, Wing, Schneider, & Gendrano, 2005). Sex is reportedly an integral part of older people’s physical and psychological well-being (Brody, 2010; Gott, Hinchliff, & Galena, 2004; Hinchliff, Tetley, Lee, & Nazroo, 2018) and life satisfaction (Woloski-Wruble, Oliel, Leefsa, & Hochner-Celnikier, 2010).

Several studies have found that older people report that sex becomes more pleasurable and satisfying as they age (Forbes, Eaton, & Krueger, 2017; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Vares, Potts, Gavey, & Grace, 2007). This is attributed to greater confidence to assert sexual desires and greater freedom in sexual expression (Rowntree, 2014). Some older women have described that they have only “woken up to the possibility of what’s possible” (Vares et al., 2007, p. 158) in the second half of life. The menopausal period for older

women and changes in hormones levels and erectile function among older men forces them to confront their changing sexuality, and they can decide if they would rather let their sexuality decline or expand and take on new dimensions (Potts, Grace, Vares, & Gavey, 2006). This can be an opportunity for older people to reevaluate their understanding of sex and sexuality and redefine optimal sexual experiences (Menard et al., 2015).

Studies examining older adults’ views on their own sexuality report that older adults seem to have a broad interpretation of sexuality that consists of more than just penetration (Arrington, 2003; Loe, 2004; Malta, 2007; Menard et al., 2015; Rowntree, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). Older adults describe that aging has changed the cognitive and emotional aspects of their sexuality, and that these changes are reflected in a greater sense of entitlement for pleasure, various sorts of reappraisals, decreased inhibition, and a better understanding of both the self and others (Yun, Kim, & Chung, 2014). However, although sexual interest and activity continue to play a role in people’s lives as they age (DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003) and sexuality develops and changes, the motivations for engaging in sexual activity in older age have not been studied.

Sexual motives are the reasons why people have sex. Previous research indicates that individuals engage in sex for various and complex reasons that include personal (self-focused) and interpersonal (partner-focused) motives (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998), such as pleasure, love, conformity, recognition, dominance, and submission (Nelson, 1978). Cooper et al. (1998) documented five reasons for sex found in

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a sample of young women and men (mean age of 19.1): enhancement, intimacy, coping, self-affirmation, and partner approval. Hill and Preston (1996), in contrast, documented eight reasons found in a sample of young women and men (mean age of 23.32): to feel valued by a partner, express value for a partner, obtain relief from stress, nurture one's partner, enhance feelings of personal power, experience one's partner's power, experience pleasure, and procreation. Several theoretical perspectives suggest that reasons for engaging in sexual intercourse might be even more numerous and complex. Meston and Buss (2007) identified 237 expressed reasons for having sex found in a sample of young women and men (mean age of 19). These reasons ranged from the mundane (e.g., I wanted to experience physical pleasure) to the spiritual (e.g., I wanted to get closer to God), from altruistic (e.g., I wanted the person to feel good about himself/herself) to vengeful (e.g., I wanted to get back at my partner for having cheated on me). Meston and Buss (2007) grouped all reasons into four main factors: physical reasons (e.g., pleasure), goal attainment (e.g., social status), emotional reasons (e.g., love), and insecurity (e.g., self-esteem boost).

Sexual motives are associated with sexual satisfaction (e.g., Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013; Stephenson, Ahrold, & Meston, 2011), function (e.g., Watson, Milhausen, Wood, & Maitland, 2017), sexual behaviors (e.g., Hensel, He, Harezlak, & Fortenberry, 2017), and wellbeing (e.g., Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). Studies conducted from a dyadic perspective found a person's reasons for engaging in sex with their partner have important implications for both partners' sexual satisfaction and function (e.g., Gewirtz-Meydan, 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2017; Muise et al., 2013).

The Approach-Avoidance Framework for Sexual Motives

Several theories of motivational processes suggest motives can be understood as approach and avoidance systems (Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Elliot & Covington, 2001). Whereas approach motivations direct the individual to achieve positive outcomes (objects, events, or possibilities), avoidance motivations represent the individual acting to avoid a negative outcome. The approach-avoidance distinction has been particularly helpful in understanding motivations in interpersonal and sexual relationships (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable & Impett, 2012; Impett et al., 2005). When applied to understanding why individuals engage in sex, approach sexual motives can include the wish to achieve potential positive outcomes such as intimacy or growth in a relationship, whereas avoidance sexual motives direct an individual away from potential negative outcomes, such as conflict or rejection (Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006).

Approach and avoidance sexual motives play an important role in shaping both partners' sexual satisfaction and function. Approach sexual goals (i.e., engaging in sex to pursue positive outcomes, such as enhanced intimacy) were found to buffer against declines in sexual desire over time

and predicted greater sexual desire and relationship satisfaction, as compared with individuals who engaged in sex for avoidance sexual goals, such as to avoid one's partner's disappointment (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008; Muise, Boudreau, & Rosen, 2017). Personal and interpersonal motives can also impact sexual satisfaction and function. For example, engaging in sex for personal self-affirmation resulted in lower levels of sexual satisfaction, sexual intimacy, and orgasmic responsivity for both partners (Gewirtz-Meydan, 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2017). In contrast, engaging in sex for interpersonal and approach motives such as increasing intimacy with one's partner was associated with greater sexual satisfaction and autonomy (Sanchez, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Crocker, 2011).

The Need for Assessing Sexual Motives in Old Age

Research has found that men and women differ in their reported motivation to engage in sex. Men are more likely to endorse desire for sexual release, orgasm, and pleasing their partner, whereas women are more likely to endorse desire for reasons of intimacy, emotional closeness, love, and feeling sexually desirable (Mark, Herbenick, Fortenberry, Sanders, & Reece, 2014). Although significant gender differences in reported sexual motives have been widely studied, age differences were not assessed in many of these studies. In fact, studies investigating sexual motives tend to focus on relatively young adults (e.g. Impett, Gordon, & Strachman, 2008; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Sanchez et al., 2011; Schachner & Shaver, 2004; Shaver & Vernon, 2004). Furthermore, all measures to examine sexual motives used in previous studies were constructed and validated in young, mostly undergraduate student populations aged 19 to 23 (Cooper et al., 1998; Gravel, Pelletier, & Reissing, 2016; Hill & Preston, 1996; Meston & Buss, 2007). We hypothesized that sexual motives in the second half of life may be somewhat different from those of younger people. These include adolescents, young adults (who may focus on reproduction and expanding a family), and those in middle age (the period between early adulthood and old age, in which most older men and women begin to undergo hormonal changes and experience an empty nest) (Bachmann & Leiblum, 2004; Araujo et al., 2004).

The Present Study

To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has examined sexual motives in the second half of life. The most common sexual motivation scales were developed with young populations with a mean age of 19 (Cooper et al., 1998; Gravel et al., 2016; Meston & Buss, 2007) and 23 (Hill & Preston, 1996). Browning (2004) studied three samples with mean ages of 24, 26, and 30. The motives for sex in the existing literature, as well as those represented in established scales (e.g., Cooper et al., 1998; Hill & Preston, 1996; Meston & Buss, 2007), may not be relevant to older people (e.g., reproduction, peer pressure). However,

as many older adults are sexually active (Lindau et al., 2007), and sexual motives have a profound impact on sexual satisfaction (Stephenson et al., 2011) and function (Watson et al., 2017), it is important to identify motives relevant to older adults. There is a gap in the literature regarding why older adults engage in sex and how these motives affect their sexual function, satisfaction, and overall well-being. The aims of this study were to identify and describe sexual motives in the second half of life.

In this study we examined older adults' accounts concerning: (a) sexual motives later in life, (b) changes in sexual motives across the life course of the participants, and (c) how identified themes correspond with the approach-avoidance and personal-interpersonal framework for sexual motives (Cooper et al., 1998; Gable, 2006; Impett et al., 2005).

Method

Participants

In the present study, 47 interviews were conducted with individuals that were recruited through referrals from family physicians ($n = 28$) and sexologists ($n = 19$). Inclusion criteria were men or women over the age of 60 who speak Hebrew or English. Participants' ages ranged from 60 to 91 ($M = 66$, $SD = 8.1$). The sample consisted of 24 men and 23 women of varied marital statuses (1 single, 10 divorced, 2 widowed, 34 married) and geographic locations (6 from central Israel, 13 from Jerusalem, and 28 participants from northern Israel). Although all participants were currently living in Israel, more than two-third (69%) of the sample were not born and raised in Israel (see Table 1). Overall, 44% of participants reported having sexual problems; however, less than half (34%) reported discussing this problem with a physician (see Table 1 for full details of sample characteristics).

Measures

Interviews were semi-structured, based on an interview guideline. Interview questions were developed using a few strategies: (a) an extensive review of the literature (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018), (b) observations from clinical practice (by the first author who is a certified sex therapist, and by consulting with physicians who also are certified sexologists from different specialties, such as urology and gynecology), and (c) consulting with older people (targeted sample of the study). The interview started with a broad question, such as "How do you define sexuality?" More specific questions followed such as: "How do you define sexuality in old age?" "In your opinion, what are the sexual motives (the reasons to engage in sex) in older age?" "Can you think of any other reasons older people would engage in sex?" "In what ways do you think the reasons to engage in sex are different in older age than in younger ages?" "In your opinion, why would older people avoid sex?" The questions

Table 1. Sample variables ($n = 47$)

Variable	n (%) / Mean (SD)
Age (Mean)	66.03 (8.1)
60–64	12 (25%)
65–69	14 (30%)
70–79	14 (30%)
80–89	6 (13%)
90+	1 (2%)
Gender	
Men	24 (51%)
Women	23 (49%)
Education, years	13.5 (3.0)
Marital status	
Single	1 (2%)
Divorced	10 (21%)
Widowed	2 (4%)
Married	34 (73%)
Country of origin	
Israel	15 (32%)
United States	11 (23%)
Europe	11 (23%)
Middle East and Asia	5 (11%)
Africa	4 (9%)
Perceived financial status	
Above average	11 (23%)
Average	33 (70%)
Below average	3 (7%)
Sexual problems	
Yes	21 (44%)
No	26 (56%)
Referral source	
Family physicians	28 (59%)
Sexologists	19 (41%)
Discussed sexual problem with physician	
Yes	16 (34%)
No	31 (66%)

addressed perceived differences between the sexuality of younger and older people. They also addressed help-seeking behaviors and preferred source of support if sexual concerns were reported. Other questions asked about sexual education and upbringing in participants' family of origin. When the interview was completed, participants were asked for their age, gender, years of education, marital status, financial status, and if they had any sexual problems.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers with a social science background; some had training in sex therapy. Interviewers received a brief explanation about the study and basic training in qualitative interviewing. Each interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes and took place in the interviewee's preferred location, most often at home. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The study received Helsinki approval from a hospital institutional review board, as well as ethics approval from the second author's university. The purpose of the study, as well as the sensitivity of the issues discussed, was explained to all the participants. Participants were required to provide

written consent, and they were assured that their names and other identifying characteristics were removed from the transcripts of the interviews and pseudonyms were used in place of names. Participants were also assured that they could withdraw from the process at any time without any possible consequences.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed according to the approach of Pope, Ziebland, and Mays (2000). This approach draws on an a priori set of aims, driven by the theory of approach-avoidance and personal-interpersonal motivational framework (Cooper et al., 1998; Gable, 2006; Impett et al., 2005). At the first stage, the first author (AGM) read the raw data in order to compile key ideas and codes about the sexual motivations of older adults. The second author (LA) read the interviews and coded them using open-coding without an a priori coding scheme, using constant comparison and contrasts, according to Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) analytical methodology. At this stage, all the key issues, concepts, and ideas were discussed among the authors and grouped into five main themes describing sexual motives in the second half of life. Subsequently, the five themes were labeled and rearranged into one of the four quadrants of the study’s biaxial chart (Figure 1). The two axes (approach-avoidance and personal-interpersonal) were used to define and map the motives, and to create typologies that expanded our ability to understand and interpret the findings. The process of mapping and interpretation was influenced by the approach-avoidance and personal-interpersonal theoretical frameworks, as well as the themes identified in the data.

Several actions were taken in order to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. The analysis was based on existing theory which alternated between the interviews, the codes, and the categories. Both authors categorized the themes, using different approaches for the data analysis (using a-priori vs. open codes schema). Disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. An audit trail, documenting all stages of analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000) was maintained. Direct quotes from the interviews are

provided to allow the reader to evaluate the essential elements of the findings and to discern whether she or he would have come to the same interpretive conclusions (Ponterotto, 2006).

Results

Data analysis yielded five themes: (a) to maintain overall functioning, (b) to feel young again, (c) to feel attractive and still desirable, (d) from lust to love, and (e) from “getting sex” to “giving sex.” All themes reflect a change in sexual motives over the life course. These themes were divided into personal-focused and interpersonal-focused motives and were discussed in relation to approach vs. avoidance sexual motives theory (see Figure 1). Staying functional, feeling young, and feeling attractive are three themes representing both approach and avoidance sexual motives aimed to increase personal goals and avoid negative personal outcomes related to aging. These sexual motives “fight” aging through sex.

From lust to love and “getting sex” vs. “giving sex” are two themes representing approach sexual motives aimed to increase interpersonal goals, focusing on the relationship or the partner. These motives represent the change in sexual motives due to aging and greater experience gained. Older men and women described a shift from very physical motives (e.g., physical attraction, the need for a physical release) or instrumental motives (e.g., procreation) that were more dominant when they were young to sexual motives that are focused on the relationship (e.g., love, commitment, companionship). On the interpersonal level, they described how they used to focus on their own physical pleasure, while as they age, they understand their own pleasure relies on their partner’s pleasure.

Personal-Focused Motives

Participants broadly discussed personal reasons to engage in sex and these were coded into three main themes. All

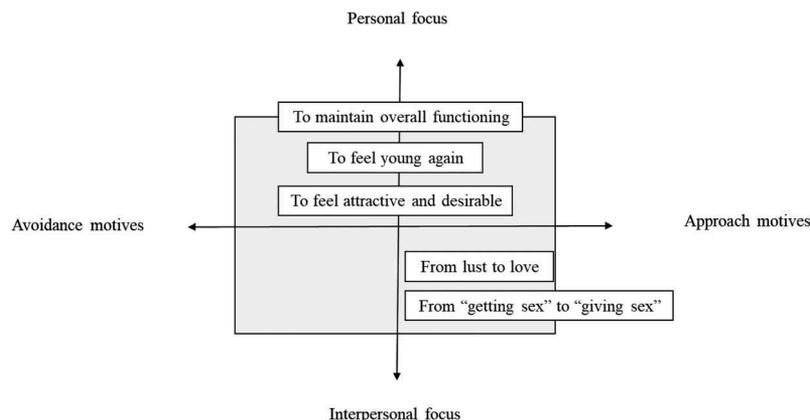


Figure 1. Personal and interpersonal approach and avoidance sexual motives themes.

personal themes were understood as twofold: participant wanting to achieve a personal goal (i.e., approach) but also avoid, or postpone, what according to many of them was “inevitable.”

To Maintain Overall Functioning. Participants viewed engaging in sex as a way of maintaining their overall physical and cognitive function and as an act that can promote their health. This theme reflects the health and bodily benefits of engaging in sex in many of the same ways exercising, keeping a diet, traveling, and other activities do. Withdrawing from sex was an indication of a decline in physical health and function: “It is like the healthcare systems tells you what to eat, exercise, quit smoking. you need to learn how to behave sexually, how to continue your sexuality. Sex is part of life, part of pleasurable aspects of life, and there is no reason to withdraw from it.” (84-year-old, married, man).

Some participants used the term “use it or lose it” to aptly describe the importance of maintaining a healthy sex life as a key part of a healthful lifestyle. Disengaging from sex was experienced by some of them as a symptom for a more general decline in function. This theme was two-fold, representing an approach goal (maintain overall functioning) but also avoiding the decline and loss of functions. A 61-year-old-man discussed this issue referring to “them,” the “older people”:

To make sure that they’re not losing it, that they haven’t reached an age where they feel that they couldn’t perform anymore. Because once that happens, I think they realize that they’re in a different stage of life. I think there’s a fear that once people get to an age that they can’t anymore, that’s a big loss in their lives. (61-year-old married man)

Older people viewed sex as another activity they wished to continue, as it was an indicator of their physical capabilities and fitness. Withdrawing from sex was perceived as a sign of a decrease in physical fitness, which was tied to losing ability in other activities such as sports and travelling, and later on, eating and walking. Participants wished to continue their physical capabilities and to avoid impairments:

The motivation is to feel that you are capable of doing sports, capable of traveling and doing many other things ... regarding young people ... it is more of a need ... But I think among older people, it makes you feel as if you are still whole. (65-year-old divorced woman)

Sex was part of a routine that was portrayed as being satisfying for participants. It was not always easy for them to maintain their sexual activity. For some, due to changes in their sexual desire, continuing sexual activity and maintaining intimacy with their partner was an effort. For one woman, sex was something she fought over, just to maintain her overall routine. Withdrawing from sexual activity was viewed by her as the beginning of a “slide” and a decrease of her functions:

We make it (sex) happen. Because things can get derailed ... I’ve got to keep on with that. It’s like I started swimming, twenty-seven years ago, three times a week, and I still go. It’s a struggle. (62-year-old married woman)

Although some participants were concerned that engaging in sex would hurt them (due to a heart condition or other health conditions), many participants viewed sexual activity as beneficial for their health.

I might have read somewhere on Google that it’s healthy, to have sex at certain times, several times ... I mean, I don’t think I would use that line “Hey look, let’s have sex because I read that, you know, if you have a headache it goes away.” (61-year-old married man)

Sexual activity was linked to health and functioning. Interviewees assumed it was important to have sex in order to maintain their overall function, keep themselves “in shape,” energetic, and vital. They compared sex with other activities, such as sports, work, and socialization. In their eyes, withdrawing from sexual activity could have brought a decline in other functions.

Just like you want to be able to walk, and you want to be able to hike, and you want to be able to climb, and you want to feel strong—sex act takes a certain amount of energy and you certainly want to be able to continue to do it ... (65-year-old widowed man)

To Feel Young Again. Feeling young again is a theme built upon participants’ responses, indicating they wanted to feel young through sex (approach motive) or avoid being old (avoidance motive). This idea was expressed by several participants:

The reason is the desire to feel young again. (83-year-old married man)

The main reason is the fear of aging, which is the final destruction ... let’s just say, the sexual desire of younger people almost does not exist in later life ... but sex will make you feel alive... (65-year-old married man)

Sex was viewed by many participants as an act of youthfulness and they distinguished themselves from young people by saying that they are not as energetic, vital, or active as when they were young. Feeling young, vital, virile, and alive again were mentioned by interviewees as main motives for engaging in sexual activity.

It makes you feel young. I mean certainly the sexual act is an act of feeling alive, virile, productive, and that you can do things that you did when you were younger. Having said that, younger people certainly have more energy and more strength. (65-year-old widowed man).

Older people wanted to feel young and alive as much as they could. Dysfunctions, disabilities, and death were discussed as

inevitable scenarios, which increased the motivation to preserve youthful activities and enjoy them when they still can. Older people engaged in sex because “life was too short” and because “you never knew how much time you had.”

When you get to my age, there is a lot more to it than just a physical need ... I want to feel young as long as I can. It makes me feel like I am young again, that I am not just another old lady (laughing). (60-year-old married woman).

When sensing a decline in physical function, the wish to stay young or avoid old age and “the next stage in life” was emphasized. The fear of old age was discussed widely. When discussed, some participants switched to talking about “other older people,” trying to distance themselves from the aging process:

In old age, sexuality declines, and the wish to stay young, and keep yourself young, grow accordingly. (75-year-old married woman).

I think as people grow older, they need to prove to themselves that they could actually do it, certainty comes into play. It's stroking their self-ego to make sure that they are not losing it, that they haven't reached the age where they feel that they can't perform anymore. (61-year-old married man)

To Feel Attractive and Desirable. Discomfort with physical appearance and masculinity were frequently mentioned in interviews. Many older people were concerned with their appearance (e.g., wrinkles, loss of hair, loose skin) and felt less confident in their appearance as they grew older. This affected their sexuality and framed two types of motivations: the desire to feel attractive (personal approach goal) and a fear of becoming undesirable (avoidance personal motive). They wondered whether they were “still in the game” and still “looking sexy.” Some women discussed how engaging in sex validated their feeling of being attractive:

Why do people do it (sex)? For the attention, to feel confident. It makes you feel desired, attractive. That I am not losing it. That I still have it. This is a very fulfilling thought. It's much more than just the physical aspect. (60-year-old married woman)

... the need for bonding, to feel attractive, loved ... it helps preserve the good feeling about ourselves in older ages ... there is a need to feel attractive, to feel like you are successful ... it is very, very important in my eyes. (70-year-old divorced woman)

Older men also tied sexual activity to their masculinity and manhood. They acknowledged physical changes that prevented them from engaging in sex at the same frequency as in the past or, as they phrased it, they were not “ready to go” all the time. However, they were still motivated to engage in sex to prove their manhood to themselves and to their partner. Sexual performance (many times including erectile function

and ejaculation) enhanced the feeling of manhood and attractiveness, as illustrated by a 91-year-old married man:

An older man needs to create these sexual thoughts in order to know what he is worth, what his value is. In order to examine himself, if he is still worthy, if his penis still moves, if he can manipulate a woman. That is all the difference between younger men and older men.

Interpersonal-Focused Motives

Participants discussed various motives to engage in sex for interpersonal reasons (e.g., desire for closeness, connection and feeling of togetherness or oneness) and these were coded and grouped into three main themes representing interpersonal-approach motives.

From Lust to Love. Participants reflected on the transformation of their sexual motives as they aged. In many interviews, they described physical attraction and desire as the most dominant sexual motives to engage in sex when they were young. A reproduction motive (e.g., “trying to conceive,” “get pregnant,” “have children”) was also mentioned by several participants as a motive for engaging in sex at younger ages. However, as they aged, they reported a shift from a strong physical desire motive to engage in sex to relational motives, focused on the couple:

Younger people tend to want to just, you know, have sex and be able to finish, and ... you know, and, and feel their power. And I think older people, it's more about the joining together of two people, that, that love each other ... (65-year-old widowed man)

Most of the older adults referred to sex as a couple's activity, aimed to enhance the emotional bond between them. Older people described how as they age, growing intimacy with their partner became increasingly important. If when they were young, they thought that sex would bring physical relief or enjoyment, in old age, they wished sex would bring emotional closeness and increased intimacy with their partner:

The excitement over sex is less from the physical aspect, and more from the emotional aspect, and how you view the relationship. When you are younger, the sexual activity itself is probably more important. When you are older, what is important is being together and the respect you have for your partner, and if you feel good in your partner's company. (72-year-old married man).

Interviewees emphasized intimacy, touch, and emotional closeness as main motives for engaging in sex. Sex was described as a venue for warmth, love, and support in the relationship.

Well, it certainly adds to closeness, and to the couple ... feeling ... together, and feeling love, and certainly love is

a part of sex when you're older. And closeness. (65-year-old divorced man)

Motives for sexual engagement in the second half of life were expressed by older people as more partner-focused compared with when they were younger. According to interviewees, when they were young, they mainly cared about their own sexual and physical pleasure. However, as they aged, they drew more joy and satisfaction by pleasing their partner or by the level of intimacy and closeness sex created between them:

Sex connects us, it makes us feel good. After we have sex, we are more connected. My partner really, really wants to cause me pleasure ... it is very important for him that I enjoy. And that is already something that was not part of my previous relationship, when I was young. My pleasure was never an issue ... (65-year-old divorced woman)

The understanding that sex is an integral and important part of the relationship was an often-mentioned motive. Although some admitted to being less interested in engaging in sexual activity, viewing sex as important made them more interested in engaging in sex. For many, sex was a way to keep the relationship going, and increase the feeling of togetherness. It was a joint activity that they shared.

By doing that (sex), there's a connection ... chemistry or love or whatever ... the fact that when you have sex, you actually get closer to your wife ... like a connection or emotional connection that makes the couple get closer. (61-year-old divorced man)

From "Getting Sex" to "Giving Sex." At younger ages, people were sexually motivated to achieve their own sexual satisfaction, rather than their partner's. They referred to themselves as "egotistical" or "selfish" and explained it by having a greater "biological drive or urge" that motivated them to engage in sex when they were young. Participants noted that when "hormones were flying around," the desire to engage in sex was natural and easy, yet when they grew older, they had to "create" and "reinvent" reasons to engage in sex. Participants described sexual motives as being more complicated and diverse in their later years compared with when they were younger.

A younger man gets an erection whether he wants it or not. There is no thought here. It's just physical ... like a man wants to eat ... but an older man needs to create these thoughts. (91-year-old married man)

Some participants, mostly men, described how when they were younger they were motivated to engage in sex for their own physical pleasure and satisfaction:

I think for me, once, when I was young, it was all about getting an orgasm as fast as I could. The only thing I wanted was to have my own orgasm. I didn't really care about my

partner or how to give her an orgasm. (68-year-old divorced man).

As they grew older, they had shifted from being driven by their own pleasure to focusing on their partner's sexual needs and pleasure. Moreover, their own pleasure was defined by seeing their partner experiencing pleasure, an orgasm, and satisfaction.

I think when I was growing up, I was just naturally more selfish, thinking about myself, not thinking about my partner as much as I should have ... Whereas I think now, I think it's almost more important for me that my partner gets enjoyment, as opposed to me. (61-year-old married man).

Although focusing on one's partner's pleasure was expressed more by older men than by women, women acknowledged this change in men's approach as well. The relational aspect of sexual motives demonstrated that older adults are motivated to engage in sex for approach partner-focused reasons, such as to please their partners and to enhance intimacy in their relationships.

Among the participants interviewed, only three women mentioned avoidance-interpersonal motives (e.g., avoid relational conflicts, avoid moodiness of partner, avoid disappointment of partner, and partner betrayal). Men in the study did not report avoidance-interpersonal motives. As these responses were infrequent, they were not formed into a broader theme.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to identify and describe sexual motives in the second half of life based on the approach and avoidance sexual motives theory and according to their personal versus interpersonal focus (see [Figure 1](#)) ([Impett et al., 2008](#); [Muise et al., 2013](#)). Five themes were identified in the interviews, which reflect the many reasons people engage in sex in the second half of life: (a) to maintain overall functioning, (b) to feel young again, (c) to feel attractive and still desirable, (d) from lust to love, and (e) from "getting sex" to "giving sex."

Some motives reported by younger people (e.g., to feel desired and sexy, to increase emotional bonds, to please one's partner; [Meston & Buss, 2007](#)) were found in this study still relevant to the second half of life as they were described as important motives by older people. However, other motives documented in the literature by young adults were either irrelevant to older people (e.g., reproduction) or unmentioned by them (e.g., peer pressure, boost social status, or brag to friends). This finding is somewhat consistent with research by [Browning \(2004\)](#), who also found that several sexual motives such as dominance, experimentation, rebellion, and peer group conformity might be important to younger people but are less reported by older people.

Several older adults noted that the physical aspect of sex was their main motive for engaging in sex when they were young. As they grew older, their sexual motives became more emotional than physical and more interpersonal than personal. While approach-interpersonal motives were discussed, only three women in the study noted avoidance-interpersonal motives. None of the men in the study discussed engaging in sex to avoid a negative outcome such as upsetting their wife/partner. Perhaps this could be explained by a greater tendency towards sexual compliance among women than men for various biological and psychological reasons, including social and cultural aspects (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Women are socialized to comply with their partners' sexual needs, based on traditional gender roles (e.g., complying with sex is their obligation as wives), fear (e.g., of their partner losing interest in them), or beliefs about male sexuality (e.g., for men, the sex urge is uncontrollable) (Impett & Peplau, 2003).

The fact that avoidance-interpersonal motives were rarely mentioned, even by women, was also interesting. This could be partially explained by older people being more authentic, genuine, uninhibited, and transparent in their romantic and sexual relationships. Perhaps personal and interpersonal experiences, exploration and development over the years and a long-term committed relationship enable older people to be truer to themselves and create or engage in relationships that are safe enough to be worthy of the vulnerability inherent in revealing oneself authentically (Kleinplatz et al., 2009). In contrast, younger people might be more occupied with their own insecurities, trying to avoid rejection, breakup, conflicts, and partner's disappointment. However, as young adults were not interviewed in the current study, these assumptions about age differences are somewhat speculative and require further investigation. More affirmatively, though, we can view how sexual motives described by older people in the present study reflect changes in sexuality over the life course.

Personal Reasons to Have Sex

Staying young, functional, and attractive are considered as self-focused motives (Cooper et al., 1998), as they aim to fulfill personal and psychological needs of the individual. These motives should be understood from the lens of the common social norms and pressures, which may have a profound impact on shaping them. In the youthful-oriented society we live in, the wish to stay young, functional, and attractive is not surprising, as "functional" is considered "normal" (Katz & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2010) and sexual activity is associated with being young and fertile (Katz & Marshall, 2003). It is possible many older adults are influenced by these societal standards and view sexual activity as a crucial element of the "successful aging" model (Katz & Marshall, 2003). Moreover, engaging in sexual activity for men means the ability to achieve and maintain an erection (Marshall & Katz, 2002), whereas successful sexual

functioning for women seems to be limited to the ability to be penetrated (Sandberg, 2008). This adds pressure to older adults not only to engage in sex but also to keep the societal standard for sexual functioning.

Societal norms also send a mixed message to older people. While there is an overall encouragement to stay sexually active, youth and beauty seem to be essential prerequisites for active sexual or romantic engagements (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2017; Wada, Hurd Clarke, & Rozanova, 2015). From either perspective, engaging in sex for these motives might result in frustration and sexual dissatisfaction. Engaging in sexual activity to gain personal psychological benefits or to fulfill needs are negatively associated with sexual function and satisfaction (Gewirtz-Meydan, 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2017; Stephenson et al., 2011). This is because increasing one's feelings of self-worth might be a difficult goal to accomplish through sex. As such, those who have sex for the reason to feel young again or desired may find themselves unable to attain these goals, resulting in frustration and decreased sexual satisfaction.

Interpersonal Reasons to Have Sex

In the current study, older adults described interpersonal sexual motives that focus on the relationship or the partner. They engaged in sex to feel close to their partner, increase the intimacy between them and their partner, and to bring their partner pleasure. Previous studies have shown that approach and interpersonal motives such as engaging in sex for love and commitment, to please one's partner, or enhance intimacy are associated with greater sexual functioning, desire and satisfaction (Impett et al., 2008; Stephenson et al., 2011).

Interviewees noted the focus they gave to interpersonal sexual motives had become more significant as they aged. Mostly men, but also some women, described sex at a younger age as serving personal needs and being motivated by egoistic and physical needs. They explained how youthful masculine sexuality revolved around personal pleasures, goal fulfillment (male orgasm), and penetration, and how their current sexual relations shifted to new "meanings" and "goals." This theme corresponds with previous studies indicating a shift from being sexually "selfish" and self-centered to being more considerate and partner-focused or "couple-focused" in the second half of life sex (Potts et al., 2006; Vares et al., 2007).

Studies report men and women differ in their reasons to engage in sex when they are young. For example, young adult women, compared to men, are more likely to endorse emotional reasons for sex and are less likely to report physical pleasure as a reason for engaging in sex (Browning, Hatfield, Kessler, & Levine, 2000; Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985; Cooper et al., 1998; Meston & Buss, 2007; Nelson, 1978). Sprague and Quadagno (1989) suggested gender differences in sexual motives can disappear or decrease as

people age. Similar to previous studies, they found that love as a reason for engaging in sexual intercourse was endorsed more by young women than young men; however, by the ages of 35–40 things began to change, and by 46–57 years, men were endorsing love as a sexual motive more than women did. Similarly, while physical release as a sexual motive was endorsed more by young men than women, at the oldest age group, that difference disappeared. It is possible that when people age they might be more strongly affected by the interpersonal context and less by myths such as men have a greater sex drive than women, which is “uncontrollable” (Impett & Peplau, 2003).

The societal sexual norms and gender roles during older adults’ upbringing should also be considered. From a young age, women experience the double standard which portrays men’s sexual activity in a positive way (Kreager & Gauthier, 2017; Trinh, 2016) and as socially approved and desired (Jonason & Fisher, 2009). Women, however, are expected to be sexual only after marriage and other forms of sexual activities such as multiple sex partners or even sex before marriage are discouraged (Crawford & Popp, 2003). When these women become older they face a double challenge of ageism and sexism (Chepngeno-Langat & Hosegood, 2012; Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2017). They may want to stop complying to social norms and the traditional gender roles, but social expectation not to be sexually active outside a marriage and only engage in instrumental types of sex (e.g., as a marital duty, procreation), less desirable or enjoyable, may be rooted within them.

The majority of participants experienced the sexual revolution during the 1960s. Yet, they were at different periods of their life such as adulthood, adolescence, or even infancy, which can potentially create cohort differences between participants. For example, people aged 60–70 were nearly born into the revolution, while people in their 80s were raised prior to the sexual revolution. Although they transitioned from a conservative society, which gave no room for open discussion of sexuality, to a society which talks openly about sexuality, many older adults still view sexual-related issues as a taboo and a secret (Ayalon, Levkovich, Gewirtz-Meydan, & Karkabi, 2018). Gender roles have also shifted over the years, but nowadays older women are still pressured more than men to look young (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2017). It is possible that sexual norms, gender roles, and gender inequalities between men and women have shaped the sexual motives reported by participants in the current study.

Contemporary sexual norms are also challenging for older people. The emphasis given to penetrative sex (which requires some physical function) and the narrowed definition given to attractiveness and beauty (e.g., youthful, skinny) can make older people feel that their sexuality is not legitimate or relevant (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018). Ageist perceptions include many myths and misconceptions that deny older people’s unique sense of sexual well-being and the right to express it (Bauer, McAuliffe, & Nay, 2007; Kirkman, Dickson-Swift, & Fox, 2015). If internalized by older adults, these myths can inhibit their sexual expression and act as a barrier for seeking sexual health-related help. In

light of that, some of the motives found in the study (e.g., to maintain overall functioning, to feel young again) and quotes (e.g., “I think as people grow older, they need to prove to themselves that they could actually do it, to make sure that they are not losing it”) may even be viewed as participants’ wish to avoid aging and ageism and the desire to fit into Western societal norms of youthfulness and attractiveness (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2017; Heywood et al., 2017).

Understanding approach and avoidance sexual motives of older adults has the potential to improve the sexual functioning of older adults. The present findings indicate that sexual motives are complex and encompass varied reasons, including biological (maintaining overall functioning), psychological (feeling desirable), and social aspects (interpersonal reasons). Finally, the investigation of older adults’ sexuality can assist in improving the content and quality of sexual education programs for the younger generations based on issues that were found important by older adults. For example, if sex education programs focused on interpersonal aspects, younger people would not have to wait until later life to find out that their partner’s pleasure can be important.

It would be valuable to develop and validate a measure to examine sexual motives in the second half of life. This would enable us to quantitatively evaluate how these motives correlate with levels of sexual activity, sexual dysfunction and satisfaction, relationship quality, and wellbeing. The present study is a first step in that direction. The differences in motivations to engage in sexual activity between older men and women, gay/lesbian/bisexual and heterosexual older adults, and cultural differences have not yet been examined. Additional research is needed to examine differences among the sexual motives of adults at different ages and sexual motives in the second half of life. This investigation would enable practitioners to better address relational and personal sexual difficulties experienced by older adults.

Study Strengths and Limitations

The primary strength of this study was the reliance on a large and diverse number of interviewees to obtain an understanding of the reasons older people engage in sex. To our knowledge, no prior study examined sexual motives in this particular age group. Despite its strengths, the study had several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, self-report motive measures tap only conscious or self-attributed motives. As human motivations may be complex, partially unconscious, and involve physiological, psychological, and social aspects, reflecting on sexual motives is not simple. It is likely that we captured only a partial picture of the sexual motives of older adults. Second, a possible bias might have occurred when recruiting the sample. When sensitive topics are investigated, there is a potential selection bias toward individuals who feel more comfortable discussing these issues than others do. Hence, it is important to

consider this when analyzing the data. Third, the sample included people aged 60 to 91 years old and although this is a large age range with likely varied lifestyles and needs, for this examination, we have treated the sample as one (“older adults”). Fourth, we did not provide a definition of “sex” to our participants. In fact, similar to the findings of Syme, Cohn, Stoffregen, Kaempfe, and Schippers (2018), participants in the current study referred to “sex” in various ways, a factor that may influence the reports of sexual motives. Finally, we did not ask participants about their sexual orientation or same-sex sexual experiences. Hence, our findings are limited in that regard.

Conclusions

Older adults are sexually motivated by various reasons that might differ from those noted for younger adults in past research. The sexual motives reported in the present study are complex and multifaceted, and include both personal and interpersonal reasons, and biological, psychological, and social aspects. Hopefully, increased knowledge of sexual motives among older adults will improve our understanding of older adults’ sexual behavior, function, and satisfaction, and help develop more adequate interventions in response to sexual problems and needs presented by older adults.

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