

Erotic wisdom in old age

La sabiduría del erotismo en la vejez

A sabedoria do erotismo na velhice

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this chapter is to articulate the concepts of wisdom and eroticism in order to consider the positive resources of the elderly in relation to sexuality throughout life. Knowing the ways in which the erotic pleasures are reconsidered at a vital stage where physical and cultural constraints can be found, may be of great value to both individual and social levels. Wisdom in eroticism seeks for the source of eroticism as a cognitive, reflective and emotional resource to treat its biological and cultural variables in sexuality. Therefore, alternative ways of obtaining pleasure can be found to strengthen personal integrity. In conclusion, the elderly, when facing certain changes that limit or prevent the sexual act, display the following three alternatives: - They multiply the areas available for enjoyment such as fantasizing, and finding ways of enjoying each other; - They increase the importance of amorous exchange in the couple; and – They find alternative ways to enjoy beauty. This chapter is based on theoretical sources and empirical evidence obtained through qualitative research.

Keywords: Wisdom; Eroticism; Old age.

RESUMEN: *El objetivo de este capítulo es articular los conceptos de sabiduría y erotismo con el fin de considerar los recursos positivos de los adultos mayores en relación a la sexualidad a lo largo del curso vital. Conocer los modos en que se redimensionan los goces eróticos en una etapa vital donde se pueden hallar limitaciones físicas y culturales puede resultar de gran valor tanto a nivel individual como social. La sabiduría del erotismo busca indicar como se conforma un recurso cognitivo, reflexivo y emocional para tratar las variables circunstancias biológicas y culturales sobre la sexualidad. De esta manera se posibilitaría la formación de goces supletorios que fortalecerían la integridad personal. A modo de conclusión hallamos que en el envejecimiento, frente a ciertos cambios que limitan o imposibilitan la genitalidad, se despliegan tres modos alternativos que: - multiplican las áreas disponibles de goce como en el fantaseo, la ponderación de otros espacios de disfrute y variadas formas de acceso al mismo; - aumentan la importancia que toma la figura de un erotismo amoroso con la pareja, y - posibilitan encontrar formas alternativas de disfrute de la belleza. Este capítulo se basa en fuentes teóricas y datos empíricos surgidos de investigaciones cualitativas.*

Palabras clave: *Sabiduría; Erotismo; Vejez.*

RESUMO: *O objetivo deste capítulo é articular os conceitos de sabedoria e erotismo, a fim de considerar os recursos positivos do idoso em relação à sexualidade ao longo da vida. Conhecer as formas em que os prazeres eróticos redimensiona numa fase vital, em que pode encontrar restrições físicas e culturais que podem ser de grande valor tanto em nível individual como social. A sabedoria de erotismo procura indicar como um recurso cognitivo, reflexivo, e emocional está em conformidade para tratar variadas circunstâncias biológicas e culturais sobre a sexualidade. Dessa forma, a formação de prazeres suplementares susceptíveis de reforçar a integridade pessoal permitiria. Em conclusão, descobrimos que, no envelhecimento, contra certas alterações que limitam ou impedem os órgãos genitais, três modos alternativos são implantados: - multiplicar as áreas disponíveis de diversão e fantasia; a ponderação de outros espaços de entretenimento e de variadas formas de acesso; - aumentar a importância de levar a figura de um casal erótico amoroso, e - possivelmente encontrar formas alternativas para desfrutar da beleza. Este capítulo baseia-se em fontes teóricas e dados empíricos emergentes de pesquisa qualitativa.*

Palavras-chave: *Sabedoria; Erotismo; Velhice.*

Introduction

Wisdom is as vague a concept as it is fascinating, perhaps because it continues to be retrieved from many different sources, trying to find a precious element related to knowledge and life.

To associate it with old age seems to be a commonplace, either for the search of a deeper kind of knowledge, which would be learnt on its way dealing with adversity; or because of the legacy that develops between those who leave and those who stay. However, it was rarely associated with knowledge about eroticism.

Taking up this topic not only involves delving into a fruitful field, where thoughts, concepts or theories are generated, but also it implies starting from the complexity of eroticism itself, which requires psychological, biological and social bases from where gains and losses stem out, or even both seem to be necessary to develop the "wisdom of eroticism".

Placing old age as a stage on which both concepts – wisdom and eroticism – are articulated seems to be a challenge from which the positive resources of the human being can be considered in this stage of life and also in relation to this topic.

Without denying certain biological and cultural difficulties that can emerge with age, to conceive the maximum development of human potential to enjoy it and help face adversity seems to be the aim of positive psychology and the current political reading.

Wisdom

The definitions are varied, both among the academic definitions and in folk wisdom. A pragmatic sense of this knowledge will be delved into in this work.

The first definition of the term, related to its etymology, deals with behavior that is appropriate, balanced and sensible to specific situations (Oxford University Press, 2005).

The Latin word "sapientia" means intelligence, judgment, sense, sanity, prudence, philosophy and knowledge. This word comes from the verb *Sapio, sapis, Sapere, sapivi / sapui / sapii* which originally meant to have flavor, to taste, to have good taste and also to know and have wisdom, common sense to judge things (Oxford University Press, 2005). The Hebrew and Greek terms also refer to the notion of a sensible and joyful knowledge about the pragmatism of life.

In this line of thought, Ferrater Mora (1940) links the ideal of the wise man of ancient times to the man of experience. His knowledge is based on the fusion of the theoretical with the practical, where knowledge and virtue or the creation of value, are basically similar. That is where the freedom of the wise man goes through a curious acceptance of what is given, but without thereby abandoning his search and interests.

From academic journals, Lubart and Sternberg (2001) draw definitions of wisdom where a vision of human nature and its difficulties stands; emotional recovery and coping with adversity; the openness to different possibilities; the capacity for forgiveness; and the learning from other life experiences. Wisdom seems to be associated with the ability of human beings to see and face difficulties, emotionally overcome them through forgiveness and to find new resources.

Baltes and Smith (1994) defined wisdom as the expertise in the domain of fundamental pragmatics of life and the human condition, with the variability, relativism, level of uncertainty and conflicts that characterize it. Baltes (1997) proposed a short formula, the SOC, which would summarize this concept. The limitations imposed by certain types of aging processes are transformed into new forms of life selectivity, which would optimize the particular general knowledge of the individual. Failures would be compensated by mechanisms that would replace the lost resources. Thus, SOC tries to face adversities strategically combining selection, optimization and compensation (SOC).

Summing up, wisdom would be a cognitive, reflective and emotional resource to deal with the changing circumstances facing the development of a life. This would facilitate finding resources for the uncertain scenarios that present difficulties and losses, and so rediscover new interests to continue linking the person with himself and with his interest in being alive.

Wisdom and Erikson's pansensual old age

This psychoanalyst defines wisdom as "informed and yet detached concern with life itself in the face of death holding and transmitting the integrity of the experience, despite the Disdain regarding human frailties and the Fear that inspires not being the end" (Erikson, 1981, p. 51).

In the above definition, the latent conflict between two ways of coping is clear. If the central force is wisdom, Erikson envisions the creation of a possible psychosexual stage: the "generalization of sensual modes" (Erikson, 2000, p. 70). This stage or resource would address the decline of partial functions and genital energy, promoting a rich body and mind experience that would promote integrity.

The "generalization of sensual modes" (Erikson, 2000, p. 70), or what we would call eroticism, becomes the basis of self-integration, since it enriches the foundations of the self. Thus the "wisdom of eroticism", although it is not mentioned as such by the author, he lets us infer it from its conceptualization. Without considering it as a stage, it could be defined as a possibility of crossing over the limits imposed by biology, life circumstances or culture, giving rise to new ways of organizing one's self.

The physical and mental enhancement that would facilitate the sensual pleasures, promotes a renewed sense of identity integration, from which one may see a hopeful promise of one self and draw out a sense of loss that leaves the person stranded in self rejection.

From this perspective, the concept of erotic wisdom is enriched as the crossing of the before-mentioned limits, as it reinforces the integrity necessary to face the imbalances that can show up in this vital stage.

Eroticism

The etymology of Eros (Greek, Ἔρως) refers to the god responsible for sexual attraction, love, sex and fertility. Plato, in the Symposium, makes Eros descend from Poros - who personified wealth, opportunity and convenience-, and Penia - who represented poverty and lack. These references allow us to consider the dual sense in lack and search of eroticism, as well as the abundance and satiety, in an alternation that gives it a special dynamism, and so the opportunity is its key element.

The term eroticism, according to the Royal Spanish Academy (2012), (Gr., ἔρωτος, ἔρωτος, love, and ism), has three meanings related to love: 1. Sensual love; 2. Character of what excites the sensual love; 3. Exaltation of the physical love in art. All definitions that allow us to relate the sensual pleasure, the call to excitement and beauty representations as central to eroticism.

Octavio Paz (2004) defined eroticism as a sexuality transfigured by human imagination, becoming the metaphor for animal sexuality, which "is beyond the reality that creates it, something new and different from the terms that constitute it." (p. 10) .This metaphor suggests the symbolic and constructive ability to resize the mechanisms of sexuality, defining spaces that refer to it without necessarily resorting to the relations between genitalia or other erogenous zones. In this sense, eroticism is built on ways that represent the substitute, similes or allusive forms of sexuality, capable of combining images, emotions and sensations. Such constructs are considered as narratives that articulate very diverse feelings and also promote, induce and activate the sensual pleasure in the subject and the object.

We might think eroticism as a dispersion of sensory pleasures unarticulated, which are brought into play by specific stimuli, or that they can be composed in a structure within certain sensorial margins. There is probably no single answer even if the second possibility is for understanding the modes of enunciation of eroticism in the fulfillment of desire, attraction through certain codes, and in its relations with the eroticism of an era.

The narrative form of eroticism is organized around a structure, which requires a specific scenario; actors with specific characteristics; interactions based on a relatively flexible script, ways of pleasure structured with the senses and body feelings, and erotic speech on aesthetic values and the potential for gender, age and sexual orientation interactions.

Erotic prose originates both from early object relations which gives more permanent models and personal contingencies that arise in the presence of psychological, physical or social life changes.

The relationship to the other (whether it is real or fantasized, with another, with oneself or a symbolic substitute) is shaped by narrative forms; and changes in people bring changes in the stories and thus, they affect the ways of meeting and obtaining pleasure. Erotic narrative combines, in each encounter, the available social stories about desire, the singular ways of obtaining pleasure, and in the relationship to sexual drive.

These criteria take special importance in aging not only because the drive levels and the possibility of coupling decrease, but also because a negative culture conspires against it. The wisdom of eroticism in old age can be seen as to a "continuous production of difference" (Sandberg, 2011, p. 19) that lets us set aside the logic of capacity vs. disability, registered around the genital and reproductive systems.

Sandberg (2011) introduces narrative prose that demonstrates the possibility of change, which goes from "the fixity of being to a fluidity of transformation" (p. 117), where one can have access to the blurred boundaries of the phallic sexual morphologies and investigate its scope without considering it a deficiency or lack.

The diversity of experiences and erotic desires is much wider than we may think, but many people consider that the lack of penetration is not a way of eroticism.

The limits of eroticism in old age

In old age there are several factors that can lead to partial withdrawal of certain forms of pleasure due to physical changes that alter desire or genital competence; changes or loss of couple's partner; the lack of aesthetic values; the limited narrative that promote joy; the cultural values that limit the various positions of pleasure; the lack of sex education, among others.

Lindau, *et al.* (2007) found that among people who were sexually active about half of them, both men and women, reported having sexual problems. While in the male group, erectile dysfunction was the most frequent problem, in the female group, there was a decrease in sexual desire, in vaginal lubrication and in reaching an orgasm. 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 women and men respectively.

Certain moral health concepts in the nineteenth and twentieth century, as well as previous religious discourse (Iacob, 2006), considered that the genitalia in old age diminished and thus all eroticism appeared as a dangerous alternative to the subject and his/her community and associated it with perversion or sin. The changes in contemporary sexual culture reviewed this discourse, even though genital sexuality prevailed in biomedical logic.

However, cultural change, or the very notion of "sexual revolution," cannot be limited to only introducing positive variants as regards the genitals, but it should also provide a narrative that enables an aesthetic eroticism in old age.

The avenues of pleasure

Filebornay, *et al.* (2015), in a study of older women, define as "sexual subjectivity" the understanding of sex and subjective and individual sexual desire, and the meanings derived from them. Thus, a change in hierarchy is promoted, going from a heteronormative and genital sex, to a broad and inclusive understanding of sex.

Starr, and Weiner (1981) suggest that education about the changes that occur in sexual development during aging is an important factor in achieving eroticism, and stress the importance of accepting variability and scope in the manifestation of sex. Their findings indicate that older people can express their eroticism in more vague terms, and be less oriented to goals. The experience becomes an instance that may be less definable in quantitative terms and more definable in qualitative terms; that is, where the importance falls on the meaning and quality of their relationships.

Lopez Sanchez (2005) argues that interpersonal needs are the same throughout life, but the way to satisfy them can be different. Here we can mention: feeling loved and appreciated; having supportive relationships, filling the need for fondling, kissing and being kissed; hugging, exploring and being explored; arousing each other; enjoying sexual pleasure and, fundamentally, body and emotional intimacy.

Eliopoulos (1979) considers the need for the elderly not only to find other ways to achieve erotic pleasure, but also to practice masturbation as a way to give relief to sexual tensions and maintain good genital functions. Consequently, Starr (1987) understands that masturbation is an acceptable form of sexual relief and recognizes that it is widely practiced. He also establishes a difference in deep sexuality through the idea of what "pleasant" means considering that if some sexual practices are not possible with age, there are other "avenues" that are open.

Iacub (2006) places a dimension of eroticism associated with fantasizing, as well as having sensual dreams that reveal a measure of private enjoyment, often embarrassing. This way of eroticism which may or may not reach masturbation, occurs especially in women, and it is considered by them as an important aspect of their lives.

Gott, & Hinchliff, (2003) point out that in cases where health problems limit or prevent certain sexual practices such as penetration, the care of physical intimacy by hugging and touching is essential for the person's well-being.

To Fileborna, *et al.* (2015), the context of a relationship and personal development of women's lives is fundamental to understand how they negotiate their sexual subjectivity. The variability over a lifetime is very high and it increases or decreases according to contextual factors, such as a new partner, physiological changes and how relationships occur.

Waite, Laumann, Das, & Schumm (2009) found that sexual activity in elderly women mainly consists of kissing, hugging and other erotic contacts. Vaginal intercourse seems to be less frequent with age.

Douglas, Tara, and Steven (2006) indicate that 90% of lesbians included hugging, touching and kissing as part of their sexual activities. They also mentioned that over 80% of them considered touching and kissing the breasts, and feeling the body as something important.

The frequency of sexual activity in lesbians decreases with age. However, they remain sexually active during middle age, considering sex as an important part in their lives. Over 50% of lesbians in the study of Loulan (1987) reported giving and receiving from their partner the following activities: touching, kissing and breast licking, inserting their fingers in the vagina, having oral sex, sticking their tongue into the vagina and couple masturbating. The most commonly reported sexual activities are manual genital contact and oral genital stimulation. A few studies of older lesbians, about 1 in 3 used tribadism or body contact as a means to achieve orgasm (Hurlbert, DF, & Apt, C. (1993); Saghir, & Robins, 1973).

The expression of eroticism in lesbians usually focuses on the partner and the desire to please her, placing more effort and time stimulating the partner than themselves (Lever, 1995) focusing less on genital contact and orgasm (Blumstein, & Schwartz 1983; Masters, & Johnson, 1979).

Also, eroticism occupied an important place highlighting the preparation of the environment, the care for details and the enjoyment of physical and emotional intimacy. Some examples are shown in the following accounts:

- “- *Yes, maybe in a dream, sometimes that happens, yes.*
- *What dreams do you have?*
- *... you feel like being and feel a ... like an ...*
- *An orgasm.*
- *Yes, an orgasm ...”* (Female, 76).

“- Yes, yes, I sometimes wake up masturbating unknowingly. Because it is a feeling, I wake up and feel like I am stroking the clitoris and there comes the orgasm ... because I feel the need.”
(Female, 82).

“- And what I like is to arrange things: paying attention to details, low lights, clean bed, the two bathed, perfumed, and in this way it still works ...” (Female, 70, in: Arias Polizzi, 2011).

The need of others

One of the functions attributed to eroticism was associated with the search for objects that tied together the need for affection, pleasure and care of a human being. The objects do not necessarily meet all these requirements, but eroticism can assimilate certain dimensions beyond pleasure, bringing the initial search to a loving relationship. Interactions, movements and associations between these two dimensions can be common, even though in some circumstances one may be in detriment of the other.

Bataille (1980, p. 22) states that erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person, as he exists in the realm of discontinuity and a "relative dissolution of the being", striving towards the encounter with the object of desire. This lack and need structure has similarities in eroticism and love, which gives the first one the possibility of becoming the second one. However, eroticism is usually linked to the object in a more limited way, as the demand of the object seems to rely on a kind of satisfaction more directly than in love, where support and security are factors that are more real.

The need for the other can interweave the erotic and loving needs, which may result in different levels of support, care, control, possession, jealousy or suffering. In women, a man's love and intimacy play a more prominent role.

Arias, and Polizzi (2011) found that the couple has an important place in old age, even more than in other vital moments. Most elderly people felt higher levels of understanding, trust, and mutual acceptance.

The need for the other became a very important issue, not only for the emotional and instrumental support they provided, but also for the feeling of being loved, appreciated and desired. The place of priority occupied by passion in the young couple's relationship turned into companionship in old age, considered by women as sharing time, "being together" either in conversation, laughing, hugging, being loved and being wanted. Along the same lines, "intimacy" in old age is for Weg (1996) the term that accounts for mutual care, responsibility, trust and open communication.

Garnetsy Peplau (2001) found in lesbians over 60 years old, that companionship, affection and sensitivity were more important than other sexual practices. Adapting sex to the new requirements, as the need to share more time together, or compensating the age-related difficulties through a better knowledge of the other and more experience became important.

"No, it's important; love and having sex with my wife is the most important thing ..." (Male, 76).

"Life is not going to be the same as when you were single. I will not tell you are going to make love two or three times a week, but if you do it once every two weeks, it is enough. With love and affection, there is not any other need. It is like if you made love every week." (Male, 71).

"The attraction that Quelly had and still has is now important not decisive. There is something very closely linked to eroticism which is an affectionate feeling. Maybe at other times I could separate both feelings (...) with my current partner things go together." (Male, 69).

The aesthetics of bodies

The issue of beauty has an important place in the desire circuit. Social parameters give great importance to the visual and images of young bodies are praised. This factor can become an obstacle to both the elderly and the young who may want to be like them. However, the way in which a subject reads this reality can be richer and more complex, being able to transcend some of these limitations.

The experience of eroticism is built in an environment where the beautiful and the desirable are included in both sides of the couple. The experience of a partner who desires her/his mate can encourage the subject to see her/himself as more beautiful or sensual, beyond the socially imposed limits. Similarly, the meeting in areas for seniors can function as spaces that mediate the dominant values of beauty, giving more importance to differential values that allow the person to like and be liked.

Finally, the creation of unique narratives, showing beauty as seen from a hegemonic view, such as being thin, better dressed or more athletic; or from more personal values that allow you to feel better, like having the know-how or knowing that the person has always been desirable, etc. In this area, comparisons between people of the same age appear to be an emerging category (Iacub, 2006), very valuable, since the lack of references to place beauty in an elderly person makes the comparison a more reliable concept.

"Since I started with this relationship, I feel like the woman I used to be. - How is a relationship at this age? – Regular, as when I was young, the same feeling, the same hormones move you, you feel flattered, I feel like I'm the same woman ... there is no difference. - And sexually? I ask her. - Sexually as well - she says without hesitation - I have young hormones, I do not have worn-out hormones, and I have a woman's hormones. If someone touches my hand, I feel good. Yes, it changed but it was renewed again, I am ready, and I had the pap and everything and I am perfect. Before I was more reserved about this, now if they say something to me I laugh, I like it when someone says something nice to me, for me it is a compliment ... it's worse (laughing) to be left aside." (Female, 73).

"I do and he likes me. Not only I like him but also my daughter does. He stands out; you ask me why I chose him, because he stood out, of all the grandparents there, none was like him." (Female, 73).

"Not in my partner (aesthetics isn't important). I felt physically unappreciated and that inhibited me in my first experience. After Tito, not at all, he made me feel very well. It is also very important that Tito make me feel good. What makes me feel safe is that for him I have an attractive and erotic figure." (Female, 68).

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have defined two core concepts, wisdom and eroticism, with the aim of articulating them and from there understanding the extent to which old people can find alternatives to face certain changes in sexual functioning and in the eroticism offered by our culture.

Eroticism emerges as a wide range of possibilities much larger than the outlined by the genital direction. Wisdom implies the ability to find, facing the difficulties, new ways to select, optimize and compensate ways of obtaining pleasure adapting them to current possibilities, thereby allowing the person to have a personal integrity experience.

All of this suggests that eroticism is always a latent possibility, to the extent that wisdom allows us to face the changes that aging brings.

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