

## The couple relationship - support functions and sexuality in Old Age

*O relacionamento do casal - funções de apoio e sexualidade na velhice*

Claudia Josefina Arias  
Luciana Polizzi

**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this paper is to analyze: 1) couple relationships – support functions and characteristics of the relationships – and their difference by gender, and 2) changes that occur in those relationships and in sexual activity in older heterosexual adults in the 65-85 age range. The subjects of the analysis were intentionally selected and the data has been collected in structured and semi-structured interviews. The results obtained by quantitative and qualitative analysis show that the couple relationship in old age fulfills functions such as emotional support, companionship and cognitive advice. Analysis by gender shows significant differences in 4 out of the 5 support functions that were explored. Among the changes that take place in old age, the decrease of frequency in sexual activity appears in the first place, though the level of satisfaction is maintained; and fellowship, mutual care and positive affect in relation to the partner increase.

**Keywords:** Couple Relationship; Sexuality; Elderly.

**RESUMO:** *O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar: 1) as relações de casal - funções de apoio e as características das relações - e sua diferença por sexo; e 2) as mudanças que ocorrem nesses relacionamentos e em atividade sexual em adultos heterossexuais mais velhos na faixa etária de 65-85 anos. Os sujeitos da análise foram intencionalmente selecionados e os dados foram coletados em entrevistas estruturadas e semi-estruturadas. Os resultados obtidos pelo programa quantitativo e qualitativo de análise evidenciam que o relacionamento do casal na velhice cumpre funções como apoio emocional, companheirismo e aconselhamento cognitivo.*

*A análise por gênero mostra diferenças significativas em 4 das 5 funções de apoio que foram exploradas. Entre as mudanças que ocorrem na velhice, a diminuição da frequência da*

*atividade sexual aparece em primeiro lugar, embora o nível de satisfação seja mantido, assim como o companheirismo, o cuidado mútuo e o afeto positivo em relação ao parceiro.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Relacionamento do casal; Sexualidade; Idoso.*

## **Introduction**

Couple relationship has been identified as one of the main bonds in the social support network of the elderly and among those that provide the highest levels of satisfaction. Such relationships, which are part of this network, provide various forms of aid and impact significantly on the overall wellbeing. (Arias, 2004; Bishop, Martin & Poon, 2006; Chou & Chi, 2001; Peirce, Frone, Russell, Cooper & Mudar, 2000; Phillips, Sui, Yeh & Cheng, 2008; Prince-Paul, 2008; Vanderhorst & Mc Laren, 2005; Warren, Stein & Grella, 2007; Yoon & Lee, 2007). Also, they are of critical importance as they give "meaning to the life of its members," they provide "everyday feedback on health deviations" and foster a series of "personal activities which are positively associated with the lifespan of the elderly," (Sluzki, 1996, p. 81) and that are oriented to healthcare.

Among the roles that support relationships play are "social company," (either by performing tasks together or by just being next to each other), "emotional support," (which means more intimacy, enabling emotional closeness, affection and understanding), "cognitive guidance and advice" (giving information, role models), "social regulation" (in order to correct any deviations from standards) and "material support from services and access to new contacts" (Sluzki, 1996). Besides, they have attributes in relation to its "prevailing functions" that meet its "multi-dimensionality" (number of functions it performs), "reciprocity," "intimacy," "frequency of contact" and "history" (p. 59).

Among those bonds, the couple relationship specifically has been widely explored, and research has focused on identifying the aspects that influence the choice of a partner (Valdez, Gonzalez, Arce & López, 2007); on communication between the members in the couple (Díaz Loving & Sánchez Aragón, 2000; Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier & Bégin, 2003; Nina Estella, 1991; Sánchez Aragón, 2002; Sanders, Halfor & Behrens, 1999; Soller, 1982); on how to handle and solve conflicts (Alberts, 1990; Bolger & Zukerman, 1995; Creasey, 2002; López, Gover, Leskela, Sauer, Schirmer & Wyssmann, 1997; Noller, 2000; Rivera Aragón, Díaz Loving & Sánchez Aragón, 2002; Sayers & Baucom, 1991); and the levels of satisfaction the

relationship provides (Chávez, 1994; Dunn, Croft & Hackett, 2000; Jonson & Bradbuty, 1999; Lomas, 1983; Muñoz, 1978; Ojeda García, Díaz Loving & Rivera Aragón, 1997; Rhyne, 1981; White, 1983); also the factors that promote happiness in long term marriages (Bachand & Caron, 2001). Furthermore, research on relationships from a gender perspective has identified differences in the male and female experience. In this regard, the findings have shown that women show less emotional closeness and passion towards their partners than men. In marital satisfaction, the differences were also significant and in the same direction (Villar, Villamizar & López Chivrrall, 2005).

More recently, there has been increased interest in understanding the changes that have been taking place, especially lately, in the process of formation and dissolution of relationships. A study in Mexico showed that these processes have deviated from standard; the earlier norm that led to a durable marriage is showing greater variability with regard to marital situations and development (Solis & Puga, 2009). Research that explores couple relationships and gay marriage, both gays and lesbians, has also greatly increased (Blando, 2001; Buffie, 2011; Deevey, 1990; Fingerhut & Maicel, 2010; Oswald & Kuvalanka 2008; Quam & Whitford, 1992; Wienke & Hill, 2009).

While research on couple relationship has focused more on samples of young adults and middle-aged subjects, some studies have aimed to compare them with those formed by older adults, thereby producing findings that provide insight into the importance and characteristics of this relationship in old age. Villar and others (2005) believe that the satisfaction of the couple has a curvilinear "U" pattern. This would indicate that this relationship has priority for both members at its beginning, when they first meet; it decreases in middle-age and then again it becomes important in old age. Thus, older people who have this type of relationship, have instrumental and emotional support (Arias, 2004), show high levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Albornoz, Gonzales & Pallavicini, 2009) and identify this bond as being central in their lives and the one that gives greater satisfaction (Arias, 2004, 2005, Arias & Polizzi, 2011).

Several studies about marriage have shown positive association with physical and mental health, as well as economic well being (Sweeney & Replogle, 2002) Villar, Villamizar and Chivrrall Lopez (2005) examined the structure of the experience of love in long-term relationships (46.6 years on average) in a sample of 144 participants aged 65 and older.

From this study, it was concluded that the structure of the love experience in older people with long-term relationships is similar, but not identical, to that one found in young or recent

relationships. High levels of commitment, sense of responsibility and assistance to the partner, along with minor passion, appear to be the most characteristic aspects of these relationships.

Compared to earlier stages of life, older people expressed more affection towards their partners, less negative response to conflict in their relationships (Carstensen, Gottman & Levenson, 1995) and had less tendency to conflict and more tendency to pleasure in several areas, providing evidence of a positive view of marriage in old age (Levenson, Carstensen & Gottman, 1993).

According to Iacub (2006) young love is more likely to be linked to speed, arrogance and pretense, while in the elderly it is less narcissistic; there is a greater acceptance of the other and less omnipotence since it is more associated with need, loneliness, difficulty and less idealized expectations.

With respect to sexuality, while this is a very important aspect in the couple relationship at any stage of life, its exploration and approach in the elderly has traditionally been relegated and its study has just been developed in recent decades.

Among other issues, research has been directed to investigate the frequency and satisfaction of sexual activity in the elderly, its impact on well-being, negative stereotypes as to its continuity in old age, limitations in practice and causes thereof, gender differences and eroticism.

While many studies have shown that the prevalence of sexual activity decreased with the increasing of age (Lindau, Schumm, Laumann, Levinson; O'Muircheartaigh & Waite, 2007; Papaharitoua, Nakopouloua, Kiranaa, Giaglis, Moraitoub & Hatzichrist, 2008) many older adults have an active sexuality. In this regard, Ginsberg, Pomerantz and Kramer-Feeley (2005) conducted a study with 179 adults over 60 year old and found that most had had sex in the previous year. In a study conducted in Greece (Papaharitoua, Nakopouloua, Kiranaa, Giaglis, Moraitoub & Hatzichrist, 2008), the factors associated with sexual behaviors and sexual interests were explored in 454 married couples in the 60 to 90 age range, and it was found that most of them declared to have sex desire and that the average frequency of intercourse was 4 times per month.

Smith, Mulhall, Deveci, Monaghan and Reid (2007) assessed sexual activity in 50 people of both sexes with an average age of 81. The results showed that 18% of women and 41% of men were sexually active providing evidence which confirms previous findings about increased sexual activity in older men compared with women in the same age group (Janus & Janus, 1993). However, this could not be attributed to age because women report significantly less sexual

activity than men in different stages of their lives (Lindau, Schumm, Laumann, Levinson, Colm, O'Muirheartaigh & Waite, 2007).

While sexuality is seen as an important aspect of the close emotional relationship in old age (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003) and its relation to health, stress levels and quality of life in this stage of life has been proven (Wang, Chen & Yu, 2008), issues have been identified that hinder its practice. Among them, the ones that stand out are: not having a partner, age, lack of interest (Ginsberg, Pomerantz & Kramer-Feeley, 2005) and health problems in the older person or his/her partner (Busse & Maddox, 1985; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003).

Lindau *et al.* (2007) found that, among those who were sexually active, about half of them, in the case of men as in women, admitted having some sexual problems. While in the older men group, erectile dysfunction was the most frequent, in women low sexual desire, vaginal lubrication problems and no orgasm were common. Smith, Mulhall, Deveci, Monaghan and Reid (2007) found similar results by showing that the "no desire" and erectile dysfunction were the main reasons for sexual inactivity in females and males, respectively.

However, despite having identified some issues, such as those mentioned above, which may limit sexual activity in old age, from a perspective that aims to highlight the possibilities rather than the deficits, Iacub (2006) focused on the analysis of eroticism which besides including desire and love, implies an infinite variety of possible ways to achieve pleasure. This consideration of sexuality in the widest sense has no barriers or limitations to its practice and demystifies the possibility of preventing old people from practicing it. Thus, in cases in which health problems limit or prevent certain sexual practices, such as penetration, maintenance of physical intimacy through cuddling and touching are essential for well being (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003).

According to López Sánchez (2005) older adults have the same interpersonal needs than young adults and middle-aged adults, although the way to satisfy them may be different. These needs include: feeling loved, appreciated and valued; having a network of relationships that provide support and sexuality understood as the need for mutual fondling, kissing and being kissed, hugging, exploring and being explored, arousing each other, enjoying sexual pleasure and fundamentally intimacy, both physical and emotional.

In order to go deeper into the functionality of the couple relationship in old age and the changes that occur at that stage of life, this study seeks to analyze that relationship – including support functions and the characteristics of the bond – and gender variations. And, 2) to explore

the changes that occur in the relationship and in sexual activity in heterosexual older adults aged 65 to 85 years.

## **Methods**

A non-experimental design, transversal and descriptive / co-relational was implemented. Inter-methodological triangulation was applied, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques in two stages of field work and data analysis.

### ***Participants***

The target population was within the 65-85 age range; the subjects had a partner - be it a live-in partner or not - and were living in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Field work was conducted in two stages. In both stages samples were selected intentionally after taking their informed consent. In the first stage, the sample consisted of 85 cases - 44 males and 41 females, with an average age of 72,41 and the standard deviation of 6,40.

As for the group that was living with someone, most people were living with their partner (n = 70), 8 were living alone, 6 with the partner and family, and one living only with family.

In the second stage, 30 seniors with an average age of 72, 86 and the standard deviation of 6.04 were selected. Regarding the history of the bond in 23 cases (12 males and 11 females) it was formed by relationships dating a minimum of 25 years; only 7 (3 men and 4 women) had relationships that were not over 8 years.

The subjects in both samples were invited to participate on a voluntary and confidential basis and they were recruited through university programs for older adults, senior centers, private homes and public spaces.

### ***Materials***

In the first stage of data collection a Structured Interview of Social Support Resources was administered (Vaux & Harrison, 1985). While this interview was originally developed to explore

the number of links in the network of social support (family, partner, friends, colleagues, neighbors, etc..) and the characteristics of each of them, for this work it was exclusively administered to investigate whether the couple relationship was included in the net and if so, to explore the functions of support offered -emotional support, social companionship, practical help, financial help and advice and guidance- and its cognitive attributes: multidimensionality, level of intimacy, frequency of contact and reciprocity.

Based on their responses, the couple was rated as multidimensional if it met two or more support functions and non-multidimensional if it only met one of these functions. In the case of the level of intimacy, the person was asked to evaluate his relationship with his/her partner as: extremely close, very close, fairly close or not close at all.

For the level of contact frequency it was explored whether contact with a partner (face to face, by telephone, letter or e-mail) happened every or almost every day, two or three times a week, once a week; every two weeks, once a month or less. Regarding the level of reciprocity participants were asked whether they felt that they equally gave and received from their partner, if one gave more than what he/she received, or if he/she received more than what he/she gave.

In the second stage a semi-structured interview was administered that explored the changes, both positive and negative, that occurred in the couple and their sexual activity in old age.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data collected in the first stage were analyzed quantitatively by applying statistical techniques, while the ones surveyed in the second stage were analyzed qualitatively.

## Results

### *Support functions that the couple encounters in old age*

From a total of 85 seniors interviewed in the first stage of the research, almost all (n = 83) included their partners within the social support network. Only two men did not mention this type of relationship.

Focusing particularly on the support functions the couple relationship provides, it was observed that the main functions referred to were emotional aspect, social companionship, advice and / or cognitive guide.

However, practical and economic aid is also provided by the couple even though these are mentioned less frequently (See Table 1).

For males, the support functions of emotional and social companionship were predominantly mentioned, followed in descending order by advice and /or cognitive guide.

Practical and economic aid was included in very few cases.

In females, emotional support was also commonly mentioned. In addition, they included practical help, advice and social company and / or cognitive guide.

Financial aid, though included less frequently than the supports above-mentioned, occurred in approximately one in four women.

The  $\chi^2$  test identified the existence of statistically significant differences between men and women in relation to the type of support they felt their partners provide to them.

While men considered more often than women that this kind of relationship gave them emotional support and companionship, the latter expressed that they received more practical and economic assistance from their partners than men did.

Only in the advice and cognitive guide function people of both genders felt that their partners provided assistance in similar proportions (See Table 1).



**Table 1:** Functions of support that couple relationship provided the elderly interviewed. Mar del Plata 2011

<b>Support function that the relationship provides</b>											
<b>Gender</b>	Emotional Support		Companionship		Practical Help		Financial Aid		Advice-guide		
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	
<b>Men</b>	N°	37	5	29	13	3	39	1	41	17	25
<b>n: 42</b>	%	88,1	11,9	69,0	31,0	7,1	92,9	2,4	97,6	40,5	59,0
<b>Women</b>	N°	26	15	19	22	22	19	11	30	17	24
<b>n: 41</b>	%	63,4	36,6	46,3	53,7	53,7	46,3	26,8	73,2	41,5	58,5
		x <sup>2</sup> : 6,91**		x <sup>2</sup> : 4,39*		x <sup>2</sup> : 21,32**		x <sup>2</sup> : 10,03**		x <sup>2</sup> : 0,08	

\*p < 0,05; \*\*p < 0,01

Regarding the number of support functions that the couple relationship provided the interviewees, it was evident that it fulfilled two or more functions providing a multidimensional bond. The gender comparison, although it did not show statistically significant differences, demonstrated that cases in which a relationship offered at least two support functions, appeared more frequently in men than in women (See Table 2).

**Table 2:** Multidimensionality of couple relationship by gender of the older people interviewed. Mar del Plata, 2011

<b>Multidimensionality in couple relationships according to gender</b>						
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>N°</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N°</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N°</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Men</b>	35	83,3	7	16,7	42	100,0
<b>Women</b>	29	70,7	12	29,3	41	100,0
<b>Total</b>	64	77,1	19	22,9	83	100,0

x<sup>2</sup>: 1,87 p > 0.05

As regards to the level of intimacy, Table 3 shows that both men and women included the couple relationship as a very intimate bond or extremely intimate. No senior considered it as not, little or fairly intimate.

**Table 3:** Level of intimacy of the relationship by gender of older people interviewed. Mar del Plata 2011

Gender	Level of intimacy in couple relationship									
	Extremely intimate		Very intimate		Quite intimate		No or Fairly intimate		Total	
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%
<b>Men</b>	39	92,9	3	7,1	0	0,0	0	0,0	42	100,0
<b>Women</b>	41	100,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	41	100,0
<b>Total</b>	80	96,4	3	3,6	0	0,0	0	0,0	83	100,0

$\chi^2$ : 3,04 p > 0.05

Moreover, older people showed that there was a balance between giving and receiving in their relationship. This reciprocity was perceived in the majority of both men and women; there were no significant differences by gender with regard to this characteristic of the bond (see Table 4).

**Table 4:** Reciprocity in couple relationship by gender of older people interviewed. Mar del Plata, 2011

Gender	Reciprocity in couple relationship							
	Gives and receives alike		Gives more than what he/she receives		Receives more than what he/she gives		Total	
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%
<b>Men</b>	38	90,5	2	4,8	2	4,8	42	100,0
<b>Women</b>	36	87,8	0	0,0	5	12,2	41	100,0
<b>Total</b>	74	89,2	2	2,4	7	8,4	83	100,0

$\chi^2$ : 3,33 p > 0.05

Regarding the frequency of contact the vast majority interacted with their partner almost every day, except for two cases (one male and one female) who only did it two or three times a week. As shown in Table 5, the distributions for men and women were very similar, finding no statistically significant differences.

**Table 5:** Frequency of contact in the relationship, by gender, in older people interviewed. Mar del Plata 2011

Gender	Frequency of contact within the couple's relationship											
	Almost everyday		2 o 3 times per week		Once a week		Approximately twice a month		Approximately once a week or less		Total	
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%
<b>Men</b>	41	97,6	1	2,4	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	42	100,0
<b>Women</b>	40	97,6	1	2,4	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	41	100,0
<b>Total</b>	81	97,6	2	2,4	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0	83	100,0

### Changes in the couple relationship and sexual activity in old age

The older people interviewed said that the couple relationship plays a very important and central role in old age, even more than in other stages of life. In all cases they would give each other companionship, support and mutual care and share all or a large part of the daily activities. Some reported that their partner was "everything" for them at this point in their lives.

While very few older people expressed not to have noticed changes in the relationship in old age, the majority felt that the relationship was enriched from achieving greater agreement and mutual acceptance, more understanding and confidence. The need for the other became more central not only for the emotional and instrumental support it provided them, but also because they felt wanted, valued and desired. The priority that passion occupied in the relationship in youth turned to companionship in old age, and primarily in women.

*"It is support, anchor, companionship, a lot of companionship. The values change, the priorities. What once joined you, passion, now changes to the idea of being together, of sharing. He is the person you can count on for everything."* (Female, 65 years old).

*"He is everything. More than when we were young because it is the time when you need him most. As a young woman I did not need him much. It's now when you need him most. Because we help each other in everything."* (Female, 76 years old).

*"It's nice to get there with a partner who will take care of you always, that is going to support you. To be reciprocal, I mean. Today I have to take care of her because she's sick. We were and are very happy."* (Male, 68 years old).

When asked what gave them satisfaction in their relationship, women, as a whole, emphasized issues related to the sharing of time, "togetherness", talking, laughing, hugging, being loved and wanted. Men expressed in a more general way that their partner gave them satisfaction, happiness and enjoyment; the latter not being frequently related to companionship as women did.

*"You know that you have support at home. We are good friends, I like to talk and discuss things with her. We always make decisions together, the two of us and what I like most is that each of us has his/her place, she has her swimming, I my gymnastics, my walks ... and that enriches the couple." (Male, 76 years old).*

*"It's great to be with a woman you have been with for a lifetime. I am happy with her. She always cared about me. I also think that it must be ugly to be alone. I cannot imagine being alone. Life made us complement each other very much." (Male, 68 years old).*

*"The satisfaction of being accompanied by a human that is always waiting for you and I'm eager to see. She is very noble and I appreciate her very much." (Male, 74 years old).*

*"He gives me great company. We've been together very long. We are very good mates. We do everything together." (Female, 76 years old).*

*"The company, always helping each other. Being alone is terrible, terrible." (Female, 76 years old).*

*"More than anything the company, being together, going to the beach which I didn't use to do alone. I didn't cook, I do now. I didn't even sit down to eat for years, and now I share the table with him. We share things together, even if we have different activities ..." (Female, 71 years old).*

*"I love being with someone, I do not like being alone. We go out; I like to go dancing, to share my life with someone close. It's beautiful." (Female, 66 years old).*

For some women, the possibility of choosing a partner for love appeared only in old age, either because the parents had chosen their spouse for them or because they themselves had prioritized other reasons, such as achieving independence from their nuclear family. In the

former cases, while some had accepted and endured that relationship, even becoming fond of their partner, in others the situation had caused great suffering and distress and had resulted in break-ups. On the other hand, the couples who had met their partners in old age received more support and satisfaction as can be seen in the following stories:

*"I did not choose him, my dad chose him. I was introduced to him. I had another suitor. So first I learned to respect Louis. The first two years I addressed him as "sir", and then I learned to love him. At first, I was not interested in him. Then, the guy that I was interested in appeared but I was married, I could not ... I know that my partner was very good to me. He supported me in all my decisions, and helped me to help and bring my sisters. I didn't have to hide anything. But I do not know if I can talk about love. I'm not sure if I know what it is like to be in love, but I know I breathe for him. When he was hospitalized I suffered a lot, it was then that I realized that I loved him."* (Female, 76 years old).

*"He is the kindest partner I've had. The first time I got married, I was 16 and he was 14 years older. He saved me from my family; I went to live with him. I had my first daughter when I was very young. I left him and the second one hit me, he was an alcoholic, an arrogant person. We worked as apartment managers and he made me do all the work. I reported him many times; I left him and he would come back to look for me. He cheated on me, beat me. Now I'm fine. George is everything to me, he is the best, we are great companions. We share the evenings, sometimes in secret because my daughter does not like him, she is very jealous."* (Female, 70 years old).

*"The last 10 years of marriage I could not stand it, I wanted to leave. And since I was working, I was saving the money and when I saved enough, I left. And I met Horace and he asked me to come with him. As I was coming out of an ugly experience, I did not want to fail. Before, I was with a partner because of my children. When I went to sleep, every time he made love to me, I felt I was being raped. I couldn't take it anymore. When he would come back from work I did not want to even see him. I was disgusted. With Horace, the relationship is very good. I always wait for him with the food he likes; we go for a walk. He works mornings and in the afternoons we go out together for a walk; he takes his*

*fishing rod and I take my notebook to write in and we are together. At night we play cards. We go out, travel a lot. We go to Cordoba twice a year for sure and then somewhere else." (Female, 70 years old).*

In some cases in particular, besides the possibility of falling in love in old age, there was also a situation of infidelity - an old man was having an affair with another woman - and in yet another case, a person showed dissatisfaction with his/her current partner.

As to sexuality, almost all the older people interviewed said they were active, except for one man and two women. However, they said that the frequency and urgency had diminished in old age. Sexuality was no longer a priority, a central need and it was considered a complement in the relationship, as shown by the following excerpts:

*"Sex is not so important. Today I seek company." Male, 67 years old.*

*"I don't seek that so much now. It does not take a central place in my life. If you have sex fine ... we do not impose anything. There are other priorities." (Female, 65 years old).*

These opinions in no way implied a decline in sexual satisfaction which not only did it remain as earlier in life but in some cases it had improved. As explained by the previously mentioned older couples, the increase in satisfaction was mainly due to either the "better" selection of their new partners or the consolidation of the relationship after many years of sharing life together.

The main difficulties to continue an active sex life were having health problems and the use of certain medications, primarily in men. To a lesser extent, it was considered that the hormonal changes that occurred in women after menopause produced certain limitations and a decrease in desire.

*"Women in this age group do not look for sex as they do when they are young. He is a chauvinist and he believes that if he does not perform as a man, he is not good as a grandfather, as nothing ... He wants to satisfy me because he says I am young, but for me this stage is over." (Female, 65 years old).*

*"Yes, there are changes. I have prostate problems, sexually it's hard, but if you are willing to do it, you can. And I am willing. The satisfaction does not change, what changes is the frequency that is reduced. But the most important thing is the willingness." (Male, 67 years old).*

Although, as discussed above, in some circumstances there were barriers to genital sexual activity in the elderly, in these cases the use of medication to boost the erection was a solution. Furthermore, it could be observed that, faced with the changes that old age bring, the elderly could adapt their sexual practices to the new needs, such as giving more time and dedication to the partner or solving difficulties through a better understanding of each other and experience. Also, eroticism occupied an important place, creating the ambiance, taking care of details, enjoying physical and emotional intimacy as noted in the following excerpts:

*"It is not the same. Each time it is less, but today the pills help a bit. But the frequency is lower. I am also very positive about it."* (Male, 65 years old).

*"Yes, regarding sexual performance, it is lower. It is compensated by experience and desire to be with the other person."* (Male, 65 years old).

*"Having been with her for 10 years, I do what is best for her, trying to please her, to care, to make her feel good. Before, when I was 25, 30 years old I did not realize those details."* (Male, 85 years old).

*"Eight years ago with Luis, both of us were younger. There was more frequency. But I think I like it better now. The desire grows stronger now that we do it less frequently. He cares, treats me well and understands me. Sexuality is a complement. It is important but it is a complement that goes together with other things. It is another way of knowing each other. And what I like is to prepare things: to pay attention to details, such as dimming lights, having a clean bed, feeling clean and smelling nice, and that still works well ... "* (Female, 70 years old).

*"The frequency is reduced but it is nicer because over the years you learn more things about each other. Sometimes I was tired and with little desire but I think the man has to be a good lover and even if you do not feel like doing it, he has to know you, take care of you, know your pace, generate the desire and make you enjoy, and that is better over time, because you know each other and talk."* (Female, 70 years old).

Older people stated that the attainment of pleasure and satisfaction from their partner through caresses, kisses, hugs and other erotic games, was an end in itself. Certainly, this view of sexuality, not strictly tied to the genitals, made possible the continuity of a sexually active life.

## Conclusions

The results show the central role that the couple relationship holds in old age. The fact that almost all of the older people interviewed have included the couple relationship in their social support network, also the many functions it performs and its characteristics, provide evidence in this regard. These findings are consistent with those obtained in previous research and reinforce the importance of this bond in this stage of life (Arias, 2004, 2005, Arias & Polizzi, 2011)

Both men and women felt that their partners contributed mainly emotional support, showing that this bond has many characteristics of closeness and confidentiality. The appreciation of this relationship as extremely close or very close in all cases and the characteristic of high reciprocity in most of them, support the previous evidence.

Finally, the high frequency of contact with the partner, enables the various supports that this relationship provides to be available and be effective every day.

The differences found with regard to support functions that the couple fulfilled predominantly by gender can be explained by the existence of family and cultural constraints related to different codes and roles given to men and women. In this sense, the fact that the latter consider that their partners will provide practical and financial assistance, more often than men perceive them as givers of these types of support, give evidence of cultural roles attributed to men as the ones responsible for the material support and competency in solving practical matters. Also, that women are valued to a greater extent than men as providers of emotional support and social companionship can also be understood as a result of different socialization processes in which these skills are considered as inherent to the female and therefore their development reinforced. However, that men have been valued more than women as givers of practical aid may seem inconsistent with what was previously stated. In fact, there is strong evidence that women are, generally speaking, the ones that most frequently are involved in caregiving throughout their life, which involves to a large extent the provision of practical help (Robles, 2003; Marco Navarro, 2006; Huenchuan, Roque & Arias, 2009).

However, note that the selected sample corresponded to self-sufficient elderly who did not require sustained daily care or support for their daily activities. In the case that one of the members in the couple showed fragility or dependency, one can consider that the prevailing



functions provided by the other one, depending on the gender, may be different from the result obtained from the sample selected in this work.

In regard to the changes perceived by older people interviewed about the relationship in general and sexuality in particular, both recurrences and specific issues, which appeared less frequently, were observed. Among the first ones, the high positive assessment of companionship in the old age couple and the strengthening and consolidation of the relationship over time stand out. The shared experiences and difficulties the old couple had to overcome through the years seem to promote greater mutual understanding and acceptance of the other. Although passion decreases compared with earlier stages of life, the changes mentioned above would enable mutual care and high positive affect in the couple. These findings agree with the points made by Iacub (2009) when he argues that mutual concern among the partners in old age emerges as a generator of love. In regard to the issues observed less frequently, situations of infidelity, dissatisfaction and infatuation were found. These facts show that during this stage of life, a relationship can go through similar situations that may occur in middle age or youth. It seems that the couple relationship may take certain characteristics and go through certain situations that depend on issues that go beyond the age or stage of life of the members.

With respect to sexuality, although it is no longer a priority in the relationship in old age, it remains a source of great satisfaction. Although there are changes - mainly related to the reduction of frequency- as well as difficulties connected to health problems and the use of certain medication, the elderly have found satisfactory alternatives by implementing strategies of selection, optimization and compensation (Baltes & Freund, 2007). Thus, in order to face some deficits, the older couples select certain practices - which are more in line with their potential - optimizing them, often by eroticism and making compensations, giving each other more time, using medication etc. Besides observing changes in the means of doing it, as mentioned above, there are also changes in the goals set for their sexual practice.

Consistent with the points made by Iacub (2006), sexual activity and urge give way to a broader sexuality in which eroticism occupies a very importance place and in which each loving practice can be an end in itself.

Beyond the difficulties that can appear in each couple, by making changes in the goals set and in the strategies used to achieve them, older people maintain a sex life, that is not only active, but also enjoyable.

Received on 23/01/2013

Accepted on 23/02/2013

## References

- Alberts, J. (1990). *The use of humor in managing couples conflict interactions*. New Jersey (EUA): Erlbaum.
- Albornoz, C., Gonzáles, L. & Pallavicini, V. (2009). *La posesión de la pareja en la vejez: relación con la satisfacción vital y la presencia de sintomatología depresiva*. Informe final de Trabajo de investigación no publicada. Facultad de Psicología, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Mar del Plata (Argentina).
- Arias, C. (2004). *Red de apoyo social y bienestar psicológico en personas de edad*. Mar del Plata (Argentina): Suárez.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2005). Composición de la red de apoyo social de adultos mayores: Vínculos familiares y no familiares. En: Golpe, L. & Arias, C. (Eds.). *Sistemas formales e informales de apoyo social para los adultos mayores aportes de una investigación científica al campo de la gerontología institucional*, 233-249. Mar del Plata (Argentina): Suárez
- \_\_\_\_\_. & Polizzi, L. (2011). La importancia de la pareja, los hijos y los amigos en la vejez. En Actas de las Primeras Jornadas de Psicología de la Universidad Atlántida Argentina y Contexto Psicológico. Los Desafíos de la Clínica Actual. Mar del Plata (Argentina): Universidad Atlántida Argentina.
- Bachand, L.L. & Caron, S.L. (2001). Ties that bin: A qualitative study of happy long-term marriages. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 23(1), 105-121.
- Baltes, P.B., & Freund, A.M. (2007). El potencial humano como orquestación de la sabiduría y la optimización selectiva por compensaciones. En: Aspinwall, L.G. & Staudinger, U.M. (Eds.). *Psicología del potencial humano. Cuestiones fundamentales y normas para una psicología positiva*, 45- 61. Barcelona (España): Gedisa.
- Bishop, A., Martin, P. & Poon, L. (2006). Happiness and congruence in older adulthood: A structural model of life satisfaction. *Aging and Mental Health*, 10(5), 445-453.
- Blando, J. (2001). Twice hidden: older gay and lesbian couples, friends, and intimacy. *Journal of the American Society of Aging*, 25(2), 87-89.
- Bolger, N. & Zuckerman, A. (1995). A framework for studying personality in the stress process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 890-902.
- Buffie, W.C. (2011). Public health implications of same-sex marriage. *American Journal of Public Health*, 101(6), 986-990.
- Carstensen, L. & Charles, S.T. (2007). El envejecimiento humano: ¿Por qué incluso las buenas noticias se toman como malas? En: Aspinwall, L.G. & Staudinger, U.M. (Eds.). *Psicología del potencial humano. Cuestiones fundamentales y normas para una psicología positiva*, 111-126. Barcelona (España): Gedisa.
- Chávez, G. (1994). *Satisfacción, marital, expectativas y estrés en familias de mujeres que trabajan fuera del hogar y familias de mujeres dedicadas al hogar*. Tesis inédita de licenciatura en Psicología, Universidad de las Américas Puebla, Puebla.

- Chou, K. L. & Chi, I. (2001). Stressful life events and depressive symptoms: social support and sense of control as mediators or moderators? *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 52(2), 155-171.
- Creasey, G. (2002). Associations between working models attachment and conflict management behavior in romantic couples. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 49(3), 365-375.
- Deevey, S. (1990). Older lesbian women: An invisible minority. *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*, 16(5), 35-39.
- Dello Buono, M., Zaghi P.C., Padoani, W., Scocco, P., Urciuoli, O., Pauro, P. & De Leo, D. (1998). Sexual feelings and sexual life in an Italian sample of 335 elderly 65 to 106-year-olds. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 6, 155-162.
- Díaz Loving, R. & Sánchez Aragón, R. (2000). Negociando y comunicando en pareja: Relación entre estilos de comunicación y estilos de negociación. *La Psicología Social en México*, 8, 32-38.
- Dunn, K., Croft, P. & Hackett, G. (2000). Satisfaction in the sex life of a general population Sample. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 26, 141-151.
- Fingerhut, A.W. & Maicel, N.C. (2010). Relationship formalization and individual and relationship well-being among same-sex couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27, 956-969.
- Ginsberg, B.T., Pomerantz S.C. & Kramer-Feeley, V. (2005). Sexuality in older adults: behaviours and preferences. *Age and Ageing*, 34, 475-480.
- Gott, M. & Hinchliff, S. (2003). How important is sex in later life? The views of older people. *Social Science & Medicine*, 56, 1617-1628. Retrieved on: [http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/Sexuality in Older Adults Behaviours and Preferences.pdf](http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/Sexuality%20in%20Older%20Adults%20Behaviours%20and%20Preferences.pdf).
- Huenchuan, S., Roqué, M. & Arias, C. (2009). *Envejecimiento y sistemas de cuidado: ¿Oportunidad o crisis?* Naciones Unidas: Santiago de Chile.
- Iacub, R. (2006). *Erótica y vejez. Perspectivas de Occidente*. Buenos Aires (Argentina): Paidós.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2009). Las nuevas parejas en la vejez. *Revista de Psicología da IMED*, 1(1), 137-146.
- Janus, S.S. & Janus, C.L. (1993). *The Janus report on sexual behavior*. New York (EUA): John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Julien, D., Chartrand, E., Simard, M., Bouthillier, D. & Bégin, J. (2003). Conflict, social support and relationship quality: An observational study of heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian couples communication. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17(3), 419-428.
- Johnson, M. & Bradbuty, T. (1999). Marital satisfaction and topographical assessment of marital interaction: A longitudinal analysis of newlywed couples. *Personal Relationship*, 6, 19-40.
- Levenson, R.W., Carstensen, L.L., & Gottman, J.M. (1993). Long-term marriage: Age, gender, and satisfaction. *Psychology and Aging*, 8(2), 301-313.
- Lindau S.T., Schumm, P., Laumann, E.O., Levinson, W., Colm, A., O'Muirheartaigh, C. & Waite, L. J. (2007). A Study of sexuality and health among older adults in the United Status. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 357(8), 762-774.
- Lomas, P. (1983). *La crisis de la familia*. México: Premia.

- López, F., Gover, M., Leskela, J., Sauer, E., Schirmer, L. & Wyssmann, J. (1997). Attachment styles, shame, guilt and collaborative problema-solving orientations. *Personal Relationships*, 4, 187-199.
- López Sánchez, F. (2005). Experiencia amorosa en la vejez. *Revista Española de Geriatria y Gerontología*, 40(3), 135-137.
- Marco Navarro, F. (2006). Cuidado no remunerado y acceso a la protección social. *Nómadas*, 24, 36-43.
- Muñoz, M. (1978). Satisfacción e insatisfacción matrimonial: Influencias de los factores de balance marital y de auto-realización. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología*, 10(3), 337-350.
- Nina Estrella, R. (1991). *Comunicación marital y estilos de comunicación: construcción y validación*. Tesis de doctorado en Psicología, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México.
- Noller, P. (2000). La comunicación familiar: Vinculando las relaciones marital, padre-hijo y entre hermanos. *Revista de Psicología Social y Personalidad*, 16(2), 123-154.
- Ojeda García, A., Díaz Loving, R. & Rivera Aragón, S. (1997). El doble vínculo como determinante de la satisfacción marital. *Revista de Psicología Social y Personalidad*, 13(1), 19-40.
- Oswald, R.F., & Kuvalanka, K.A. (2008). Same sex couples legal complexities. *Journal of Families*, 29(8), 1051-1066.
- Papaharitoua, S., Nakopouloua, E., Kiranaa, P., Giaglis, G., Moraitoub, M. & Hatzichrist, D. (2007). Factors associated with sexuality in later life: An exploratory study in a group of Greek married older adults. *Archives of Gerontology & Geriatrics*, 46(2), 191-201.
- Peirce, R.S., Frone, M.R., Russell, M., Cooper, M.L. & Mudar, P. (2000). A longitudinal model of social contact, social support, depression and alcohol use. *Health Psychology*, 19(1), 28-38.
- Phillips, D.R., Sui, O.L., Yeh, A.G., & Cheng, K.H. (2008). Informal social support and older person's psychological well being in Hong Kong. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 23(1), 39-55.
- Prince-Paul, M. (2008). Understanding the meaning of social well-being at the end of life. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 35(3), 365-371.
- Quam, J.K. & Whitford, G.S. (1992). Adaptation and age-related expectations of older gays and lesbian adults. *The Gerontologist*, 32(3), 367-374.
- Rhine, D. (1981). Bases of marital satisfaction among men and women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 43(4), 941-955.
- Rivera Aragón, S., Díaz Loving, R. & Sánchez Aragón, R. (2002). Negociación ante el conflicto en la población mexicana. *Revista de Psicología Social y Personalidad*, 16(2), 21-36.
- Robles, L. (2003). Una vida cuidando a los demás. Una "carrera" de vida en ancianas cuidadoras. Trabajo presentado en el 51 Congreso Nacional de Americanistas. Santiago de Chile, Chile. Retrieved on: <http://www.redadultosmayores.com.ar/buscador/files/CALID019.pdf>
- Sánchez Aragón, R. (2002). ¿Nos expresamos igual o diferente hombres y mujeres?: Estilos de comunicación con la pareja. *La psicología social en México*, 9, 749-755.
- Sanders, M., Halford, W. & Behrens, B. (1999). Parental divorce and premarital couple communication. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 13(1), 60-74.

- Sayers, S. & Baucom, D. (1991). Role of Femininity and Masculinity in Distressed Couple's Communication. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(4), 641-647.
- Sluzki, C. (1996). *La red social: Frontera de la práctica sistémica*. Barcelona (España): Gedisa.
- Smith, L.J., Mulhall, J.P., Deveci, S., Monaghan, N. & Reid, M.C. (2007). *Sex after seventy: a pilot study of sexual function in older persons*. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 4(5), 1247-1253.
- Solis, R., & Puga, I. (2009). Los nuevos senderos de la nupcialidad: cambios en los patrones de formación y disolución de las primeras uniones en México. En: Romero, C.R. (Coord.). *Tramas familiares en el México contemporáneo. Una perspectiva sociodemográfica*, 179-198. México: UNAM.
- Soller, P. (1982). Couple communication and marital satisfaction. *Australian Journal of Sex, Marriage and Family*, 13(2), 69-75.
- Sweeney, M. M. & Replogle, E. M. (2002). Marital relationships. *Encyclopedia of Aging*. Retrieved on mayo 14, 2011: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3402200251.html>.
- Valdez, J.L., Gonzalez, N.I, Arce, J. & López, M. C. (2007). La elección real e ideal de pareja. Un estudio con parejas establecidas. *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, 41(3), 305-311.
- Vanderhorst, R.K., & McLaren, S. (2005). Social relationship as predictors of depression and suicidal ideation in older adults. *Aging and Mental Health*, 9(6), 517-525.
- Vaux, A. & Harrison, D. (1985). Support networks characteristics associated with support satisfaction and perceived support. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 13(3), 245-268.
- Villar, F., Villamizar, D.J. & López Chivral, S. (2005). Los componentes de la experiencia amorosa en la vejez personas mayores y relaciones de pareja de larga duración. *Revista Española de Geriatría y Gerontología*, 40(3), 166-177.
- Wang, T.F., Lu, C. H., Chen, I.J. & Yu, S. (2008). Sexual knowledge, attitudes and activity of older people in Taipei, Taiwan. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 17, 443-450.
- Warren, J.I., Stein, J.A. & Grella, C.E. (2007). Role of social support and self-efficacy in treatment outcomes among clients with co-occurrence disorders. *Drug and Alcohol Dependences*, 10(89), 267-274.
- White, L. (1983). Determinants of spousal interaction: Marital structure of marital happiness. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 45(3), 511-519.
- Wienke, C. & Hill, G. J. (2009). Does the "Marriage benefit" extend to partners in gay and lesbian relationships? Evidence from a random sample of sexually active adults. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30(2), 259-289.
- Yoon, D. & Lee, E. (2007). The impact of religiousness, spiritually and social support on psychological well-being among older adults in rural areas. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 48(3-4), 281-298.

Received on 20/01/2013

Accepted on 20/02/2013

**Claudia Josefina Arias** - Graduate in Psychology (Licenciada en Psicología) Mar del Plata National University, Argentina, M.A. *In: Social Psychology*, Mar del Plata National University, Argentina. Currently Professor and researcher at School of Psychology. Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata (Argentina).

E-mail: [cjarias@mdp.edu.ar](mailto:cjarias@mdp.edu.ar)

**Luciana Polizzi** - Graduate in Psychology (Licenciada en Psicología). Mar del Plata National University, Argentina. Research grant at School of Psychology. Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata (Argentina).

E-mail: [polizzilu@gmail.com](mailto:polizzilu@gmail.com)