Background

Stereotypes about old age and sexuality persist despite new generations of older adults (OA) becoming increasingly more liberal than previous generations in their attitudes towards sex and sexual behaviour (Syme, 2014). Complementary with the reproduction model of sexuality, in youth-oriented Western culture sexuality and eroticism are perceived as the domain of young and beautiful, while aging sexuality and eroticism are perceived as the sexuality and sexual behaviour of older adults in Croatia. Focus of interest is on both the stereotypes older adults encounter and those they have internalised. Using thematic analysis and MAXQDA, relations between stereotypes, perceptions of sexuality and sexual behaviour in old age are explored.

Study aims

This qualitative study explores stereotypic views of sexuality and aging and the sexual behaviour of older adults in Croatia. Focus of interest is on both the stereotypes older adults encounter and those they have internalised. Using thematic analysis and MAXQDA, relations between stereotypes, perceptions of sexuality and sexual behaviour in old age are explored.

Method

Data collection: in-depth, semi-structured interviews
Recruitment: retirement homes, gerontology centres, Red Cross Zagreb, lectures, flyers and posters
Sample: 33 participants, aged 64 and above, 20 women and 13 men
Subsample: 10 interviews (6 women, 4 men) in which topic of stereotypes of aging and sexuality was found
Analysis: thematic analysis

Asexual stereotype and sexual behaviour

"...No, my God, no way... I cannot imagine older [people] having intercourse, how can they use their old, flabby bodies, really..." (Female, 82)

The asexual stereotype was found among older adults in Croatia, both as something they face and as internalised view on the sexuality. Reactions on the stereotype take two main forms: acceptance of sexual decline as a natural course of life (mostly among men), and rejection of the stereotype, more typical for female participants, and often fuelled by anger, perhaps because of the burden of the stereotype.

Reactions to stereotypes

Old is ugly

Rejection of stereotypes

Sexual behaviour/activity in old age

Satisfaction with sexual activity

Active sexual life

I watch porn

Sex in dreams

Desire for intimacy (non-penetrative sex)

Wishing sex more often

Old shouldn't be ugly

He says I'm old. I go a bit crazy

Double standard of aging

You are too old for sex

It's a natural course of things

I don't mind my age and wrinkles

Accepting the asexual stereotype

Asexual stereotype

Loss of desire

Sex annoys me, let me be

No sex without love

Shame of naked body as a barrier for sex

No sexual activity

Masturbation - rarely

No masturbation

Active sexual life

Bad experiences

Reluctant sexual activity

No sexual desire...

Decline in sexual activity

Active sexual life

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Sexual behaviour and perception of sexuality in old age both take diverse forms, sometimes contradictory within individual narratives. It was not possible to determine if stereotypes affect sexual behaviour. Part of the reason is that from the stories of the participants is not clear where the line between stereotypes and factual observation of physical decline is. More research into the nature of attitudes toward sexuality in old age is needed.

"The other side, man is watching, if he hears [my] years over the phone, then I am old for him. And he is 75! But when he hears 69, he sees a barrel! ... One guy asked me: "Pretty please, how do you look? I don't want a barrel by my side." (Female, 69)

"I know many men can't accept it, I just think it is the natural course of life, someone dies and someone loses [desire]" (Male, 67)