

Prevalence and Correlates of Sexuality-Related Distress
Among Older Adults in the United States
Extended Abstract

INTRODUCTION

Despite the burgeoning literature on sexual disorders among older adults, and the addition of distress to the DSM-IV's diagnostic criteria for sexual disorders, prevalence and predictors of sexual-experience-caused distress in the older adult population are unknown. This paper fills this gap in the literature.

Other studies have examined women only, or have asked about general, non-experience-specific distress.

The hypotheses tested in this paper are grounded in psychological and sociological theory. For example, according to the dominant American masculinity ideology, men are expected to be always ready for and interested in sex, to have an erection on demand and for as long as it takes to provide their partner with an orgasm from vaginal thrusting. In contrast, femininity ideology proscribes for women a more responsive role, specifying that they be aroused only in the context of an established romantic relationship. These sexual scripts underlie hypotheses eight and twelve.

[Much more background to come here]

Hypotheses that apply to all outcomes examined:

Attitudes Toward Sex

Hypothesis one: Belief in the importance of sex will be positively associated with the likelihood of being bothered among people who experience each outcome

Hypothesis two: Frequency of thinking about sex will be positively associated with the likelihood of being bothered among people who experience each outcome

Relationship Quality

Hypothesis three: Physical pleasure in the relationship will be negatively associated with the likelihood of being bothered among people who experience each outcome

Sexual Experiences

Hypothesis four: Pain during intercourse will be positively associated with the likelihood of being bothered among people who experience each outcome

Hypothesis five: Lack of interest in sex will be negatively associated with the likelihood of being bothered among people who experience each outcome

Hypotheses that apply to a subset of outcomes examined:

Attitudes Toward Sex

Hypothesis six: Belief that sexual ability decreases with age will be negatively associated with the likelihood of being bothered by lack of interest, erection difficulties, and lubrication difficulties among people who experience each outcome

Relationship Quality

Hypothesis seven: Emotional satisfaction in the relationship will be negatively associated with the likelihood of being bothered by lack of pleasure, lack of orgasm among women who experience each outcome -- and quick orgasm among men who experience that outcome

Sexual Experience

Hypothesis eight: Anxiety about ability to perform sexually will be positively associated with the likelihood of being bothered among men who experience lack of interest, lack of orgasm, erection difficulties, and quick orgasm, but only among women who experience lubrication difficulty.

Partnered Sexual Behavior

Hypothesis nine: Engaging in sexual touching will be negatively associated with the likelihood of being bothered by lack of interest, lack of pleasure, and lack of orgasm among men and women who experience each.

Hypothesis ten: Always engaging in vaginal sex when having sex will be positively associated with the likelihood of being bothered by erection or lubrication difficulties, among those who have experience them

Partner's Sexual Experiences

Hypothesis eleven: If one's partner experiences lack of interest, this will be negatively associated with the likelihood of being bothered by one's own lack of interest, erection difficulties, or lubrication difficulties, among those who experience each.

Hypothesis twelve: If one's partner experiences lack of orgasm, this will be positively associated with the likelihood of being bothered by erection difficulties, lubrication difficulties, or quick orgasm among men, among those who experience each.

Hypotheses that apply to only men or only women

Sexual Experiences

Hypothesis thirteen: Erection difficulty will be positively associated with being bothered by lack of interest, lack of orgasm, and quick orgasm among men who experience each

Hypothesis fourteen: Avoiding sex due to sexual problems will be positively associated with the likelihood of being bothered by lack of interest in sex, lack of orgasm, erection difficulties, and quick orgasms among men who experience each

Hypothesis fifteen: Frequency of arousal during sex will be negatively associated with the likelihood of being bothered by lack of interest, lack of orgasm, and lubrication difficulties among women who experience each.

Hypothesis sixteen: Genital pain during intercourse will be positively associated with being bothered by lack of pleasure, lack of orgasm, and lubrication difficulties among women who experience each

Partnered Sexual Behavior

Hypothesis seventeen: Women who receive oral sex will be less likely to be bothered by lubrication difficulties and more likely to be bothered by lack of interest, lack of pleasure, and lack of orgasm, among those who have each experience

Hypothesis eighteen: Women who give their partner oral sex will be more likely to be bothered by lack of interest, lack of pleasure, and lack of orgasm, among those who experience each.

Partner's Sexual Experiences

Hypothesis nineteen: Men whose partners experience pain during intercourse or genital pain during intercourse will be more likely to be bothered by their own lack of pleasure or orgasm, among those who have these experiences.

METHODS

Data and Sample

The data is from the 2005-2006 National Social Life Health and Aging Project, which surveyed 3005 community-dwelling men and women ages 57-85 in their homes in the United States (Smith et al, 2009; O'Muircheartaigh, 2009). The survey was a national probability sample, with an unweighted response rate of 74.8% and a weighted response rate of 75.5%. The analytic sample consists of the (N=1,433) respondents who reported having had sex in the past year. Sample statistics are shown in Table 1.

Measures

Sexual Experiences

Respondents were asked whether during the last 12 months there had ever been a period of **several months or more** [boldface appears in interviewer script] when they had any of six experiences, including "lacked interest in having sex", "did not find sex pleasurable, even if it was not painful", "were unable to climax (experience an orgasm)", "came to a climax (experienced orgasm) too quickly", "experienced physical pain during intercourse", or "felt anxious just before having sex about your ability to perform sexually". Men were asked about having "trouble getting or maintaining an erection" and women were asked about having "trouble lubricating." About each experience reported, the respondents were asked whether it bothered them a lot, somewhat or not at all. Respondents who reported pain during intercourse were asked where in the body

they experienced the pain. This procedure was then repeated in reference to the respondent's partner. Respondents were asked if their partner had experienced the various conditions and also whether they (the respondents) were bothered by each of the partner's conditions, if any, though they were not asked if they were bothered by their partner's pain.

After the respondent-focused but before the partner-focused sets of questions, respondents were also asked once if they had "ever avoided sex in the past 12 months because of the problem(s)" they mentioned. In addition, women were asked how often they felt sexually aroused ("turned on") during sexual activity with their partner in the last 12 months: always, usually, sometimes, rarely, or never. They were not asked how they felt about this frequency.

Sexual Ideation and Attitude Measures

Questions about attitudes toward sex include "How often do you think about sex", whose answer options were less than once a month, once to a few times a month, one to a few times a week, every day, and several times a day (if respondent states: never). They also included the question "How important a part of your life would you say that sex is? Extremely important, very, moderately, somewhat, not at all. Respondents were also asked whether they believed that sexual ability decreases with age.

Relationship Quality Measures

Relationship quality was measured with two items. Respondents reported how emotionally satisfying and physically pleasurable they found their relationship: extremely, very, moderately, slightly, not at all.

Sexual Behavior Measures

Partnered sexual behavior questions included questions about the frequency of "kissing, hugging, caressing, or other ways of sexual touching", performing oral sex on the partner, having oral sex performed by the partner, and "vaginal intercourse. Answer options for all four questions were always, usually, sometimes, rarely, never.

Demographic Measures

Sociodemographic measures included age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and relationship type.

Analysis

In the first step of the analysis, gender and age differences in likelihood of distress about each sexual experience were calculated. In the second step of the analysis, we estimated a series of independent logistic regressions of an indicator of being bothered by an experience, among those who had the experience, on each individual or relationship covariate, one at a time. Only bivariate models were estimated, since the sample sizes were so small for each outcome. These models were all estimated separately by gender. We only model lack of interest, lack of pleasure, inability to climax, erection difficulties, and lubrication difficulties, for men and women and quick orgasm for men. This decision was based on the distribution of distress about sexual pain (nearly everyone is bothered by it) and by the questionable validity of

the women's quick climax measure. Finally, we examine the distribution of distress about one's partner's sexual experiences, for clues for future research directions. All analyses were conducted using Stata 10.

RESULTS

Demographic Predictors of Distress

Gender was the most consistently significant demographic predictor of being bothered by sexual experiences – more so than age group, race/ethnicity, or education. While men were less likely to report most experiences (inability to climax, lacking interest in sex, not finding sex pleasurable, experiencing physical pain during intercourse), they were more likely to be bothered by at least some of the experiences they reported, while women were more likely to be bothered by only a single experience [Tables 2 and 4].

Among those who reported the given experience, women and men were equally likely to be bothered by not being interested in sex and not finding sex pleasurable, but men were more likely than women to be bothered by not achieving orgasm or having too quick orgasms, and were less likely than women to be bothered by pain during sex [Table 4]. One possible explanation for the difference in percentage bothered by pain may be the greater likelihood among women than among men that the pain included genital pain. Of the 17.8% of women who reported pain during sex, 82% reported vaginal pain, while only 47% of the 2.8% of men who reported pain during sex reported penis or scrotum pain [Not shown]. The only difference found by age group within gender in likelihood of being bothered by a sexual experience, given reporting that experience, was among women who reported not experiencing pleasure during sex [Table 4]. Such women ages 75-85 were less likely to be bothered by it compared to those ages 57-64 ($p<0.01$) and ages 65-74 ($p<0.1$) [Table 4].

Among men, there were no differences by race/ethnicity in likelihood of being bothered by reported sexual experiences, but among women, Hispanic women were less likely than White women to report being bothered if they reported lack of interest or lack of pleasure and Black women were less likely than White women to report being bothered if they reported lack of interest [Not shown].

Among women, education only significantly predicted bother for one outcome. Women who reported lack of interest were more likely to be bothered by it if they had a BA or more. Among men, having a BA or higher was associated with lower likelihood of being bothered by lack of pleasure but with higher likelihood of being bothered by erection difficulties. Also, men with less than a high school degree were less likely to be bothered by quick orgasms [Not shown].

There were no differences by marital status.

Individual and Relationship Predictors of Distress

Results from the series of independent logistic regressions of an indicator of being bothered by an experience, among those who had the experience, on individual covariates are shown in Tables B and C, and summarized in Table A. This extended abstract will touch on a few of the highlights.

Hypothesis one was largely supported. Belief in the importance of sex was found to be positively associated with being bothered among both men and women, though the nature of the relationship differed by gender, and was only significant for some experiences. Among men, those who reported that sex was not at all important were less likely to be bothered by a lack of interest in sex ($OR=0.13$, $p<0.01$) and erection difficulties ($OR=0.08$, $p<0.01$), among those who had those experiences. Similarly, among women, the likelihood of being bothered by lack of interest and orgasm increased as importance of sex increased, with some evidence of a dose effect [Table B].

In contrast, a clear gender difference was found regarding hypotheses three and seven. Among men, the evidence was in line with the predictions, but among women the evidence was in the opposite direction of that predicted. Among men who reported experiencing lack of pleasure, lack of orgasm, or quick orgasm, extreme physical pleasure or emotional satisfaction was associated with reduced likelihood of being bothered by the experiences. However, among women who reported lack of interest, inability to climax, and lubrication difficulties, extreme physical, and in the case of interest and lubrication, emotional, pleasure was associated with *increased* likelihood of being bothered.

Distress about Partner's Sexual Experiences

A higher percentage of men who have erection difficulties, inability to orgasm, and lack interest in sex are bothered by it, compared to the percentages of women whose partners experience these conditions. Likewise, a higher percentage of men whose partners lack of interest in sex or lack of pleasure from sex are bothered by it, compared to the percentages of women who experience those conditions. Since this wave of NSHAP did not interview partners, we cannot test these differences statistically. It may be that what we see here is merely a sample bias, i.e., that the men's female partners differ in important ways from the women in the survey, and those differences account for the difference in men's and women's bother about their own and their partner's experiences. However, if this difference is real, it suggests that some of women's bother may be explained by their partner's distress about the women's problems. Future studies that include partner data can examine this question.

DISCUSSION

Most estimates of the prevalence of sexual problems among older adults in the United States have not taken into account distress about the specific experience reported. This study provides such estimates for both men and women. We find that, with the exception of erection difficulty, less than a third of those reporting each experience say that it bothers them "a lot". Furthermore, for the more than a quarter of

those reporting all problems but physical pain and erection difficulties, who said that the experience did not bother them at all, the question may be raised as to whether the experience even qualifies as a “problem”. At the very least, by DSM-IV criteria, those who have these experiences without being bothered by it are not suffering from a disorder.

The associations found between individual and relationship characteristics and the likelihood of being bothered suggest that these sexual experiences cannot be understood outside the social, relationship, and individual context. For example, the gender difference found in the association of relationship quality with likelihood of being bothered may stem from gender differences in perspectives on sex. Since sex is in general more important to men, men want sex more frequently than women, and men’s gender identity is measured to some extent by their ability to “provide” their partner with sexual pleasure, women in good relationships may feel bad about their lack of interest, orgasms, or lubrication because of the impact it has on their partner’s gender identity, sexual satisfaction, and self-esteem. In contrast, among men, emotional satisfaction may compensate for lack of physical pleasure, because women’s gender identity is not tied up in their partner’s enjoyment. This is but one example of the presence of distress being insufficient evidence that a sexual experience constitutes an individual problem or disorder. While the symptoms may manifest in an individual, the problem may actually lie in the conflict between sexual scripts and individual desires, or discrepancies between partners wishes, etc In order to craft effective prevention and treatment programs, it is necessary that we understand these interlocking levels of effects. This study is a first step in that direction.

The limitations of this study include the circumscribed set of sexual experiences measured, and the relatively small samples who reported some of these experiences. Future studies, using as-yet uncollected national data, can examine other experiences, such as intrusive and excessive sexual desire, difficulty focusing on non-genital affectionate touching and talking, difficulty focusing on sex due to worries about other responsibilities, and anxiety about ability to communicate sexual desires and limits. This study also could not assess the degree to which respondents may have had positive feelings about their experiences. For example, quick orgasms and lack of interest may both be appreciated, relief-providing experiences. Finally, this study was limited to the covariates available in the data set. Other studies using new data can examine other predictors of distress.

This is the first population study to examine the degree of experience-specific distress experienced by older adults in the United States who report experiences commonly referred to as sexual problems. It is also the first population study to examine the covariates of this distress, among those who report the experiences. This study lays the groundwork for future studies in this area, providing a perspective that will be useful to demographers, public health workers, sexual health specialists, and gerontologists alike.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

	Men	Women
Age 57-64	53.8	57.4
Age 65-74	34.1	31.5
Age 75-85	12.1	11.2
White	81.8	84.6
Black	8.4	8.3
Native/Asian/Other	2.7	1.2
Hispanic	7.0	5.9
Less than high school diploma	12.4	11.0
High school diploma	22.7	25.9
Vocational certificate / some college / Associates degree	29.1	38.5
BA or more	35.8	24.7
Married or Cohabiting	88.6	91.1
Other	11.4	9.0
Importance of sex		
Not at all	2.6	8.6
Somewhat	14.3	17.8
Moderately	40	44.7
Very extremely	43	28.8
Frequency of thinking about sex		
Never/less than once a month	5.3	17.1
Once to a few times a month	21.7	43.8
Once to a few times a week	40.4	29
Every day/Several Times a day	32.6	10.1
Believes that sexual ability decreases with age	77.9	71.7
Frequency of arousal during sex		
Never/rarely		8.9
Sometimes/Usually		58.5
Always		32.9
Anxious about ability to perform sexually	27.2	11.5
Physical pleasure in the relationship		
Not/slightly	2	6.7
Moderately/Very	57	6.2
Extremely	40.9	30.4
Relationship is extremely emotionally satisfying	40.7	33.8
Sexual touching usually/always	93.0	89.4
Give partner oral sex, ever	48.8	43.6
Receiving oral sex, ever	44.4	44.8
Vaginal sex, always	66.9	68.7
Vaginal sex, rarely/never	6.1	7.9

Table 2. Distribution of Sexual Experiences (for Several Months or More in Last 12 Months) and Resulting Distress, by Gender

	Difficulty getting or maintaining an erection		Inability to climax (orgasm)		Lacked interest in sex		Did not find sex pleasurable		Physical pain during intercourse	
Men										
Did not experience	63.3	63.3	79.7	79.7	72.1	72.1	95.4	95.4	97.2	97.2
Experienced	36.7		20.3		27.9		4.6		2.8	
Not at all bothered		3.7	10.0	5.3		9.3		1.3	29.0	0.4
Bothered										13.3
Somewhat		20.4	55.8			12.7	45.7			1.7
A lot		12.5	34.2	5.1	25.3	5.8	20.8	1.0	22.9	0.7
	Difficult lubricating									25.9
Women										
Did not experience	61.0	61.0	65.3	65.3	57.4	57.4	77.5	77.5	82.2	82.2
Experienced	39.0		34.7		42.6		22.5		17.8	
Not at all bothered		12.4	32.0	14.4		16.5	38.8	7.9	35.5	0.6
Bothered										3.5
Somewhat		17.8	46.0	15	43.2	20.0	47.0	10.1	45.4	11.8
A lot		8.6	22.0	5.3	15.3	6.1	14.2	4.2	19.1	5.1
										29.2

Table 3. Distribution of Partner's (P's) Sexual Experiences (for Several Months or More in Last 12 Months) and Respondent's (R's) Resulting Distress, by Gender

	P has difficulty lubricating		P has been unable to climax (orgasm)		P has lacked interest in sex		P did not find sex pleasurable		P had physical pain during intercourse	
Men										
P did not experience	71.9	71.9	77.6	77.6	68.5	68.5	84.2	84.2	85.8	
P experienced	28.1		22.4		31.5		15.8		14.2	
R not at all bothered		14.7	52.8	8.5		8.9	28.4	1.9	11.9	
R bothered										
Somewhat		10.7	38.2	11.1	49.7	19.2	61	9.3	58.8	
A lot		2.5	9.0	2.7	12.2	3.3	10.6	4.6	29.3	
	P has difficulty with erection									
Women										
P did not experience	60.1	60.1	76.0	76.0	77.6	77.6	95.5	95.5	95.4	
P experienced	40.0		24.0		22.4		4.5		4.6	
R not at all bothered		19	47.5	12.4	51.5	13.6	60.8	1.5	36.3	
R bothered										
Somewhat		15.1	37.9	9.6	40.1	5.7	25.4	2.2	51.3	
A lot		5.9	14.7	2.0	8.4	3.1	13.8	0.5	12.4	

Table 4. Percentage of Those Reporting Each Sexual Experience Who Are Bothered by It, by Age Group and Gender

	Age Group			
	57-64	65-74	75-85	All (57-85)
No Interest				
Men	65.9	60.4	75.8	65.0
Women	64.7	56.3	52.0	60.7
No Pleasure				
Men	74.1	54.1	71.7	64.3
Women	70.2	62.4	29.5 ^a	63.7
No Orgasm				
Men	74.5	70.6	73.4	72.8
Women	59.0	61.1	52.1	58.9 ^{**}
Erection Difficulties				
Men	92.2	88.8	83.5	89.6
Lubrication Difficulties				
Women	73.7	63.4	55.2	68.1
Quick Orgasm				
Men	76.3	63.6	68.7	71.4
Women	33.3	56.9	35.3	39.3 ^{**}
Pain During Sex				
Men	94.5	74.6	100	87.0
Women	97.6	94.2	100	96.6 ⁺

^a Among women who report not experiencing pleasure during sex, those ages 75-85 are less likely to be bothered by it compared to those ages 57-64 ($p<0.01$) and ages 65-74 ($p<0.1$)

^{**} Gender difference significant at $p<0.01$

⁺ Gender difference significant at $p<0.1$

Table A. Summary Table: Direction of Associations of Individual and Relationship Factors with Distress about a Sexual Experience, among Those with that Sexual Experience, By Gender

	Bothered by...									
	No Interest		No Pleasure		No Orgasm		Erection Difficulty	Lubrication Difficulty	Quick Orgasm	
Attitudes toward sex	M	F	M	F	M	F			M	F
Importance of sex										
Not at all	-	ref	ns	ref	ns	ref	-	Ref	ns	
Somewhat		+		ns		+		ns		
Moderately		+		ns		+		ns		
Very extremely		+		ns		+		ns		
Think about sex < median for gender	ns	-	ns	-	+	-	ns	ns	ns	
Believes that sexual ability decreases with age	+	-					ns	ns		
Other Sexual Experiences										
Frequency of arousal during sex										
Never/rarely		-				-				
Always		-						-		
No interest			ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	+?	
Erection Difficulty	+				+				+	
Pain during intercourse	+	ns	+	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	
Genital pain during sex				ns		ns		+		
Anxious about sexual ability	+				+	ns	+	+	+	
Avoids sex because of problems	+				+		ns		+	
Relationship Quality										
Physical pleasure in the relationship										
Not/slightly		-								
Extremely	ns	+	-	ns	-	+	ns	+	-	
Relationship is extremely emotionally satisfying		+	-	ns	-	ns		+	-	
Partnered Sexual Behavior										
Sexual touching usually always		+	-	ns	ns	ns				
Give partner oral sex, ever		+		+		ns				
Receiving oral sex, ever		+		+		ns		ns		
Vaginal sex, always								-	ns	
Vaginal sex, rarely/never							-			
Partner's Sexual Experiences										
Partner – No interest	ns	ns					ns	ns		
Partner – No orgasm							+	ns	ns	
Partner – Pain during intercourse			+		+					
Partner – Genital pain during intercourse			ns		+					

Table B. Odds Ratios from Independent Logistic Regressions of Distress about Sexual Experience on Individual and Relationship Factors, By Gender

	Bothered By...					
	No Interest		No Pleasure		No Orgasm	
Attitudes toward sex	M	F	M	F	M	F
Importance of sex						
Not at all	0.13**	ref	ns	ref	ns	ref
Somewhat		3.2+		ns		2.9+
Moderately		4.5++		ns		3.0*
Very extremely		9.4***		ns		5.6*
Think about sex < median for gender	ns	0.17***	ns	0.31*	3.3** ?	0.28*
Believes that sexual ability decreases with age	2.8*	0.26**				
Other Sexual Experiences						
Frequency of arousal during sex						
Never/rarely		0.24***				0.26**
Always		0.40*				
No interest			ns	ns	ns	ns
Erection Difficulty	3.3**				3.5**	
Pain during intercourse	6.0*	ns	11.9*	ns	ns	ns
Genital pain during sex				ns		ns
Anxious about sexual ability	1.7+				5.0***	ns
Avoids sex because of problems	2.1*				4.2*	
Relationship Quality						
Physical pleasure in the relationship						
Not/slightly		0.46+				
Extremely	ns	4.3*	0.13*	ns	0.54+	3.5**
Relationship is extremely emotionally satisfying		2.6+	0.05***	ns	0.51*	ns
Partnered Sexual Behavior						
Sexual touching usually always		2.5*	0.06*	ns	ns	ns
Give partner oral sex, ever		2.6*		3.6**		ns
Receiving oral sex, ever		2.6*		2.8*		ns
Vaginal sex, always						
Vaginal sex, rarely/never						
Partner's Sexual Experiences						
Partner – No interest	ns	ns				
Partner – No orgasm						
Partner – Pain during intercourse			14.9*		3.4**	
Partner – Genital pain during intercourse			ns		5.4*	

Table C. Odds Ratios from Independent Logistic Regressions of Distress about Sexual Experience on Individual and Relationship Factors, By Gender

	Bothered By...			
	Erection Difficulty	Lubrication Difficulty	Quick Orgasm	
			M	F
Attitudes toward sex				
Importance of sex				
Not at all	0.08**	Ref	ns	
Somewhat		ns		
Moderately		ns		
Very extremely		ns		
Think about sex < median for gender	ns	ns	ns	
Believes that sexual ability decreases with age	ns	ns		
Other Sexual Experiences				
Frequency of arousal during sex				
Never/rarely				
Always		0.28**		
No interest	ns	ns	3.2**	
Erection Difficulty			2.7*	
Pain during intercourse	ns	ns	ns	
Genital pain during sex		2.2*		
Anxious about sexual ability	2.5*	2.7*	1.9*	
Avoids sex because of problems	ns		1.7*	
Relationship Quality				
Physical pleasure in the relationship				
Not/slightly				
Extremely	ns	2.2*	0.52*	
Relationship is extremely emotionally satisfying		1.9+	0.37**	
Partnered Sexual Behavior				
Sexual touching usually always				
Give partner oral sex, ever				
Receiving oral sex, ever		ns		
Vaginal sex, always		0.5+	ns	
Vaginal sex, rarely/never	0.42+			
Partner's Sexual Experiences				
Partner – No interest	ns	ns		
Partner – No orgasm	2.8*	ns	ns	
Partner – Pain during intercourse				
Partner – Genital pain during intercourse				