

REVIEW

## Sex and Diversity in Later Life: Critical Perspectives

Trish Hafford-Letchfield, Paul Simpson and Paul Reynolds (eds),  
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This comprehensive text is the first of a five-book Sex and Intimacy in Later Life series, published by Policy Press. The series aims ‘to explore, interrogate and enlighten the sensual, sexual and intimate lives of older people’ (p. XIV), whilst recognising older people as sexual citizens and highlighting the need for culturally diverse, multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches to later-life sexuality research.

The overarching aim of *Sex and Diversity in Later Life: Critical Perspectives* is to ‘put back sex into sexuality’ (p. 217) by challenging the stereotypes of non-sexual older adulthood by offering a vibrant and critical overview of how later-life sexuality intersects with gender, ethnicity and class. The editors argue that to understand the complexity and heterogeneity of sexuality and intimacy in later life, the intersections influencing people’s sexual pleasure and desire within their particular environments and cultures must be examined critically in order to dismiss stereotypes and prejudice.

The book comprises 11 chapters, a Foreword and Final Reflections. The first chapter, ‘Sex and Intimacy in Later Life: A Survey of the Terrain’, written by the book’s editors, presents the theoretical perspectives of the book, establishing a guide for the chapters to follow. The second chapter, ‘Sexual Expression and Pleasure Among Black Minority Ethnic Older Women’, written by Debra Harley, focuses on how ethnic background influences the expression of sexuality and prejudice encountered. The third chapter, ‘Sexual Desires and Intimacy Needs in Older Persons and Towards the End of Life’, written by Karen Rennie, offers a powerful account of how sexuality and intimacy concepts and their embodied experience are still relevant for older people in very late life.

The fourth and fifth chapters delve into the experiences of heterosexual men and women. The fourth chapter, ‘Heterosexual Sex, Love and Intimacy in Later Life: What Have Older Women Got to Say?’ written by Trish Hafford-Letchfield, explores the sexual expressions of older women and how their heterosexual identities influence their sexuality throughout the lifecourse. The subsequent chapter,

'Sex and Ageing in Older Heterosexual Men', by David Lee and Josephine Tetley, examines the data presented in Wave 6 of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, focusing on older heterosexual men and their concerns and struggles, particularly regarding sexual problems and sexual health, and how this influences their understanding of masculinity.

The sixth chapter, 'Sex and Older Gay Men' by Peter Robinson, explores how the ageing process influences sexual opportunities for gay men in the youth-orientated gay world. In Chapter 7, 'Thinking the Unthinkable: Older Lesbians, Sex and Violence', Megan Todd explores the topic of couples violence and the invisibility and prejudice existing in lesbian couples and society due to cultural gender stereotypes. The eighth chapter, 'Splitting Hairs: Michel Foucault's "Heteropia" and Bisexuality in Later Life', written by Christopher Wells, explores the constraints of older bisexual individuals regarding the mandates of mono-normativity.

In Chapter 9, 'The Age of Rediscovery: What is it Like to Gender Transition When You Are 50 Plus?', Laura Scarrone Bonhomme reflects on the challenges of transitioning considering the individual's different roles and explores the factors that influence the experience of transitioning from a biopsychosocial perspective. The tenth chapter, 'Ageing Asexually: Exploring Desexualisation and Ageing Asexual Intimacies', written by Ela Przybylo, contrasts the concepts of asexuality and desexualisation and explores how older people are desexualised and its impact on their lives. Lastly, in the eleventh chapter, 'Older People, Sex and Social Class: Unusual Bedfellows?', Paul Simpson critically discusses social class as a frequently overlooked intersection and how this factor influences the experience and expression of sexuality in later life. In the Final Reflections, the editors reflect on the themes presented throughout this book and offer suggestions for policy and research.

Although the editors make an important effort to provide transnational evidence (e.g. from Europe, North America and Australia), work carried out in the global South is absent from this book. Considering that the expression and experience of sexuality are deeply influenced by social, cultural and political aspects, it would be interesting to see how the intersections explored in this book are experienced outside the global North and whether there are other factors that influence sexuality in different global locations. As Dworkin *et al.* (2016) suggested as a conclusion of their review of the academic work published in the *Journal of Sex Research*, more needs to be done by the academic community to increase the outreach of global South research and to expand the awareness in audiences of particularities of this location to enrich understanding of the phenomenon of sexuality.

Notwithstanding the latter, the diversity of experiences presented throughout the book allows the reader a broader insight into the challenges of later-life sexuality. The book is an excellent effort to provide an overview of ageing and sexuality research with a sex-positive, multi-disciplinary and intersectional approach. Therefore, students and researchers from several backgrounds can benefit from the insights and evidence presented throughout the chapters. *Sex and Intimacy in Later Life* can be a starting point for any student who wants to challenge the prejudice of ageing sexuality and have a broader understanding of its several intersections. Additionally, the book presents emerging issues in ageing sexuality research. It can provide a foundation for further research and constitute an

opportunity for more-experienced readers, such as practitioners and educators, to reflect on these topics and review the challenges for practice from these new approaches.

## Reference

Dworkin SL, Lerum K and Zakaras JM (2016) Sexuality in the Global South: 50 years of published research in the *Journal of Sex Research* – Inclusions, Omissions, and Future Possibilities. *Journal of Sex Research* 53 (9), 1059–1064.

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