

Age, Sexuality, and Social Norms: Between Invisibility and Change

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To this day, age and sexuality remain closely linked to social norms, stereotypical attributions, and taboos. Older people are often perceived as asexual or defined primarily by their family roles, such as that of grandparents. Such notions are found not only in everyday discourse but also in media portrayals and institutional structures, such as in health and long-term care facilities. Yet it has long been established that sexuality is not the exclusive domain of youth, and that sexuality in old age is not a marginal phenomenon, but rather part of the lifelong shaping of identity and relationships (see Heinemann & Kalbermatten 2017; WHO 2006).

To understand why sexuality in old age often remains invisible or appears unusual, it is helpful to examine social norms. These norms shape perceptions of what is considered appropriate, normal, or deviant, and thus influence both individual life choices and institutional practices.

Norms as Social Guidance—and as an Expression of Historical Processes

Social norms structure societal expectations and provide guidance for social coexistence. They define which behaviors are considered appropriate, desirable, or deviant, thereby contributing to the stabilization of social order (Popitz 2006, p. 11 ff.; Dimbath 2020, p. 211 ff.).

At the same time, they limit scope for action and influence perceptions, evaluations, and self-images. Norms do not operate exclusively through laws or formal regulations; they are also conveyed through education, the media, religion, science, social relationships, and cultural traditions.

The effectiveness of social norms is particularly evident in the areas of gender, sexuality, and age. These topics are closely linked to moral concepts, cultural values, and societal expectations. For example, norms influence ideas about how women and men should live, which forms of partnership receive social recognition, or what behavior is considered appropriate in certain life stages.

From a social science perspective, gender, sexuality, and age are not understood exclusively as biological facts. Rather, they are social categories whose meaning emerges within historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. The term “gender,” for example, refers to socially constructed roles, expectations, and attributions associated with bodies and identities. Age, too, is not viewed solely as a biological process, but as a socially structured life stage linked to specific rights, obligations, and role models.

However, norms are not immutable quantities. They emerge through historical processes of negotiation and change under the influence of societal developments, social movements, scientific findings, and political decisions. The history of Europe since the end of World War II,

in particular, vividly illustrates just how profoundly societal notions of gender and sexuality can change.

Social Change Since the Postwar Period

In the 1950s, comparatively rigid notions of family, gender roles, and sexuality dominated in many European countries. Marriage between a man and a woman was considered the social norm; sexuality was understood primarily in the context of marriage and procreation; and traditional gender roles defined the relationship between the sexes. Homosexuality was criminalized in many places or heavily stigmatized by society, and alternative lifestyles remained largely invisible.

With the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, this picture began to change. The so-called sexual revolutions, women's movements, and civil rights movements challenged existing norms. Demands for sexual self-determination, equality, and individual freedom led to an increasingly critical examination of traditional notions of gender and sexuality. In the decades that followed, many European countries decriminalized homosexual acts, legally recognized same-sex partnerships, and saw growing social acceptance of sexual and gender diversity.

These developments show that social norms are neither natural nor permanently fixed. What is widely taken for granted today might have been considered inappropriate, morally reprehensible, or even punishable by law in earlier generations. Conversely, current norms can be renewed and changed in the future. Norms thus have a dual effect: they structure social life and, at the same time, can be the subject of social change.

Sexuality in Old Age as a Result of Societal Perceptions of Aging

This insight is central to understanding sexuality in old age. In public discourse, sexuality is often associated with youth, physical attractiveness, and sexual performance. In contrast, there are perceptions of aging that primarily associate growing older with physical decline, illness, or dependence. This gives rise to the widespread assumption that sexual needs disappear with age or become less significant in old age. However, this notion is not a given of nature. Rather, it is a socially constructed image of aging based on specific norms and cultural expectations. The question of what needs older adults are permitted to have and what behavior is considered age-appropriate is significantly influenced by societal attributions. This often creates tensions between individual needs and societal expectations. The assumption that sexual needs generally disappear with advancing age is not supported by research. Rather, studies in gerontology and sexology show that desires for closeness, intimacy, and sexual self-determination persist even in later life. Forms of sexual expression often change over the course of a lifetime, but they do not necessarily disappear. Sexuality encompasses far more than sexual acts. It also includes emotional closeness, tenderness,

physical touch, a sense of belonging, and personal identity. The widespread notion of “asexuality in old age” can therefore be understood more as an expression of societal norms regarding aging than as an empirically proven fact (see Heinemann & Kalbermatten 2017; Kruse 2017).

Cultural narratives and societal expectations

Perceptions of old age are largely shaped by cultural narratives (see Matuszkiewicz 2017). In many Western societies, youth is associated with attractiveness, vitality, and sexual activity. Old age, by contrast, is often viewed as a phase of life marked by withdrawal or loss. Such narratives influence not only societal perceptions but also older adults’ self-perception. Societal expectations of how they should behave at a certain age are internalized into their self-image. This can lead to feelings of insecurity when personal needs diverge from societal expectations. Older women, in particular, often experience a double invisibility, as both age-related and gender-specific standards of beauty and attractiveness come into play (Hausbichler and Kruckenhauser 2024). At the same time, the lived realities of queer older adults or older adults with disabilities are often overlooked.

Media Portrayals of Age and Sexuality

The media play a significant role in conveying and reinforcing social norms. Movies, TV series, advertising, and social media shape perceptions of which bodies are considered attractive and which forms of sexuality are made visible. In media portrayals, older people are often either not depicted as sexual beings at all or reduced to stereotypical roles. They appear as caring grandparents, people in need of care, or humorous, eccentric characters. As a result, sexuality in old age is often portrayed as surprising or unusual, while youthful bodies continue to serve as society’s standard of attractiveness.

The scarcity of realistic and diverse portrayals of sexuality in later life gives the impression that it plays hardly any role in society or is merely an exception. This form of invisibility is by no means neutral. What is absent from public images and narratives is often not perceived as a natural part of social reality. In this way, sexuality is implicitly linked to youth, physical attractiveness, and sexual performance, while older age is situated outside these notions. Media representations thus contribute to reinforcing existing norms regarding the body, age, and sexuality. As a result, the diversity of older adults’ sexual realities remains largely invisible. Such images not only influence public attitudes but also permeate professional practice. They can shape the understanding of professionals in caregiving, counseling, or adult education and, often unconsciously, reproduce existing norms regarding age and sexuality in these fields. The significance of media stereotypes thus extends beyond individual perceptions. They influence family expectations, institutional routines, and societal debates about which forms of sexuality are considered normal or appropriate. Sexuality in old age is rarely explicitly

questioned; rather, its marginalization often occurs indirectly through a lack of visibility and a failure to address the issue in society. It is precisely this subtle form of exclusion that helps perpetuate the notion that aging and sexuality are fundamentally at odds with one another. Against this backdrop, a critical examination of media portrayals of aging and sexuality takes on central importance. Norm-reflective educational work can help to expose stereotypical representations, question their social origins, and open up alternative perspectives. This can make it possible to recognize sexuality in old age as a natural part of human life stories and as an expression of self-determination, relationships, and quality of life.

In this context, norm-reflective educational work means not taking societal notions of age, gender, and sexuality for granted, but rather making visible their historical origins, their effects, and their potential for change. Only through this reflection can stereotypical images of aging be challenged and spaces opened up in which older people can live out their sexuality in a self-determined manner and without societal devaluation.

Stigmatization and Institutional Practice

The societal taboo surrounding sexuality in old age also affects professional settings. In long-term care facilities, counseling centers, or the healthcare system, sexuality is often not viewed as a natural component of quality of life. As a result, needs for closeness, partnership, and intimacy are frequently overlooked.

Many professionals have only limited opportunities for training and continuing education in this area. Added to this are uncertainties in addressing the sexual needs of older adults, particularly when issues such as dementia, the need for care, or sexual diversity are involved. Institutional guidelines or frameworks that enable a professional and sensitive approach are often lacking.

As a result, the sexual needs of older adults remain invisible or are predominantly perceived as a problem. A person-centered and human rights-oriented approach, however, requires the recognition of sexual self-determination as part of quality of life and dignity.

Implications for Education and Care

For professionals in education, counseling, and care, this entails the task of critically reflecting on social norms and societal perceptions of aging. This includes examining one's own notions of age, gender, and sexuality, as well as creating spaces where intimacy, partnership, and sexual needs can be discussed.

Furthermore, educational programs should highlight stereotypical images of aging and address their historical origins. The realization that social norms are subject to change opens up opportunities to challenge existing taboos and develop new perspectives on aging. In long-term care facilities, guidelines, continuing education, and appropriate framework conditions can help strengthen the privacy and self-determination of older adults.

Conclusion

The history of social norms shows that notions of gender, sexuality, and age are neither natural nor immutable. They arise through historical processes, are socially negotiated, and are subject to change. Developments since the postwar period, in particular, illustrate just how profoundly societal notions of normality can shift.

When it comes to addressing sexuality in old age, this means critically questioning assumptions that are taken for granted. When sexuality is understood as a lifelong component of human identity, the focus shifts away from deficits or age limits and toward the diversity of individual life paths. Reflecting on social norms can thus make an important contribution to breaking down stereotypical images of aging and promoting the sexual self-determination of older adults.

The findings to date from the “Never Gets Old” project (2024–2026) show that normative notions of aging and sexuality remain prevalent in all participating countries. At the same time, they illustrate that societal attitudes are in the process of changing. Educational initiatives, in particular, can support this change by encouraging reflection on social norms and contributing to the visibility of diverse life paths in old age.

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