

## Transsexual aging: needs and difficulties

*Envelhecimento Transsexual: necessidades e dificuldades*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper gives a brief overview of some of the most important questions facing transsexual individuals throughout the aging process. This report starts by discussing the current state of aging, and the various studies that have specifically addressed aging in transsexual individuals. Finally, it proposes various suggestions for improving the future wellbeing of elderly transsexual individuals.

**Keywords:** Aging; Transgender; Needs; Difficulties.

**RESUMO:** *Este artigo apresenta uma visão geral de algumas das questões mais importantes para as pessoas transexuais em todo o processo de envelhecimento. Este trabalho começa por discutir o estado atual do envelhecimento, e os vários estudos que abordaram especificamente o envelhecimento em indivíduos transexuais. Finalmente, apresentam-se várias sugestões para melhorar o futuro bem-estar dos indivíduos transexuais idosos.*

*Palavras-chave: Envelhecimento; Transexuais; Necessidades; Dificuldades.*

## **Introduction**

From gerontology, it is accepted that as human beings age, we increasingly differ from one another. The diversity of life experiences and circumstances, and the way in which each individual adapts to said situations, can be attributed to the idiosyncrasies of each person and of each community or communities to which we belong. As a result, we encounter numerous, diverse groups among the aging population. Interest in aging among the general population is relatively recent, due, in part, to the increased life expectancy of the population. Scientific and technological advances of recent years have contributed to the increase in average lifespan. However, beliefs, taboos, resistance, myths, prejudices and social stereotypes that revolve around the process of aging have prevailed over time, negatively impacting the quality of life of seniors, as well as their integration in society. This is particularly evident in regard to minority and marginalized populations, such as transsexual individuals. As a result, the study of aging in minority and marginalized populations today is almost anecdotal, as is the case of transsexual individuals. However, in recent years, some practitioners have begun to address the diversity of aging in regard to sex and gender (Blank, 2006).

## **The study of transsexuality and aging**

The perception of sexuality and aging has changed throughout history, constantly evolving as a function of historical, political, socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, and familial contexts. On one hand, the concept of old age, as happens with other life stages, brought about the need to monitor chronological age, in this case, to determine the passing of years in a social context. The definition of “old” varies among countries and societies. In our society, old age is implicitly associated with the idea of degeneration, meaning loss of physical and mental abilities, which would hinder the ability to complete professional work in the same way it has previously been carried out, making it difficult or impossible (López y Olazábal, 2006). In addition, old age is often associated with other terms, such as disability or dementia. In general, an

individual is considered “old” upon reaching the age of 60-65, independently of personal history and social situation (Bonita, 1998).

On the other hand, we know that sexuality is a fundamental component of quality of life (Zanni, Wick & Walker, 2003) and is essential for maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, self-image and a personal sense of integrity (Hajjar & Kamel, 2003). As such, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) defines sexuality as a complex, multidimensional concept that includes sex, sexual identity, gender roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction. For this reason, sexuality is experienced and expressed through thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships (Bauer, McAuliffe & Nay, 2007).

However, despite the importance of sexuality to wellbeing, if the study of sexuality in aging individuals has only recently become a topic of interest, the study of experiencing sexual diversity in old age is nearly nonexistent. Although the aging population is being recognized more and more, any form of sexual diversity among this population continues to be ignored (Bauer *et al.*, 2007). In scientific literature, it is extremely difficult to find precise information about the experiences of aging among transsexual individuals (Witten, 2004) thus this group has been particularly invisible on an epidemiological level (Witten & Eyler, 1999) given that, in addition, until the scarce interest which has arisen in recent decades, many transsexual individuals have not wanted to make their sexuality public (Witten, 2003). For this reason, aging transsexual individuals today are, for all intents and purposes, invisible (Persson, 2009). Consequently, we fail to find records of sexual orientation or sexual identity among gerontological counseling work. On the contrary, this information is found in aging studies of other minority collectives, such as certain ethnic groups (Henery, 2011).

To date, the little research conducted focuses on the most studied issues facing the aging population, such as health or feelings of loneliness. Existing studies from the seventies and eighties, a time in which transsexuality lacked the treatment it has today, discuss aging in transsexual individuals as regularly being accompanied by unsatisfactory psychological health, questioning the recommended type of care in this case. Similarly, some studies exist that address some issues with elderly individuals who have had sex reassignment surgery. These studies report the presence of symptoms of depression, and a tendency toward introversion or certain personality-related problems (Meyer, 1974).

On the other hand, the experience of aging in transsexual individuals has also been linked to a time of emotional crisis, as well as the manifestation of a particular urgency for sex reassignment in old age. No data exists that advises against sexual reassignment in old age, although the possible characteristics in the elderly that such treatment would require are debated (Lothstein, 1979).

Nevertheless, the presently increasing recognition of diverse sexual identities, coupled with the passage of time that allows visible transsexual individuals to age and the increased attention being given to the aging population, brings greater interest to addressing transsexuality during this stage of life (Witten, 2009). Thus, we find studies reporting that, currently, the greatest difficulties in aging transsexual individuals are often associated with physical deterioration due to inadequate health care often not suited to their needs and poor social stimulation, with frequent feelings of loneliness. It is possible that this is influenced by the negative views held by the general aging population, due, perhaps, to lack of awareness and rejection of transsexuality (Witten & Cook-Daniels, 1999).

However, there are many fields of study related to aging in transsexual individuals that are not presently being explored. Studies have yet to be done that delve into the experiences of these individuals in relation to their sexual identities, that show us distinctive traits while aging and that demonstrate the most important elements of wellbeing in these individuals during this stage of life. Moreover, there is little to no information detailing the extent to which sex reassignment procedures, solicited by many of today's aging transsexual adults, are causing consequences. To what extent have these procedures had physical consequences, such as illnesses caused by possible treatments, social consequences such as isolation and loneliness, and psychological consequences such as any manifestation of psychological distress caused by the rejection or vulnerability to which these individuals are exposed? Systematic studies on the lack or failing of factors, agents and resources in meeting the needs of aging transsexual individuals do not exist. As we can see, there is still a long way to go. Now that transsexual individuals are present to a greater extent in literature, it is necessary to know what happens as they grow old.

## Difficulties facing Aging Transsexual Individuals

Points of concern for aging among transsexual individuals are fundamentally the same as for the majority of older adults — loneliness, health, and economic concerns — though it is true that these factors depend on the individual characteristics of each situation (Witten, 2009). However, in this population in particular we regularly find a heightened fear of the future, fear of family rejection, and fear of transphobia and social marginalization (Dean *et al.*, 2000).

Like members of other marginalized and oppressed groups, many aging transsexual individuals have internalized negative feelings about their own sexual identities; especially those transgender people who grew up in accordance with their biological sex, keeping their sexual identity's contradiction to their biological sex a secret (Namaste & Sharon, 2011).

In this regard, transsexual individuals have long acted according to the social expectations and social pressures, ignoring their sexual identity and functioning in accordance with their biological sex. This presumably had a great personal and interpersonal cost for these individuals. To the extent that we find individuals who have long lived their sexual identities in secret, we will find particularly vulnerable individuals with a generally lower state of wellbeing. The threat of social punishment for making one's sexual identity public has long served to perpetuate the anonymity and invisibility of transsexual individuals, especially among older generations which are now aging. Without a doubt this experience reflects one of abuse and neglect. Aging transsexual individuals have suffered varying degrees of abuse throughout their lives.

Moreover, there is often an additional factor of shame for the individual, which increases with age, given the existing myths surrounding what an older individual can or can't do, think or be. In our society, many older individuals are the object of age-discrimination; thus, if we discuss aging transsexual individuals, the degree of discrimination is exponentially greater.

However, it is also important to emphasize the existing pressure to belong to a group of transsexual individuals and to fulfill the appropriate stereotypes — female stereotypes in the case of trans-women (male to female) or male stereotypes in the case of trans-men (female to male). Transphobia still exists in many forms and in all areas, as in most of the world there is no legislation against it.

In addition to the general challenges of aging, transsexual individuals age in a heterosexist context that does not readily accept sexual diversity. Having suffered different obstacles (repression, lack of education, work assault etc.) that can make it difficult to establish, among other things, a professional career, it is not uncommon that these individuals fall into poverty at retirement age. In fact, studies on the employment situation in some countries show that the rate of unemployed transsexual individuals is double the rate of unemployment in the general population (Fernández-Rouco, López & Carcedo, 2011). If these individuals have also struggled to establish secure and stable relationships, or suffered emotional neglect by their loved ones, isolation and feelings of loneliness can further complicate effective coping during an intrinsically vulnerable stage of life. In fact, some studies find that aging individuals of diverse sexualities (homosexual or transsexual) find better support in friendships and family relationships (McFarland & Sanders, 2003). There are many variables to consider in the study of aging transsexual individuals given that there are so many variables in the risk of social exclusion that have shaped the experiences of these people.

The state of public health is also quite important to address, as it so often lacks the resources and support needed for this group to live a dignified life while aging (Belongia & Witten, 2006). It is a rarity to find professionals who both specialize in old age and are familiar with treating the distinct needs of transsexual individuals — if they are taking hormones, have taken them or have had any surgery — or who know how to treat transsexual individuals regardless of physical appearance or their phase of the transitioning process (Cascio, 2002). This is particularly harmful for the elderly living in institutions, as it creates a hostile environment in which they must hide their sexual identity and become invisible (Ward, Vass, Aggarwall, Garfield & Cybyk, 2005).

From time to time, we have come across older transsexual individuals with other high risk factors of social exclusion, such as homosexual orientation, disability, HIV positive status etc. In these cases, the negative social stigma is significantly worse, and the discrimination increases drastically. Ultimately, all of these findings suggest that transsexuality during aging is greatly influenced not just by bio-physiological aspects but psychosocial factors as well. All people need affection and intimacy throughout their lives, even in old age. We need to love and be loved, to touch and be touched, to desire and be desired and enjoy the pleasure of intimate contact. However, in our society, many prejudices against the diverse expression of sexuality in older individuals

are still present. There is still a clear taboo about this topic. This situation creates various challenges in that respect and in appropriately meeting the afore mentioned needs.

### **Present Needs, Proposals for the Future**

While scientific professionals and activists have made great achievements in this area, there is still much work to be done. We have no comprehensive scientific or professional works relating to transsexuality and ageing, nor do we see public resources that would facilitate a raised awareness of the needs, challenges and possibilities of this population. We are faced with a minority population that is extremely vulnerable during this stage of life. At present, there are no systematic studies on the situation of older transsexuals, which are necessary to promote interventions and actions responding to the relevant data. The reference literature on this topic is scarce and inadequate.

In this sense, it is necessary to put a greater emphasis on educational diversity programs, including specific education about transsexuality from a holistic perspective that addresses all evolutionary stages of human development. Between the increasing social awareness and improved professional training, we will improve the wellbeing of these individuals. In addition, we can simultaneously increase the number of capable professionals as well as tolerant, and respectful citizens, acting from a deeper understanding of diverse social realities.

Similarly, there are little to no policies in place to effectively regulate the situation of transsexual individuals, especially while aging. It is important to strongly protect against any violation of the rights of transsexuals, by promoting legislation that grants equal rights to this population. Additionally, it is necessary that said laws take effect and are attentively enforced in all areas.

Finally, it is necessary to invest in psychosocial resources to better address the needs of aging transsexuals. Legal identity status is not regulated or protected if the process of sexual reassignment has not commenced prior to attempting to access resources; otherwise all resources are accessible according to their biological sex, especially in regard to resources and services that are divided between males and females. What is more, resources to support specific medical needs of transsexual individuals rarely exist, thus this population is in a situation of neglect.

Specifically, we need to develop residential care services in short, medium and long term stays, develop home care services, raise awareness among social agencies and within the health system, create opportunities for the participation of aging transsexual individuals to have a voice in the discourse, foster a sexual diversity approach in all life stages across professions, work with groups of professionals that are in contact with transsexual individuals, identify target areas for the wellbeing of these individuals at this stage of life and design and implement intervention programs intended to work with the individual and the environment, especially with the family.

For this reason, it is important to promote the integration of transsexual individuals throughout the life cycle (Edwards, 2001), foster relationships with others and deal with grief, work on physical and mental autonomy, and face the changes implicit in aging in relation to their sexually diverse experience (Blank, 2006). From our point of view, it seems that there is still a long road ahead in the studies of and care for transsexual people, and even more so as they age.

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Received on 02/02/2013

Accepted on 12/02/2013

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