

Widowhood, loneliness and sexuality in old age: mechanisms of coping and overcoming

Viuvez, solidão e sexualidade na velhice: mecanismos de enfrentamento e superação

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ABSTRACT: A long widowhood is associated with negative aspects in the life of the people, especially if they are in the stage of Old Age. However depending on the moment they experience this event in the course of life is possible to activate mechanisms to face life and reorder. This article shows from an exploratory perspective, qualitative and analytical, three case studies in the state of Mexico showing the perceived widowhood, which means in old age, their impacts economic and social, and how discourses and counter-discourses that have been generated subjects analyzed to overcome loneliness, isolation, the need for affection and love beyond providing family and children. Sexuality is seen from a critical and is an element highlighted in the narratives of these three cases and drew attention to the traditional way of analyzing Old Age and widowhood. The article consists of a literature review, objectives and methodology, as well as a section of results and final thoughts.

Keywords: Aging; Widowhood; Sexuality.

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RESUMO: *A viuvez longa está associada a aspectos negativos da vida da pessoas, especialmente se elas estão na fase da velhice. No entanto, dependendo do momento em que experimentarem este evento, é possível, ao longo da vida, ativar mecanismos para enfrentar a vida e reordená-la. Este artigo mostra três estudos de caso no estado de México, em uma perspectiva exploratória, qualitativa e analítica, mostrando a viuvez percebida, o que significa que, na velhice, os impactos dos discursos econômicos e sociais, e os contra-discursos que foram gerados são analisados visando a superar a solidão, o isolamento, a necessidade de afeto e amor, além do fornecimento de família e filhos. A sexualidade é vista a partir de um olhar crítico e é um elemento destacado nas narrativas desstes três casos tendo chamado a atenção para a forma tradicional de análise de velhice e viuvez. O artigo consiste em uma revisão da literatura, objetivos e metodologia, bem como uma seção de resultados e pensamentos finais.*

Palavras-chave: *Envelhecimento; Viuvez; Sexualidade.*

Introduction

The formation of a family through marriage is one of the most important events in the life course among Mexicans. This has been manifested through studies of family trajectories (Tuirán, 1996; Echarri, 2009). To find a partner who will accompany one through the most important events of life, such as the birth of children, personal development, the generation of a family patrimony and so on, is perhaps one of the greatest privileges a person can enjoy — hence this explains the tremendous significance of widowhood (Solís and Puga, 2009; Mier and Terán, 2009). Widowhood represents the partial dissolution of the original family or, at the least, of the matrimonial bond from which other important transformations in the life course arise (Tovar, 1999; Pérez Cárdenas and Infante, 2005).

Important changes have taken place during the twentieth century that affect the way this event is experienced, and at present it represents a transition related, in the popular mind, with the entry into the phase of old age; in fact it can be regarded as a crucial event

that generates adjustments in the system of family support in advanced cycles of family life (Montes de Oca and Hebrero, 2006). However, the death of the partner does not always take place within a family context, since the stress of daily life together and changes in the personalities of individuals generate, with ever increasing frequency, separation and divorce (Ojeda and González, 2008). Nevertheless, widowhood is universally associated with separation and death, and it is quite unusual to think of it in connection with other aspects such as sexuality and pleasure, which ought to be possible once more when the loss has been overcome and mechanisms of resilience for carrying on with one's life have been activated. Such aspects have been scarcely considered in the literature, and it thus seems relevant to reflect on this area on the basis of evidence found in Mexico.

Researchers into various aspects of widowhood mention that the significance of this event varies in accordance with the life stage at which it takes place, as well as the number of years the couple have spent together, the sex of the surviving partner, whether there are descendants and the number of them, the financial resources of the couple and, finally, with the presence of affectionate memories subsisting in the family, a result of intergenerational conviviality.

Such factors obviously contribute to making widowhood as an important event in old age (Tovar, 1999; Quadagno, 2007); but how is it actually lived? What are its implications in advanced stages of life? Is it experienced in the same way by elderly men and women? How does it impact on the sense of meaning in life and what mechanisms arise to cope with loneliness? How is the exercise of sexuality transformed after the loss of the partner?

Although this article does not pretend to exhaust these questions, it does seek to explore in depth some matters associated with widowhood. It comprises a review of the literature, aims and methodologies as well as a section of final results and reflections.

Widowhood in the past and the context of the State of Mexico²

The definition of widowhood implies having been married prior to the death of the partner. The word comes from an Indo-European root that means “empty” or “separated” (cf. Lat. *viduus* = bereft of).³ Widowhood is thus a very ancient concept; in fact it should be said that in the past it was seen as something natural and very frequent, in the same way as becoming an orphan and infant mortality were seen as natural events. Separated or divorced women were often also referred to as “widows” since they were subject to the same prohibitions or rituals (Tovar, 1999). Although until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries widowhood was still a relatively common experience in early stages of adulthood, with the socio-economic developments of the modern era it began to be associated with longevity and the arrival of old age. Young people used to enter into marriage almost at the beginning of their reproductive stage and, since there was no birth control, it was expected that couples would have a fair number of children, both to guarantee sufficient workers on the family farm and to allow for deaths in infancy resulting from the transmissible diseases for which there were no remedies (Jiménez, 1988). In those times, low survival rates meant that the disappearance of close family members was a common event. Infant mortality⁴ and death in childbirth were social phenomena always to be feared as pregnancy drew to its term, and the image of the infant orphaned at birth—of one or both parents—was a common topic. Young offspring who lost their parents might live with relatives or, if none were available, in the social institutions that catered for this situation: orphanages.

With the passing of time, such situations — orphanhood and infant mortality — became less and less frequent; consequently, widowhood tends to be postponed to a late stage of the individual’s life course and is thus seen as an event related to aging, and

² The State of Mexico (*Estado de México* in Spanish) is one of the 32 states that make up the Mexican republic. It is a separate entity from the Federal District of Mexico City which it surrounds on all sides. Its inhabitants are referred to as *Mexiquenses*.

³ In some societies the definition of widowhood is broadened to include women whose husbands are absent owing to war, migration or working at sea. These women are sometimes referred to as “widows of the living” are often expected to dress in black as a means of identification and to enable them to move in spaces restricted to men (Tovar, 1999).

⁴ Infant mortality fell from 288.6 in 1900, to 73.8 in 1960, and to 42 deaths of children under one year per thousand live births in 1986 (Jiménez, 1988). At present, official figures mention 17.29 deaths in children under one year per thousand live births (Index Mundi, 2011).

especially to old age. The Mexican population began to undergo this process during the first half of the twentieth century, as the life expectancy of Mexicans rose from between 20 and 30 years in the first quarter-century to 50 years in the 1950s, reaching 67 in the 1980s and 75 in 2012 (Jiménez, 1988; Consejo Nacional de Población [Conapo], 2012).

The State of Mexico has participated in this phenomenon in the same way as the rest of the country, through practically all the same historic stages. Today, it is the most heavily populated state, with a total of 15.2 million inhabitants. The life expectancy of *Mexiquenses* for the year 2012 is 76.1 years (Consejo Estatal de Población [COESPO], 2011). Of the total population of the state, 1.13 million are aged 60 years or over, which makes it the federal entity with the highest number of older adults in absolute terms. The total of individuals in situation of widowhood in the State of Mexico is 454,000, of which 78% are women. Of the total of widows and widowers, 67.5% are aged 60 years or over. Of the total of older adults 27% are widowed (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2010).

On the basis of the above, it can be seen that widowhood is an event whose significance changes in relation to its context: the history of populations and the moment at which it occurs in the life course of each person. That is to say that the individual's perspective varies in relation to his or her position in the family organization and the moment of the family life-cycle at which the loss of the partner occurs; this is what accounts for its particular importance in old age. As regards the State of Mexico, the condition of widowhood deserves special attention on account of its being the most highly populated in terms of older adults and because widowhood in old age is a statistically significant phenomenon.

Widowhood and associated factors: review of the literature

Several aspects are mentioned in the literature associated with the condition of widowhood, and this section examines some factors in particular. Those relating widowhood with processes of economic vulnerability have special prominence, followed by psychological aspects related to depersonalization, loss of identity and mourning. Then

there is that account that sets forth widowhood as an antecedent to suicide, or that relates it as a form of death. Also the loss of sexuality is set forth as another form of mourning simultaneous to widowhood.

Economic vulnerability in widowhood

From the economic perspective, old age is seen as a fundamental phenomenon since the conjugal structure not only consists in a formalization of family life, but is also a fundamental component in the agrarian mode of production. Historically, family units have also been domestic units of agricultural production. Hence, at one time widowhood was a phenomenon that implied the dismantling of the basic unit of production. Thus, whether the survivor was a man or a woman, the death of the other partner meant the loss of one of the basic elements of economic, social and biological reproduction. If it was the woman who died, the domestic unit lost an essential element for maintenance, as regards the gathering of food and its daily preparation, the make-up and repair of clothing and the care of the youngest members of the family unit. With the death of the male partner the domestic unit lost the productive unit's basic producer, the head of the family, principal administrator of property, manager of affairs relating to external society, or to municipal or agrarian administrations. Within this logic, dying and leaving a family represented the onset of vulnerability, with different effects in the cases of men or women. As Tovar (1999) observes, this vulnerability resulted in weakness, need, indigence and misfortune.

It is important to remember that — in the historical conditions experienced by many of those Mexicans who are now of advanced age — to have survived the transmissible diseases of that period (smallpox, measles, cholera, tuberculosis etc.), to which the lack of vaccines and absence of medical services made them so vulnerable, was a feat in itself; hence, when longevity was attained, it represented an extraordinary event of great social significance. However, the widowhood that accompanied that longevity did not enjoy the protection afforded by a pension or any other benefits, something that affected women particularly on account of their longer life expectancy. Traditionally, women depend economically on their husbands throughout their lives, which means that when widowed

they lose their main economic support and are thrown on the labor market without adequate preparation. Even today, widowhood is associated with vulnerability and poverty. On the other hand, because of the way in which male children were brought up, wives represent a fundamental affective link, and it is often they who resolve matters of daily life; it is also they who generate and maintain links with relatives, neighbors and friends. From the perspective of gender, the elderly — both women and men — are vulnerable; but they differ in important social and economic aspects.

Depersonalization, loss of identity and mourning

From the psychological point of view, widowhood has been associated with the onset of a stage of depersonalization: the loss of the partner brings with it a loss of the widowed person's own identity. Depersonalization is regarded as an alteration of one's perception or experience of oneself, such that one feels "separated" from one's mental processes and body, as if one were an observer external to them. While this can also happen in the case of divorce, its effects are clearly different as regards family and society; some of the literature indicates that the social networks act with greater force when there is a death in the family than in the case of divorce or separation; social solidarity tends to come into operation in the face of unavoidable events, and not so when both partners are still alive and break society's basic link. Other studies point to the role of the social networks when faced with the death of a partner as a factor of protection in the ambience of family and religion that helps the bereaved to deal with the event (López, Cervantes, Obregón and Villalón, 2009).

The loss of identity generated by widowhood and the mourning process can be defined as the state of thought, feeling and activity resulting from the loss of the loved person, and which is associated with physical and emotional symptoms. Psychologically it is traumatic in the same degree as a wound or a burn, and is thus always painful; a person needs time to return to the normal equilibrium, which is what constitutes the mourning

process (Carevic, 2003).⁵ Hence the protection afforded by the social networks can only be a partial help to emotional recovery. Nonetheless, there are mechanisms of confrontation that help to generate resilience and adaptation following the loss of a spouse; studies have shown the existence of strategies for revaluation through the support networks that have a cohesive and communicative function for individuals who experience widowhood (López, Cervantes, Obregón and Villalón, 2009). Another study carried out in Spain concludes that adaptation to widowhood implies beginning to confront problems alone, overcoming the initial experience of insecurity at having to do things one has never done before, to decide for oneself. Likewise it postulates that the ability to adapt depends on various factors, such as sex, age, state of health, degree of dependency, and the presence of social support networks (Sánchez-Vera, Algado, Centelles, López & Jiménez, 2009). Interviews with social workers suggested that rural communities tend to give more support to those experiencing the death of a spouse, but that all in all remaining active is one of the best mechanisms for helping one to face the future with greater success (Sánchez-Vera, Algado, Centelles, López & Jiménez, 2009).

Widowhood as a factor of risk to suicide

Some researchers have also pointed out that widowhood may produce a situation of despair and departure from normal behavior that, on occasions, can generate a form of “social death” and, in the worst case, an actual death by suicide. In other words, marriage, or having a partner, can be seen as a protective factor against suicidal urges (Luoma and Pearson, 2002). But it might be as well to clarify at this point whether — rather than suicide being a direct consequence of widowhood — such deaths might be a response to the social death arising from the separation imposed in some societies after widowhood. It would thus be difficult to uphold a direct causal relation between widowhood and suicide. In US society it has been found that while widowhood figures as a preceding factor to suicide in younger populations, as age advances divorce acquires greater significance (Luoma and

⁵ According to Carevic (2003), Freud noted the similarity between the word mourning and one of the Latin words for mourning (*dolor*) and *duellum*, or duel, which implies a painful combat between two entities: on the one hand, the ego that resists giving up its sources of satisfaction and, on the other, the reality principle that insists on the loss.

Pearson, 2002). These studies make clear that separation from a spouse has substantial force in our cultures and that the loss of the partner has a serious effect on social life. Marriage or the presence of a partner, in contrast, strengthens the role of individuals in relation to society and protects personal identity. These questions probably tend to be aggravated in those couples that lack offspring, since the existence of children can offset the negative effect of widowhood or divorce.

Till death us do part...

Our culture is permeated by Judeo-Christian models that have given pride of place to religious norms over and above civil ones; hence Catholic marriage still plays a significant role in Mexican society. Here, marriage is still regarded as a link that should last the whole of life and which ought only to be dissolved by the death of one of the partners. According to data from the State of Mexico, in 1990, 49.3% of the population aged 60 or over were married by both religious and civil ceremonies, a proportion which fell in 2000 to 45.9%, while 4.3 and 3.1, respectively, were married by religious ceremonies alone (Consejo Estatal de Población [COESPO], 2006). Marriage favors company; despite inevitable conflicts, the presence of a partner in old age takes on a very peculiar meaning; an important part of the relationship resides in the fact of overcoming loneliness and offering mutual caring. Although offspring is the fruit of the matrimonial relation, children can never be a substitute for the tenderness and love of the couple. Another important element, in this respect, has to do with sexuality in advanced age; the spouse is also the sexual and affective partner, so that death also implies, generally, the cancellation of sexual life.

The loss of partner sexuality in widowhood

Sexuality in itself is a censured subject, even more so when one talks about sexuality in the couple. But treatment of sexuality in advanced age is practically nonexistent

in the literature. López (2007) suggests that there is a refusal to talk or think about sexuality in old age, and this is due to three concrete errors and several false beliefs. Among the errors this author mentions: the conception of sexuality as reduced to genitality and capacity for coitus; the fact sex in advanced age is imagined on the basis of the youthful coital model; and the simplification of sexuality to the male erection which also functions as a symbol of power. All these errors inhibit consideration of sexuality by treating it in function of erection and capacity for coitus and not of that for pleasure and love. Among the false beliefs mentioned are: that elderly people have no capacity for having coital behavior; that elderly people have no interest in sex; that elderly people who are interested in sex are immature; that while older men may have sexual interests, elderly women do not. Other false beliefs are: that women who are interested in their sexuality are nymphomaniacs; sexual deviations are more common in old age; sexual activity wears out and ages; sexual activity is bad for the health; masturbation is a deviant form of behavior; after the menopause sexual satisfaction diminishes; older people with illnesses ought not to have sexual activity; older people are not sexually attractive to others; women ought to be the same age or younger than their male partners (López, 2007; Fouilloux, 2007).

In view of this quantity of erroneous ideas and beliefs one is unlikely to associate age with sexuality and even less so after widowhood. Nonetheless, sexuality has a very important role in old age; although its reproductive basis may have been lost, it is often more pleasurable and satisfies physical and emotional desires. As we can appreciate, sexuality is a taboo when talking about elderly people; it is believed mistakenly that they do not exercise their sexuality as young people do (Fouilloux, 2007). As regards popular culture and the media, there are, for instance, few films that deal with this subject; almost all of those that do so address relations between those of mature years and younger people. Even more so, when the subject of sexuality in old age is addressed, the attention is centered on males who have relations with younger women. Nor is homosexuality in old age touched on (Fouilloux, 2007). Likewise there is a double taboo on speaking of female sexuality in old age and even more so in relation with younger men.

For anybody, irrespective of age, sexuality is an important aspect of a full life. With the passing of time it becomes transformed. It does not, however, disappear; on the contrary it is maintained while the need for affection, tenderness, empathy and pleasure in physical

contact increases (López and Olazábal, 1998; cited in López, 2007; Dello, 1998; cited in Fouilloux, 2007).

The literature records the fact that once the reproductive age is passed women discover a substantial aspect of their sexuality, more pleasure oriented and less subject to the risk of pregnancy, though not to sexually transmissible diseases. Researchers agree that the hormonal changes women experience as a result of the diminution of the ovarian function do not always produce changes in sexual activity (Fouilloux, 2007). As for men, it is only difficult to exercise genital sexuality if there are problems in the physical condition, but in general the exercise of sexuality has advantages for health and self-esteem.⁶ One of the benefits most often mentioned has to do with vitality, strengthening of self-esteem and security in relating to other people. In the physiological context the cardiovascular system also benefits and along with that many other organs of the body (López, 2007). But a fundamental aspect, which must be mentioned despite its obviousness, is that through sexuality we attain happiness momentarily but consistently (Fouilloux, 2007). For this reason it ought also to be obvious that, although widowhood clearly cancels out sexuality with the deceased partner, new options are opened once the mourning period has been passed.

Many other matters are related to widowhood; I have, however, tried to make this review of the importance of this subject in the sociological field as brief as possible, leaving aside many other aspects that deserve to be analyzed in the face of the increase in longevity and concomitant demographic aging that our societies are undergoing.

Aim of the study and methodological strategy

The present research is part of a broader study entitled: Demographic Diagnosis of Aging in the Estado de México developed in the Centre for Research and Advanced Studies on Population at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México. This study is aimed at discovering the situation of people aged 60 and over in the country's most populous state.

⁶ Dello (1998; cited in Fouilloux, 2007) found a series of factors associated positively with sexual activity: being of male sex, being married, being younger, higher educational level, good social functioning and non-impairment of cognitive faculties.

To this end a socio-demographic survey was carried out, and a qualitative study was performed on certain aspects considered relevant: the population institutionalized in old people's homes (Garay, 2009), elderly people in prisons (Ramírez, 2009), among the indigenous population, and in the condition of widowhood. Each line of research had its own objectives. As regards the inquiry into the condition of widowhood, the questions guiding this study were: How is widowhood lived out? What is its significance in advanced stages of life? What role does gender play in the ways in which widowhood is played out? What impact does it have on the sense of life and what mechanisms arise to deal with loneliness? How is the exercise of sexuality transformed after widowhood?

In this framework the central objective of this study was to discover the significance and the perceptions generated by widowhood, how this experience is lived out in elderly men and women in various municipalities of the State. To this end nine semi-structured surveys were carried out with a questionnaire in the municipality of Texcoco, State of Mexico, during May and August, 2008. Out of the interviews effected, three cases were selected that proved of particular theoretic relevance in contrast with the remaining interviewed informants. Once the cases selected for study had been transcribed the results were analyzed paying significant attention to widowhood and its relation with sexuality in old age in the State of Mexico.

The study is explorative, qualitative and analytic; hence it is not intended to be representative so much as to enable currents and countercurrents regarding the subject of widowhood and sexuality to be identified. This article takes up the most relevant points on the subject, the limitation being the lack of a larger number of cases that might allow a contrast with other perspectives. It appeals, nevertheless, to the arguments of Giménez (2012) regarding case studies, which stress their validity in exploratory analyses since, if salient elements are found in this type of context (older persons in a municipality like Texcoco in the State of Mexico), one may well consider that the subjects of sexuality and widowhood are in themselves sociologically and anthropologically pertinent in relation to the area that concerns us of human aging. Thus, as Yin (2003) mentions, such case studies are generalizable for theoretic purposes, although not statistically; their utility resides in helping to identify novel problems that have not been fully explored by means of other methodologies. In summary, this article only aims to present some evidence regarding the

perception of widowhood and how it connects with other matters, such as the question of social support networks and sexuality. It does not seek to infer conclusions regarding all the widowed people of the Estado de México, but only to explore new perspectives for analyzing widowhood in Mexico in general.

Widowhood, loneliness and sexuality through three case studies in the State of Mexico

This article considers three cases that may help to understand the significance of, and perceptions regarding, widowhood in old age: two cases of males (73 and 75 years) and one female (71). The three individuals involved lived at the moment of the interview in the community of San Miguel Tlaixpan, Texcoco, Estado de México. Doña María had been married for 40 years, Don José, for 46, and Don Luis, for 25 years. They all enjoyed long-lasting marriages to which children were born. Their offspring are not considered the main source of family support, which is a characteristic that breaks with the general tendency of old age in Mexico (Montes de Oca, 2001). These individuals did not have a solid family network to provide support. Despite the considerable pain and sadness that the experience of widowhood left in them, reflecting the long years of married life, the circumstances that prevail in each history are the prolonged illnesses of their spouses. For example, the husband of Doña María and the wife of Don Luis died as a result of diabetes, and the wife of Don José of a probable brain tumor. The average length of widowhood experienced by them at the time of interview was around ten years, during which they have had to deal with their own illness, loneliness and the lack of support from relatives.

The moment of occurrence of an event is a central factor in the way in which experience is reconstructed — in this case, that of widowhood, which is reflected on in old age. These elements are a datum that deserves to be analyzed in a particular way.

“It was eight years ago that my husband died; I was 66 years old when he went. We got married in 1960 and our marriage lasted forty years. My husband died of diabetes, thirty years of diabetes; that illness finishes them off, there are lots of things they can’t eat; he was in very delicate health for a long time. He went off early and took his pills; at night he

came home and took other pills. That was the only way to have it under control; he ate very little.” (Doña María, 72 years of age, 43 of marriage. Born in San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

For Doña María, the death of her husband appears as a painful event but also as a relief after so many years of suffering from diabetes, which implied many years of care. Death meant rest from suffering for the sick man but also for the surviving widow. One must remember that 30 years ago medical science had not advanced so far in terms of treatment for diabetes, and the situation was harsher for the sick and for their families; today it is easier to live with this illness.

Don José’s narrative reflects other experiences:

“I was 63 years old when my wife died, I’ve been a widower for 12 years. My wife got sick in the head. I was in Atizapán. One Friday I got back from work, and she was taken very bad; we went to see the doctor at San Nicolás; he prescribed some medicines, they did nothing for her. On Sunday she got worse, we took her to another doctor and she had to be admitted to hospital in Texcoco. We took her by car, but she didn’t make it; she died on the way, just at the entrance to the Molino de las Flores, she never got to see the doctor. I think it was a tumor, because she had a terrible pain in the head, but we never knew for sure what the illness was, who knows what happened to her.” (Don José, 75 years old and 46 of marriage. Born in San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

In Don José’s case, uncertainty surrounds the terrible event of seeing his wife die, without the availability of medical recourses to treat her close to home; this exemplifies the geographical vulnerability suffered by many communities in the state. The attempts to help his wife to survive were frustrated by the distance and the lack of adequate medical services. In view of the death of the spouse it was harrowing to have no information regarding the cause of her death, an uncertainty that compounded the pain of loss and left a feeling of sadness and bitterness.

Don Luis’s situation had something in common but also differences as regards the two previous cases:

“My wife was 48 years old when she died of diabetes, the last two years she was very ill, it got complicated by other illnesses. Diabetes finishes people off, there’s no cure, that’s a fact. I took her to various doctors in Texcoco, in Mexico City, and even to a herb doctor to practice a limpia, but she didn’t get any better, nothing helped. There’s no remedy for diabetes, I’ve been through all those failures; believe me, please, don’t take them to any doctor, they just do operations on them and it gets complicated with other diseases, it gets complicated with everything.”
(Don Luis, 73 years of age and 25 of marriage. Born in San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

In view of the age difference between Don Luis (65) and his wife (48) it would have seemed unlikely for him to have become the widowed spouse, but once again as in the case of Doña María, diabetes made its appearance, bringing misfortune upon a family of *Mexiquenses*.

This aspect is very important given the impact of this illness as one of the primary causes of death in Mexico. For 2010 the principal causes of death are given as heart disease, diabetes mellitus and malign tumors (INEGI, 2010). Given the expansion of such chronic diseases as diabetes and cancers it is possible to observe their effects in spouses and relatives previous to the patient’s death.

Disease, marginalization and widowhood

The narratives of the individuals studied illustrate several aspects that are qualitatively important when we address the subject of widowhood in *Mexiquenses* of advanced age. On the one hand, the presence of diseases that are nowadays being controlled by the country’s principal health institutions are present, but where the effort is still not reflected effectively in the population. In every case, gradually deteriorating health was the principle element leading to this event bringing pain and loneliness in old age. But while health inevitably becomes fragile in advanced age, what is most to be deplored is the lack of medical facilities and the social development to facilitate healing and help people to arrive at an advanced age with an adequate quality of life. The greater life expectation that

results in the presence of so many elderly people is rightly seen as a great social achievement, but while it is an undeniable good fortune for couples to live long years of marriage, for those condemned to spend their final years in loneliness and poverty, longevity is a dubious privilege. Don Luis, Don José and Doña María are part of that social achievement, but chronic illness denied them the possibility to live out their old age in the company of their spouses.

Part of the marginalization suffered by the elderly has as its antecedent the poverty that many of them experienced in childhood. Doña María is a case in point; as she tells us:

“I left home at the age of twelve, we were very poor, we didn’t have enough money. My mother and father were always ill. It was a sad story; they had no work. I was ten before I got to put on a pair of shoes.” (Doña María, 72 years of age and 43 of marriage. Born in San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

Don Luis’s case was similar:

“I didn’t go to school because I had to maintain my family. At the age of six I went to look after the sheep and goats. With my grandfather I worked in the fields growing maize or beans. As I had no father, my mother got married again and we went to San Pablo; there they took me to the hillsides to cut firewood, make charcoal and fell timber for running beams, shingles, boards: a bit of everything.” (Don Luis, 73 years of age and 25 of marriage. Born in San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

In many cases, the poverty experienced in childhood is repeated in old age, since the conditions in which one is born structure the life course until death. Few opportunities appear in the course of life to change the trajectories of poverty. This is the case of Doña María whose childhood and adolescence were always occupied in activities aimed at survival; then in marriage her husband was sick for thirty years and that undermined her family welfare.

The situation of Don Luis was different, since he had the opportunity to go to Mexico City and work in a bank, which provided him with the pension that maintains him

in old age. Both Doña María and Don Luis had children to their marriages, but this does not necessarily represent company nor support for them. In one of the cases offspring are a source of family support but in the other, on the contrary, a source of conflict and ill treatment in old age.

Loneliness and widowhood in old age

Widowhood puts individuals in a situation of vulnerability, while it destabilizes family structure and intensifies marginalization. Widowhood brings mourning and the psychological processes called depersonalization and identity loss in its wake. From an objective dimension, after the death of the spouse, one is simply left alone, but from a subjective dimension this is experienced as the state of deprivation we call loneliness (Sánchez-Vera and Bote, 2007). The loneliness that accompanies widowhood is often not compensated by children and grandchildren. The effect of this loneliness is expressed in the following:

“Soon after my wife died, I thought of going to live in the Asilo Mundet which is opposite the building where I go to get my pension check. I said [to a woman friend]: I’d do better to go to the old folks’ home and for them [my children] to pick up the check; what do you think? This lady said to me: Compadre, what are you going to do there? You’re still strong; there you’re just going to while away the days; here you have your house, you can get about; you must keep on. I was really in despair; I thought, best not do it here [commit suicide], better go and kill myself in the barranca and to hell with all the problems. When you’re alone the moment comes when you ask yourself: what am I doing here?” (Don Luis, 73 years of age and 25 of marriage. Native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

This case illustrates how suicide is considered after entering widowhood, something already mentioned in the review of the literature at the beginning of this article. Several studies have mentioned this phenomenon that is much more serious among young widowed

people. But life in common throughout decades and the emotional significance of the matrimonial bond paves the way for a stage of psychological crisis in those experiencing the loss of a partner. This change in marital status is regarded as a public-health problem because it is a conditioning factor for suicide. Widowhood in itself favors depression and a sense of sadness that one feels can only be alleviated by death itself (Luoma and Pearson, 2002). The loneliness that comes when the partner with whom one has shared so many years dies is an emotional experience that deserves to be studied. For Doña María the situation was somewhat similar; she tells us:

“More than anything, the loneliness is very sad, haven’t you seen how old people who remain alone get very sad? Loneliness kills us, brings us sadness. Loneliness is sad; when my old fellow died I spent nights without sleep, by day I didn’t want to eat, I was just looking for my old fellow, I was calling him. But where was I to find him? We have to make do, that’s life. They say everything has a remedy except for death. I would have liked my husband to have lived the same years as me—like cats and dogs, but together; there were moments when we got annoyed with each other, and others when we enjoyed eating together, happy. In marriage there’s something of everything: problems; but when the annoyance was over he begged me or I begged him; come on love, lets go and have dinner.”
(Doña María, 72 years old and 43 of marriage, native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

Despite the conflicts inherent in marriage, widowhood is still an event laden with sadness and loneliness. For Sánchez-Vera and Bote (2007), men tend to feel less alone than women, although they also feel the need for company and for someone to help them sort out certain functional aspects of everyday life; besides, the higher levels of schooling generally attained by men seem to palliate to some degree the feelings of loneliness.

Behind the evidence that 38.3% of women in the State of Mexico are in the condition of widowhood (INEGI, 2010), we must remember that this event is not automatic and that family and matrimonial life are two deeply emotional situations that are connected to the quality of life in old age. Loneliness and its most extreme manifestation, the

Loneliness Syndrome,⁷ can affect the state of health (physical and/or emotional) of elderly individuals. In fact, studies from the environmental perspective have found a strong correlation between loneliness and illness. There is also an inverse relation in the sense that some illnesses tend to isolate older people setting off in them feelings of loneliness that ought to be taken into account (Lawton, 1974; Gubrium, 1976; cited in Sánchez-Vera and Bote, 2007). Some studies of women have found that widowhood brings in train a depression that increases when the woman lives alone. To sum up, widowhood, loneliness and illness, in all their combinations, are connected situations that can affect the quality of life in older adults.

New unions in old age

There is only one way to deal with loneliness: seeking company. For this purpose there are help groups, third-age clubs and church groups, just to mention a few. Confrontation is a process that draws on an interior strength in order to face negative situations in life, it is way of self-adaptation and transforming satisfactorily the everyday scenarios in the new stage of life now without the loved one. For this reason, self-help groups are a very important form of support in these situations; by means of these it is possible to find friends and even to establish a new loving relationship with others of the same generation. However, this is not a simple process, since a value system exists that rejects or shows animadversion to remarriage, particularly when elderly people are involved. This is partly due to the false beliefs concerning sexuality in advanced age, as well as the above-mentioned criteria regarding sexuality itself. Offspring may also oppose it out of fear of losing all or part of their inheritance. Likewise, as marriage is connected with reproduction, the fact of “transgressing” this function has a negative impact on the image of second marriages among older people. Sánchez and Bote (2007:37) appeal to considering courtship, cohabitation and marriage among elderly couples a way of

⁷ The Loneliness Syndrome is defined as the psychological state that occurs after a loss in the system of individual support, leading to a diminution of participation in activities within the society in which one belongs and a feeling of failure in life (Bermejo, 2002).

prolonging autonomous life and providing mutual support, independence and happiness — thus maintaining the quality of life in old age — and to break with the related stereotypes.

In Mexico it is not common for widowed people to remarry, in particular when women are concerned. Nonetheless, although this subject has not been explored in this country, the case studies presented here give rise to some very interesting evidence in the respect. Don Luis mentions that on the death of his wife he felt extremely lonely and suffered on account of it:

“For this reason I looked for another woman and now I live with her; also [the fact is] my daughters didn’t look after me; they already have their husbands and children of their own, and what help is it having my mother and brothers and sisters if they are all old as well. I was left on my own.”

This declaration allows us to observe in what way the partner’s company offers elements to which the love and affection given by offspring, parents, friends and brothers and sisters are not comparable. The second marriage, on the other hand, incorporates new family arrangements in which at times children intervene, above all in the matter of inheritance. The same Don Luis comments:

“I told the lady: We’re going to get married so that you have the right to what I have. Perhaps you won’t have the right to my house.... [After all] people say: You shouldn’t put another woman in your house because the rights belong to your daughters.” (Don Luis, 73 years of age and 25 of marriage. Native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

Doña María remarks that, following her widowhood, she sought company and the chance to contract matrimony once again:

“Yes, we were lovers: he came to this house, we thought about marrying, throwing a small party, that was no longer important. My children didn’t say anything; rather, they said, it’s your life and you can do as you like.”

As can be appreciated, an element documented in the narratives of the cases studied is the interference of the offspring in the remarriage of older adults, whether men or

women. Apparently, when one is young it is parents who guide the actions of their children in matters of courtship and sexuality; however, when one arrives at an advanced age, sons and daughters take on a role of authority and counsel in these affairs of their elderly fathers and mothers. Also in the case of Doña María, attendance in support groups for the elderly enabled her to have a loving relationship:

“After my first husband died it was two or three years before I found the second; I’d already known him for years, because I used to sell things at the swimming baths and he made eyes at me, but my husband was still alive. And I did look for another man, now I was a widow I meant to get married again, but he died, he didn’t make it. I met him in the group’s dances. When my husband died we became friends, afterwards we were lovers, we were going out together, he invited me to drink a beer, we went dancing, we went for walks, rides, went out together.” (Doña María, 72 years of age and 43 of marriage. Native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

Don José, on the other hand, tried on various occasions to begin serious relationships with women, but he had no luck. However, he too is able to express the affective needs of old age, which he often tries to hide from his family or social contacts, despite the considerable impact such needs have on the quality of life. In Don José’s narratives it becomes clear that he was tricked by the offspring of his future sentimental companions, perhaps because of his accumulated wealth. One article in particular in the literature on ill treatment deals with just this problem of economic abuse in old age, giving details of its incidence by gender and age (Giraldo, 2006). Don José was a victim of ill treatment by the children of his possible future partners and the experience gave him cold feet about seeking anyone else; he has thus preferred to live out his old age alone so as to avoid the risks involved in trying to reconcile different dynamics and family interests.

“When you’re getting on you have to look after yourself, if you don’t take care you take the faster road to the graveyard. Sex comes to an end. The doctors say everything’s good but in moderation: a drink with moderation, anything with moderation. If you go blazing ahead things end

faster. The desire to be with women fades away. The women I've known since my wife died have left me with unpleasant experiences; they did harmful things to me; they robbed me of my money, they didn't show love and affection for me. Better by yourself, it's better alone than in bad company. I'm well enough off with what I had when I was young." (Don José, 75 years of marriage and 46 of marriage. Native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

There is no doubt that the need for affection is strong in widowhood; hence in old age attempts are made to live once again in company. However, experiences do not always work out: in old age men may suffer financial ill treatment by their own families or those of their chosen partners. Such was the situation of Don José, who was unfortunate when he tried to enter into a new amorous relationship and, the reader will recall, also received ill treatment from his own daughters. The studies have shown that most of those responsible for ill treatment are members of a person's own family or others with a certain closeness.



7

*Elderly couple dancing at a party in
Toluca, Estado de México*

Photo: Proa

In Giraldo's study (2006) in Mexico City (Distrito Federal) the various types of ill treatment do not show differences by level of education, but they do by sex. Men suffer to a greater extent ill treatment, both physically and economically, while ill treatment of women tends to be physical or psychological. All types of ill treatment increase with age and with deteriorating health (Giraldo, 2006).

The body demands it: sexuality and aging

While remarriage in old age is a marginalized subject in sociological and anthropological studies, even less attention is given to sexuality and pleasure in the third age. There can be no doubt that Doña María's declarations go beyond the more traditional and orthodox visions of women and sexuality in advanced age. This case shows that individuals can construct their own discourse, far distant from that expected of them by society. She is a woman of scant educational and economic resources but with a wisdom evidenced by her own words. She mentions the importance of the exercise of sexuality in old age and points out that, although emotional and bodily needs are often ignored, she did not give up trying:

“‘Love is for once only and no more’, as the song has it [Solamente una vez [...], solamente una vez y nada más...]. I did feel love for the second man, and sorrow at his death, but not like the first time, for him who was the father of my children; I did love him very much and mourned his death deeply. You don't love the second man so deeply; if you do happen to fall in love again it's not with so much love as the first time, it's different. While God gives me permission to stay alive, it's no big problem to be alone.

A lot of people talk about widows: Look at the dirty old sows! They had their turn at husband and children, and there they go flirting, looking for another man, it's disgusting. Even when we're alone, there's always people's tittle-tattle to put up with.”

In these first narratives, Doña María shows awareness of the expected social discourse, and mentions the attempts at coercion by the social milieu, through what she calls “people's tittle-tattle”. She is aware of those social mechanisms and the way widows are supposed to behave in society. But she knows that in that social discourse there is no room for personal satisfaction and display of other feelings. She continues explaining to the interviewer:

“I’m going to talk woman to woman; if you go looking for the company of men, at parties or in the street it’s because you’re looking for a man; we all have that need to be with a man, it’s in women’s nature, that’s what we came into the world for. Of course there are frigid people; well, who cares? That’s as far as they go.

Women need men, it’s part of our nature; even when you’re old you still feel it and you can do it; it’s more difficult [to be sure], it’s no longer quite the same.

It’s a matter of how you feel, how much energy you have; there are women who are still looking for a husband, the body demands it, calls for it, it still feels the energy calling for sex, it feels like when you were young, though it’s really no longer the same. You feel the longing, the desire for a hug, a kiss, to hear pretty words: “Come sweetheart”. It’s normal, it’s part of what we are; as women we feel that longing.

Although women deny it—although they say it’s not that way—they do need it, it’s a lie to say they don’t feel it, they do feel the desire.” (Doña María, 72 years of age and 43 of marriage. Native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

The above relation shows a strong hedonistic and positive discourse in favor of sexuality, pleasure and enjoyment in old age. It is certainly a counter-discourse as regards the collective imaginary regarding female old age. Her narrative evinces a strongly constituted *doxa* and a sustained *praxis* as regards affective relations and bodily needs. The realization, or recognition, of desire are transcendent aspects in this stage of life that are often difficult to explore in the first person, to set forth before others—all the more so to live out in view of social and family questioning.

Don Luis’s case does not seem very different; there is, however, a more precise need to satisfy everyday functions. While Doña María seems very independent and self-sufficient, the men’s narratives show something beyond an emotional need. If we look at this from a gender perspective, we find that men were brought up to be waited on, and for this reason when they become widowed they feel incapacitated for living everyday life. In the case of women, the search for company could seem more hedonistic, a search for the

pleasure lost with the years, perhaps.⁸ On the other hand, Don Luis, faced with the lack of support from his five daughters, stated the following:

“A man must always look for a partner. Many people have told me: If you’d had a male child he would have come to see you.... Who knows? My daughters are jealous, envious and selfish. They ought to attend to me, care for me, show me affection or whatever, but they don’t give me anything; on the contrary, they want me to give them. The woman is also alone and needs someone to help her or accompany her. We men do still have the need to be with a woman... The desire to have intimate relations with a woman doesn’t stop; even if you get to 100 years it doesn’t go away, I’m not joking. It’s not only when you’re young, you feel it too when you get old, although it’s not the same because we no longer have the same energies. I’m seventy-three, and I feel like a person of 50, 55, 60 years, I feel that age, I don’t feel like I’m finished. I fancy that woman, I’m going to live and have a relationship with her; why not? If it’s a need, if you feel it, that’s how it is.” (Don Luis, 73 years of age and 25 of marriage. Native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

Don Luis also sets forth his arguments regarding the physical need for pleasure and the practical need for company in order to deal with aspects of daily life. These bear similarities to those of Doña María, but her narrative shows a clear inclination towards the recovery of pleasure and enjoyment of sexuality, possibly as a response to the process of pregnancies, child raising, care of the family, which often amounts to a sacrifice of pleasure in women. On the other hand, in Don Luis there is a need for sex and affection, but also for support in everyday life.

Don José tells us that sexual needs do not come to an end in old age, although physical limitations exist that increase with age.

⁸ Although the subject of pleasure in old age has received little attention from the social sciences, the psychology of old age has mentioned that satisfaction and pleasure are indispensable for the individual’s physical and psychological well-being. Capodiecì (1998, p.243) points out that if life consisted only of sacrifice and striving after difficult objectives, sooner or later it would become unbearable. Pleasure, on the other hand, being the spice of life, can make the struggle worthwhile and help us to understand that what is most important is not how long life lasts, but also its quality and the way it is lived. The same author adds that “the capacity for experiencing pleasure does not depend on will or choice, but is intimately linked to our real essence; it may seem paradoxical, but while it is not possible to cause us pain, it is not possible to do the same with pleasure” (Capodiecì, 1998, p. 242).

“You don’t forget it, but you can no longer rise to it. I’m 75 years old. My nieces tell me: “Uncle José, there are plenty of women out there”, but now I can’t; the body can’t take the strain any more. Of course we have the need, not only when we’re young; now we’re old we still feel it, it doesn’t finish, you still feel it, but it’s not the same as when you’re young. You need a woman for company, to have someone to talk to, tell her about things and to help make decisions; to say: ‘Look at this; what should we do? what do you think`...” (Don José, 75 years of age and 46 of marriage, native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

Don Luis and Don José manifest a traditional discourse regarding sexuality, more centered on genitility; nonetheless, that conception opens out to broader aspects concerning sexuality, as López (2007) points out. In the case of Doña María, clearly with age reproductive capacity is lost and perhaps this biological reality is what makes it possible to overcome the traditional notion of sexuality and to advance towards a more pleasure-centered conception of it.

On the other hand, unfortunately, the population of advanced age, whether male or female, is not free of abuses: its vulnerability makes it easy prey to ill treatment, often of a criminal nature.

Although it is a good thing that families of elderly individuals and government institutions should to try to facilitate encounters of an affectively healthy nature between elderly people, they must also be on their guard to ensure that such relations form in a framework of respect for rights, in which abuses and ill treatment are penalized.



Elderly couple in the arcades at Toluca
Photo: Sandra Mata Domínguez

Perception of old age

Widowhood is an event in the life course that is associated ever more exclusively with old age and has thus important implications in the perception of elderly persons attempting to rebuild upon this stage of their lives. It has been observed that widowhood calls for a reconstruction of identity because a kind of depersonalization is experienced; it is also true that the vision reflected by elderly people themselves enables us to understand advanced age from their own perspective. For instance, Don Luis shows us how he regards his situation in comparison with that of other people of his age: he regards himself as fortunate and takes for granted that the family is a key element in the well-being of old age at present. Part of his own perception, however, is due to the bad relation he has with his daughters. His opinion, although it is partially true, also betrays the fact that Don Luis lacks a full awareness of the citizenship rights that individuals of advanced age ought to enjoy. In his narrative we can also appreciate a generational awareness regarding the situation of elderly people like himself. In this respect he comments:

*“I looked after my own affairs; I have a pension and insurance to live off.
There across the road there’s a fellow of my age and he still has to work;*

he's a builder, and at his age he still has to work, sometimes all day. On the other hand, I just have to go and collect my money, come back home and go to sleep. I have a place to live, someone to cook for me, I have money so we can go out; I don't have to tighten my belt, or wonder: 'What am I going to do? where am I to get a meal? Thank God I have something to live on'. There are lots of people who are not protected, most of them old folks. Who knows what'll happen to them tomorrow? At times it's not the government that's to blame; it's the family. Nowadays, children get married and have children of their own. They don't help the old folks, they don't go to see them, they don't value them, they forget about them." (Don Luis, 73 years of age and 25 of marriage. Native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

Doña María is not so optimistic about her own old age and links her present state with the functional deterioration she is suffering. This perception of aging has been identified in other works, confirming its close relation with the state of physical and mental health, as well as with its capacity to develop activities that are basic and instrumental for daily life (Robles, Reyes, Vázquez, & Orozco, 2005). Nonetheless, Doña María alludes to some strategies for keeping oneself cheerful and in a good mood; one that proves fundamental is to maintain contact with groups of one's own age and to engage in playful activities:

"The truth is that I am suffering, feeling more worn out. How will I be in two or three years time; if God lets me live I'll have so many more years on my shoulders. I'm going to feel even more worn out, I'll be overcome by weakness, having to sit down all the time, I'll no longer be able to move out. You can be happy or sad, depending on how you take it, only God knows how long he'll give me permission to live; I'll take it as God commands. We must be aware of our age, take courage, keep our spirits up, as long as we're able to fend for ourselves. If we're going to start getting miserable, we're already done for. When I get in the mood I dress up and go and dance in the third age group; yesterday we danced in the church after the rosary of the feast of St. Anthony." (Doña María, 72 years

of age and 43 of marriage. Native of San Nicolás Tlaminca, Texcoco, State of Mexico).

The relation between Doña María and other members of her generation appears to be a resource that helps her keep in good spirits, despite feeling down on occasions. She expresses her awareness of time as an allotted lifespan, aware of the changes in her body and the likelihood of running out of energy; but she strives to face up to the passing years and has strategies for adapting herself positively. The experience of these case studies allows us to talk about a conscious attitude that people adopt in order to face up to aging and the changes of health conditions brought about by old age. There is no doubt that mental health, through a good spirit and the strength to continue with enjoyable activities, involves resilience to the changes involved in aging.

Final reflections

Widowhood has been little studied as a significant event in the life of individuals that brings about substantial changes in the life course. With increasing life expectancy widowhood tends to be postponed and is now more closely associated with old age. Statistically the condition of widowhood is lived with greater force among the population aged 60 years and over, but it is not known how this event is experienced, perceived and signified in the lives of elderly persons. This article sets out to discover the perceptions and meanings associated with the experience of widowhood, using a qualitative study in the State of Mexico, the Mexican federal entity with the highest concentration of elderly population in the country. The study is of an exploratory, analytic and qualitative nature founded on three case studies which are not intended to be extrapolated to elderly *Mexiquences* in the condition of widowhood in general — nor to widowed Mexicans as a whole — but are regarded as theoretically relevant since they demonstrate different factors associated with the event itself which has an undeniable impact on the quality of life in old age.

Some factors mentioned in the literature are: economic vulnerability resulting from widowhood; loss of identity; experience of mourning; feelings of loneliness; contemplation

of suicide; the need for company and remarriage. The awareness of the need for affection and company opens on reflections regarding sexuality and pleasure, but in view of this situation, the family is not necessarily the best support. These cases, through their narratives, show mechanisms for coping after becoming widowed. This shows that years may be needed to overcome the sadness and to find strategies for forging ahead; but the voices of Doña María, Don Luis and Don José give concrete expression to those situations, with their feelings, lived experiences and narratives that are critical of the traditional discourse on old age, widowhood and sexuality. Inadvertently, an event related to mortality in the couple brings us to other effects barely glimpsed at previously in the literature.

The narratives present us with the force of these experiences and the way in those who underwent them resolved them—or attempted to resolve them—so as to continue their lives in old age. Their narratives describe economic readjustments, experiences of abuse, suicidal impulses, loss of identity as part of a process of mourning and changes in everyday life as effects brought on by widowhood. An interesting aspect that stands out in the interviews in these three cases is the need for affection following the loss of the spouse; while the literature abounds in studies of the processes of loss, little has been done to explore the strategies of elderly people to satisfy their needs for company, sexual gratification and pleasure. For Doña María and Don Luis this represents a fundamental element in the quality of life in advanced years. While both of these are now aged a little over seventy, at the time of being widowed, some ten years ago, they still had the initiative to look for affection further beyond what their families could give them. The discourses showed that family and children are important but that they are no substitute for the presence of a partner with whom to enjoy a full sexual life.

The meaning older people give to widowhood depends on the moment in their life course at which they experience it, as well as the circumstances in which they are living. The three cases had to deal with the sickness of the spouse, processes of uncertainty in the face of deteriorating health and poverty in the life course. But widowhood in old age is irremediably an event linked to the appearance of feelings of loneliness that may lead to illness or even the death of the person who undergoes them. At the same time, the absence of a partner sets in evidence the importance of company in old age; widowhood represents the absence of love, sexuality and pleasure for which other family members are no

substitute. Despite the fact that Mexican culture and its system of values second marriages after divorce or widowhood are frowned on, these are events which, according to Sánchez and Bote (2007), are necessary and desirable for maintaining the quality of psychic and physical life of men and women in old age. The evidence shows that widowhood oscillates between two paradigms: on the one hand a state of loneliness and loss, but on the other the possibility that, once the phase of mourning has been overcome, an opportunity may open up for love and sexuality in old age.

I hope this article may serve to motivate further academic research into the condition of male and female widowhood, from the points of view of public health, sociology and anthropology, with new related elements that may overcome the shortfall of the perspective on widowhood and show mechanisms and strategies of resilience for enjoying life alone or with a partner, aspects that in old age are central for maintaining the quality of life. On the other hand it is necessary to integrate the thematic of sexuality, from a critical perspective, in the studies of quality of life and healthy aging. This aspect is indispensable if we are to introduce something of humanity into our work in the sciences of aging, for otherwise we would be condemned to studying an existence lacking in passion and enjoyment.

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