

SENSE OF SEXUAL ATTRACTIVENESS, SEXUAL BEHAVIORS AND SATISFACTION IN GAY MEN AND LESBIANS IN LATE ADULTHOOD

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Summary. The aim of this paper is to present the results of studies on the influence of self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness on sexual behaviors and satisfaction of gay men and lesbians in late adulthood. Within the framework of the project it was assumed that global self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness consists of: sense of physical attractiveness and self-evaluation of sexual ability. Interesting results of studies are the following findings: (1) generally sense of physical attractiveness seems to have a stronger influence on sexual behavior than self-evaluation of sexual ability; (2) in the lesbians' group in late adulthood there is a stronger influence of the sense of physical attractiveness on sexual behaviors than in the gay men's group, and (3) in the men's group in late adulthood there is a stronger influence of self-assessment of sexual ability on sexual behaviors than in the women's group.

Key words: older homosexuals, sexual behaviors, sexual satisfaction, sense of sexual attractiveness, physical attractiveness

Introduction

Sexual behaviors in late adulthood are studied more and more often and become the subject of scientific publications. This increasing interest in the most intimate aspect of life of older people may result from a general increase of concern about the quality of older people's lives, in conjunction with the data suggesting an increase of the population for the discussed age group. The studies on the sexuality of people in late adulthood most often concern groups of heterosexual persons (Perlmutter, Hall, 1992; Schulz, Ewen, 1993; Craig, 1996; Gormly, 1997; Rice, 1998; Schaie, Willis, 2002), whereas more numerous research projects focusing on homosexual persons concern rather the global meaning of aging for gay men and lesbians or issues of social help for seniors (e.g. McFarland, Sanders, 2003; Phillips, Marks, 2008; Fokkema, Kuyper, 2009; Neville, Henrickson, 2010). It is also usually noted that the aging gay men and lesbians are likely to suffer from a double stigma: from

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homophobia and ageism (McDougall, 1993). The common image of older gay men and older lesbians usually shows them as being depressed, lonely, despairing and inactive sexually (Berger, 1996; Meri-Esh, Doron, 2009).

Discussing the question of sexuality of people in late adulthood it is worth emphasizing that the results of research projects on sexual behaviors and sexual satisfaction of older people are still not unambiguous (Grabowska, 2009). Both a decrease of sexual activity as well as lack of changes in this area can be observed in addition to a slight increase of interest in sexuality. This ambiguity may suggest, among others, a significant individualization of changes in the sexual sphere in late adulthood and also point to the need of detailed knowledge of the factors determining sexual behaviors in the discussed age group. Showing and describing all these factors (both specific for this age such as physiological changes connected with aging as well as nonspecific, present at all phases of development such as gender) goes beyond the scope of this paper which concentrates on the influence of sexual attractiveness on behaviors and sexual satisfaction of gay men and lesbians in late adulthood.

Sexual attractiveness is defined in short as a set of features arousing sexual interest and desire (Goldenson, Anderson, 1996). It is worth emphasizing that sexual attractiveness in many cultures is connected with an evaluation of physical attractiveness which includes physical appearance, body odor and the sound of voice (Giddens, 2005). One of the evaluation criteria of the physical appearance is a healthy complexion. A suntan is generally appreciated, the results of research suggest that persons with a suntan are perceived more favourably than people with a pale complexion (Leary, 1995). Body weight is also important (Mirucka, 2003), however, it has to be emphasised that the influence of body weight on the perception of attractiveness depends on the culture and wealth of a given territory. It has been found that in an area where there is lack of food (poverty areas) plump and abundant shapes are preferred, whereas in wealthy areas slim or thin silhouettes are favored (Leary, 1995; Doroszewicz, 2002). However, it seems that a more important factor for evaluation of feminine attractiveness is the distribution of fat tissue in the body, namely the waist to hip ratio (WHR) (Wojciszke, 2006). Women with a slim waist, who have WHR from 0.67 to 0.80, are judged to be the most attractive (Doroszewicz, 2002; Dixson et al., 2007). As far as evaluation of male attractiveness is concerned an important index is waist to chest ratio (WCR), calculated as a relation of waist circumference to chest circumference (Weeden, Sabini, 2007). However, the evaluation of attractiveness does not depend only on physical parameters of the body. It seems to be related also to available comparison criteria. To confirm this thesis it is worth mentioning some research where the subjects were asked to evaluate a person after watching a movie starring some very attractive actresses. This evaluation usually turned out to be negative (Myers, 2008).

In relation to sexuality it seems significant that a high level of the sense of physical attractiveness often signifies an acceptance of one's own body and sexual role, provides a high level of self-esteem and extraversion, which in turn intensifies social contacts of an individual and favors openness of behaviors including sexual behav-

ior (Faith, Schare, 1993; Koch et al., 2005; Davison et al., 2008). However, it is worth mentioning that too high level of self-evaluation in this area may lead to focusing on oneself and one's own needs, treated as superior in comparison with the partner's needs (Kaschak, 1992; Pietrzak, Halaj, 2000). Too low level of self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness may lead to avoiding sexual contacts for fear of negative evaluation. Moreover, the results of research suggest that negative self-evaluation of physical attractiveness has a negative influence on assertiveness in the sphere of sexual behaviors and on self-evaluation of sexual ability (Yamamiya, Cash, Thompson, 2006). A relationship between the sense of physical attractiveness and sexuality has been shown to exist above and beyond the effects of real body size, suggesting that a woman's perception and cognition of her body size, rather than her actual body size, has a strong influence on sexuality (Weaver, Byers, 2006).

Within the framework of the discussed project it was assumed that an element of a global self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness is self-evaluation of sexual ability – the capacity to become sexually excited and, in particular, to achieve orgasm (Goldenson, Anderson, 1994). It seems to depend on the physical state of an individual conditioned, among others, by biological processes of aging, an amount and quality of the taken drugs, diet etc. Biological symptoms of aging in the case of men include, among others, longer time of increasing of arousal and time of refraction as well as greater need of stimulation (Schulz, Ewen, 1993; Smolak, 1993; Turner, Helms, 1994). Men experience weaker ejaculation, there is a higher percentage of men who have erection problems (lack of erection or partial erection). Women can experience vaginal atrophy which consists of the vagina shortening and narrowing, and also elasticity and lubrication problems can occur (Hyde, 1979; Schulz, Ewen, 1993; Smolak, 1993; Turner, Helms, 1994). The results of research demonstrate also a lower level of sexual desire in women during menopause, including women using hormonal therapy (Woods, Mitchell, Smith-Di Julio, 2010). This negative influence is caused by frequently occurring symptoms such as hot flashes, resulting from a sudden change in the blood vessels diameter, and manifesting themselves by a short feeling of increased body temperature in the upper part of the body, reddened skin and an increased sweating (Kaplan, Sedney, 1980). It is also worth mentioning that in late adulthood sexual ability may be lower due to circulatory system diseases (including: atherosclerosis, hypertension, arteries' diseases etc.), diabetes (resulting in lowering of libido, decreased sexual reactivity), urological problems or mental disorders (such as anxiety disorders, depression and others). Medications taken by an individual are also of great importance for the sexual ability (e.g. psychotropic drugs or hypotensive drugs) (Lew-Starowicz, 1997). The above mentioned factors may result in sexual problems, most often reported by sexually active persons above the age of 80. In case of men these problems include: problems with reaching erection (28 percent of the subjects), problems with maintaining erection (35 percent) and problems with reaching orgasm (28 percent) (Bretschneider, McCoy, 1998). In the group of studied women the most commonly reported problems were pain experienced during a sexual intercourse and problems with achieving orgasm.

Taking all these facts into consideration, in this research project the following question was raised whether sexual behavior and satisfaction of homosexuals in late adulthood are modified by the sex of the subjects, their global sense of sexual attractiveness, sense of physical attractiveness and self-evaluation of sexual ability. The problem of influence of sexual behaviors on sexual satisfaction in late adulthood was also taken up. It was also assumed that the sex of the subjects might modify the strength of influence of the discussed independent variables on the dependent variables.

Method

Participants

The data were obtained from a sample of 80 noninstitutionalized homosexual women ($n = 40$) and men ($n = 40$) ranged in age from 61 to 82 years old ($M = 67$) living in the urban areas of central and northern Poland. All participants were volunteers surveyed within a larger research project focused on seniors' sexuality and its determinants. The sample was collected using such techniques as "from door to door" and "snowball sampling", with the help of students participating in the author's MA seminar.

Measurement

Sexual behaviors were measured using Sexual Behaviors Questionnaire (vide Grabowska, 2007a, 2007b, 2009) which includes, among others, the scale of behaviors aimed at satisfying own needs (12 items; Cronbach $\alpha = 0.78$), the scale of behaviors aimed at satisfying partner's needs (7 items; Cronbach $\alpha = 0.77$), the scale of frequency of sexual activity (in which the subjects have to choose an answer corresponding to an average frequency of sexual activity in a given period of time) and the scale of sexual initiative (5 items; Cronbach $\alpha = 0.83$). The subjects were asked to refer to items of the above mentioned scales (apart from the scale of frequency of sexual activity) by attributing values from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The questionnaire includes also the scale of variety of sexual techniques containing a 10-item list of techniques with a request to mark those which apply to the subject.

Self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness was used as the independent variable, which was measured with the Scale of Sexual Attractiveness consisting of two subscales. The first is the physical attractiveness subscale, which includes four items. The subjects were asked to attribute values from 1 (never) to 5 (always) to these items. The internal consistency of this scale, calculated with Cronbach α coefficient, is 0.78. The second subscale is used to measure self-evaluation of sexual ability. This scale includes three items (e.g. *I am an equally good lover as most homosexual women*), which were attributed values from 1 (I totally disagree) to 5 (I totally agree) by the subjects. Internal consistency of this scale, calculated with Cronbach α coefficient, is 0.84.

The sex of the subjects was determined on the basis of their written declaration.

Results

Sex of the subjects and sexual behaviors

Within this research project it was assumed that there could be sex differences concerning sexual behaviors of the subjects and their sexual satisfaction. The results of *t* tests for independent variables (table 1) prove the existence of statistically significant difference concerning only variety of sexual activity (higher results for men).

Table 1. Differences between mean values for women and men in late adulthood concerning sexual behaviors and satisfaction – *t* tests for independent variable results

Sexual behavior and satisfaction	Women	Men	<i>t</i>
Behavior directed at satisfying own needs	3.19	3.26	-0.41
Behaviors directed at satisfying partner's needs	3.23	3.22	0.03
Sexual initiative	1.96	2.06	-0.56
Variety of sexual behaviors	1.74	2.16	-2.22*
Frequency of sexual activity	4.50	4.47	0.07
Sexual satisfaction	2.83	2.52	1.27

**p* < .05

No statistically significant differences were found between the results of women and men concerning other sexual behaviors or sexual satisfaction. At the same time it can be noticed that an average frequency of sexual activity of people in late adulthood is in the range between 4 (once a month) and 5 (once a week).

Sense of sexual attractiveness and sexual behaviors

Another research question concerned a global influence of self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness on sexual behaviors of the subjects. Summing up the results of regression analyses (table 2) it can be stated that both in the group of women and in the group of men self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness plays a very important role in determining all sexual behaviors included in the study.

Table 2. The influence of sexual attractiveness on sexual behaviors – multiple regression analyses results

Sexual behavior	Sexual attractiveness (in women)		Sexual attractiveness (in men)	
	β	R^2	β	R^2
Satisfying own needs	.69*	.481	.76*	.569
Satisfying partner's needs	.66*	.436	.67*	.438
Sexual initiative	.68*	.458	.72*	.512

cd. table 2

Variety of sexual behaviors	.59*	.346	.64*	.393	.59*	.336
Frequency of sexual activity	.60*	.351	.65*	.402	.55*	.287

* $p < .05$

The analysis of the percentage of variance of sexual behaviors explained by self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness allows to draw conclusion about a slightly stronger influence of this variable on sexual behaviors of women than men.

Moreover, multiple regression analyses were also performed in order to estimate the influence of the sense of physical attractiveness and self-evaluation of sexual ability on sexual behaviors of the subjects in late adulthood (table 3 and 4).

Table 3. The influence of the sense of physical attractiveness on sexual behaviors – multiple regression analyses results

Sexual behavior	Sense of physical attractiveness		Sense of physical attractiveness (in women)		Sense of physical attractiveness (in men)	
	β	R^2	β	R^2	β	R^2
Satisfying own Reed	.66*	.431	.71*	.496	.62*	.374
Satisfying partner's needs	.60*	.351	.59*	.335	.61*	.362
Sexual initiative	.64*	.405	.67*	.433	.62*	.375
Variety of sexual behaviors	.58*	.330	.61*	.352	.50*	.349
Frequency of sexual activity	.54*	.284	.59*	.330	.49*	.223

* $p < .05$

Table 4. Influence of self-evaluation of sexual ability on sexual behaviors – multiple regression analyses results

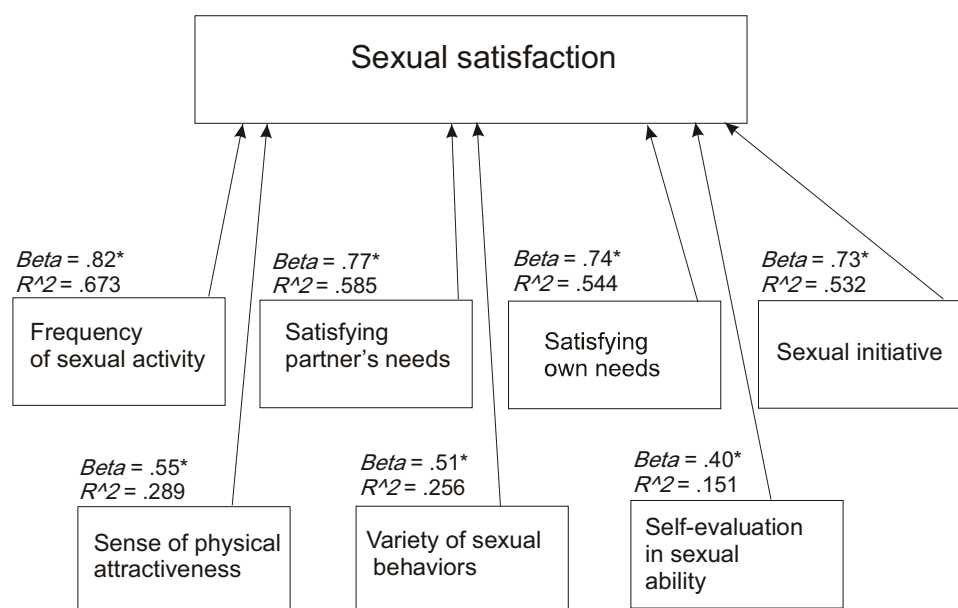
Sexual behavior	Self-evaluation of sexual ability		Self-evaluation of sexual ability (in women)		Self-evaluation of sexual ability (in men)	
	β	R^2	β	R^2	β	R^2
Satisfying own Reed	.50*	.245	.47*	.202	.55*	.285
Satisfying partner's needs	.45*	.194	.36*	.105	.60*	.347
Sexual initiative	.51*	.255	.45*	.178	.60*	.346
Variety of sexual behaviors	.48*	.220	.43*	.167	.52*	.250
Frequency of sexual activity	.38*	.136	.35*	.103	.43*	.164

* $p < .05$

An analysis of the percentage of variance of sexual behaviors through the sense of physical attractiveness and self-evaluation of sexual ability leads to a few important conclusions: (1) generally the sense of physical attractiveness seems to have a stronger influence on sexual behavior than self-evaluation of sexual ability; (2) in the group of women in late adulthood a stronger influence can be noticed of the sense of physical attractiveness on sexual behaviors than in the group of men and (3) in the group of men in late adulthood a stronger influence can be noticed of self-evaluation of sexual ability on sexual behaviors than in the group of women.

Sense of sexual attractiveness, sexual behaviors and satisfaction

The last research question of the project concerned the conditions of sexual satisfaction of gay men and lesbians in late adulthood. It was assumed that factors, which determine sexual satisfaction, include the sense of physical attractiveness, self-evaluation of sexual ability and sexual behaviors. In order to answer the above question multiple regression analyses were performed in the whole study group, whose results are presented in figure 1.

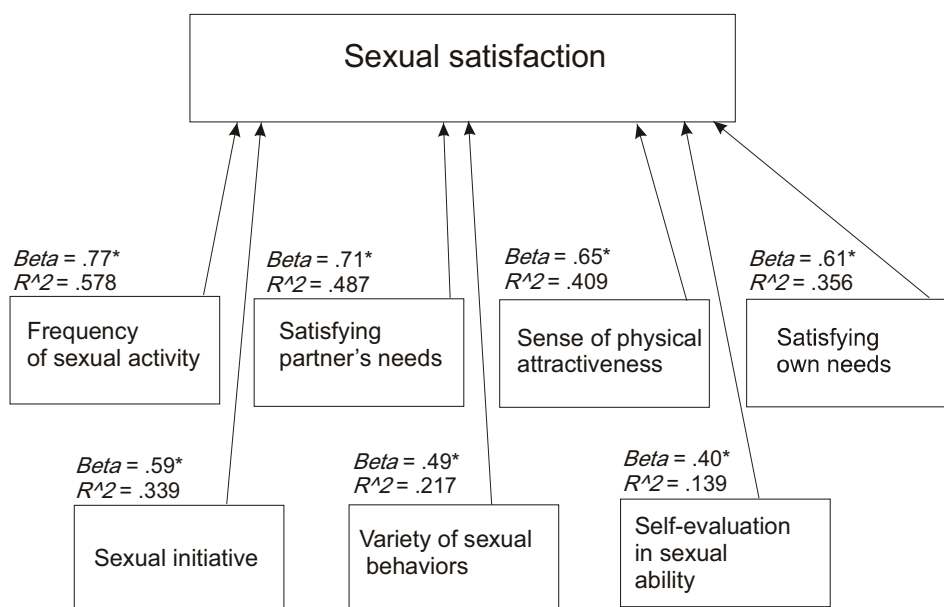


* $p < .05$

Figure 1. The influence of the sense of physical attractiveness, self-evaluation of sexual ability and sexual behaviors on sexual satisfaction in late adulthood – multiple regression analyses results

The results of regression analyses demonstrate that there is a statistically significant influence of all independent variables on the sexual satisfaction of the subjects. On the basis of the above results it can be stated that the factor that most strongly modifies sexual satisfaction of the studied subjects is the frequency of the sexual activity whereas the factor with the least influence on this dependent variable is self-evaluation of sexual ability.

Within the discussed research project it was assumed that the role of particular independent variables in explaining sexual satisfaction may depend on the sex of the subjects. In order to verify this assumption analogous regression analyses were performed separately in the group of women (figure 2) and in the group of men (figure 3).



* $p < .05$

Figure 2. The influence of the sense of physical attractiveness, self-evaluation of sexual ability and sexual behaviors on sexual satisfaction in women – multiple regression analyses results

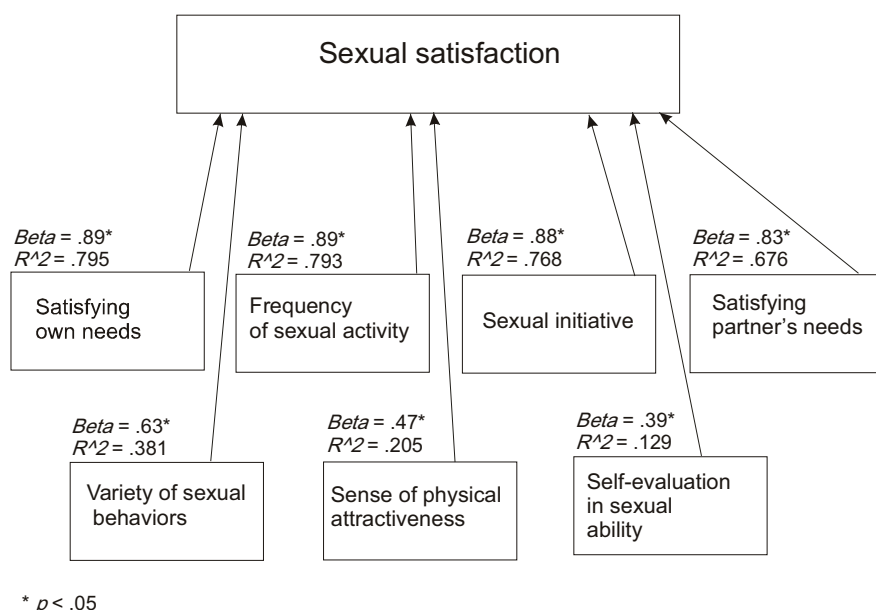


Figure 3. The influence of the sense of physical attractiveness, self-evaluation of sexual ability and sexual behaviors on sexual satisfaction in men – multiple regression analyses results

The results of regression analyses allow to notice that sexual satisfaction of women in late adulthood is strongly determined by the frequency of sexual activity and behaviors aimed at satisfying partner's needs. A smaller, however still very important role is played by the sense of physical attractiveness, and the smallest – self-evaluation of sexual ability.

On the other hand, in the group of men in late adulthood a strong influence was noted of behaviors aimed at satisfying own needs, the frequency of sexual activity and sexual initiative on sexual satisfaction. In this research sample the factors which relatively weaker modified sexual activity were self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness and the sense of physical attractiveness.

Discussion

The above presented results of research confirmed the assumption that there is an influence of self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness on sexual activity and satisfaction of gay men and lesbians in late adulthood. It is worth noticing that social consequences of attractiveness can be observed from the earliest phases of human life. Newborn babies benefit from physical attractiveness – it gives them care by inducing additional affection in the caregivers. It was proved that mothers

of more beautiful babies spend more time with them; they cuddle them more often, have more eye contact with them and talk to them more often. On the other hand, mothers of less attractive children are more reserved in showing affection towards them (Doroszewicz, 2002). Attractive children are better treated by their teachers, who show more patience and attention towards them, consider them to be smarter, better behaved and more promising for the future (Wosinska, 2004). Similarly to childhood, also in adulthood physical attractiveness has a significant influence on people's behaviors. For example, people are more willing to have contact with attractive persons, mainly because of the fact that they are perceived as more sociable, friendly, balanced, more intelligent, stronger, with better character, happier, better suited socially and more active sexually (Leary, 1995; Pietrzak, Halaj, 2000; Gindrich, 2006; Lipowska, Lipowski, 2006; Myers, 2008). A common belief that attractive people besides a nice appearance have also many other positive features is described in literature as a stereotype of physical attractiveness (Wosinska, 2004). Some researchers explain this phenomenon with the so-called aureole effect. It is assumed that physical attractiveness – as a positive feature – motivates generally to positively evaluate an attractive person; this feature seems to 'beam' at other features of an individual (Wojciszke, 2006). Physical attractiveness, although provides many benefits, may also be connected with some losses. Some studies demonstrate that especially attractive women are believed to be more vain, conceited, egoistic, materialistic and prone to betrayal. In turn, very handsome men are believed to be less intelligent (Baron, Byrne, 1997; Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 2004; Wojciszke, 2006). Moreover, successes (e.g. professional) of attractive women are often explained by their attractiveness and not the level of competence (Kaschak, 1992). These women are often not treated as equal partners in communication (Buczowski, 2005). This awareness that physical attractiveness brings more benefits than losses seems to be socially common. For example, a great majority of those surveyed (90 percent) by CBOS (Bialy, 2003) declared that physical appearance is very important for them. The subjects also stated that taking care of physical attractiveness translates to the quality of personal life (82 percent) and professional life (80 percent). Also the majority of the studied women (84 percent) stated that they would like to change some feature of their physical appearance – most often body weight or hair style, less often – they mentioned having a surgery (Izdebski, 2004). To improve one's own attractiveness different behaviors are used, such as choosing appropriate clothes, make-up, suntan and plastic surgeries. Most women who decided to have a breast augmentation gave the main reason as increasing the level of their own attractiveness (Leary, 1995). People, who had beautifying plastic surgeries, are evaluated – on the basis of their appearance in pictures before and after the surgery – as nicer and more attractive sexually (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 2004).

The results of research presented in this paper also allow to notice that in the group of women in late adulthood there is a slightly stronger influence of the sense of physical attractiveness on sexual behaviors than in the group of men. In turn in the group of men in late adulthood a stronger influence can be noticed of self-evaluation of sexual ability on sexual behaviors than in the group of women. The dif-

ferences between sexes concerning physical attractiveness manifest themselves not only in this period of life – they can be observed from the earliest phases of development. As early as in childhood girls are expected to look nice and pretty whereas boys are expected to be curious and courageous. An interest in appearance manifested by dressing up and looking in the mirror is believed to be a girls' thing, in turn boys are encouraged to dynamic plays (Kaschak, 1992). In adolescence boys describe their own appearance in terms of strength and fitness, whereas girls in terms of attractiveness. Another significant sex difference in this period consists in the fact that unlike boys girls refer to their appearance in a detailed and fragmentary way, which is visible in describing particular parts of the body, usually those connected with stereotypical perception of feminine attractiveness (e.g. breasts, buttocks) (Ziółkowska, 2003). Adult women, asked to choose their own and men's ideal of a woman's body, in both cases usually choose the slimmer than average body build. Men, on the other hand, in such tasks choose an average build (Buss, 2004). Moreover, women, in comparison with men, are more critical in evaluating their own physical attractiveness, seem to have less satisfaction from their own appearance and more often worry about being critically judged (Sabini, 1995; Baron, Byrne, 1997; Buczkowski, 2005). The results of research prove that sexual orientation was not found to be a significant variable in men's perceptions of attractiveness. The attractiveness ratings given by homosexual and bisexual women were significantly lower than those of heterosexual women. Sexual orientation may therefore be relevant for the perception of female attractiveness by women (Nash, Fieldman, Hussey, 2005).

Physical changes, resulting from biological ageing, may influence the level of self-evaluation of sexual attractiveness especially in the group of women because of the so-called double standard of ageing, i.e. more critical judgement of physical symptoms of ageing in the case of women than in men (Matlin, 1996; Lips, 2005). This phenomenon is connected with a common social tendency to value women in terms of their physical attractiveness for men (Lips, 2005). Ageing women, with the appearance of the first physical symptoms of the ageing process (e.g. wrinkles, grey hair, farsightedness), may experience not only losing their femininity, but also losing their own value as a human being. The same physical changes occurring in men are treated as a natural process, they are acceptable or even believed to be dignifying or symbolizing maturity. Maturity is, however, a commonly desired feature in men – in the case of women it is merely one of gender-relaxed prescriptions, that is a feature socially desirable but at the same time the lack of which in women is easily 'forgiven' (Prentice, Carranza, 2002). In turn, for the sexual behaviors and satisfaction of gay men in late adulthood an important factor is self-evaluation of sexual ability. This fact can be related to physical changes influencing the sexual efficiency of men in this age. These changes include longer time of sexual arousal and refraction as well as grater need for stimulation (Schulz, Ewen, 1993; Smolak, 1993; Turner, Helms, 1994; Lew-Starowicz, 2004). As it was mentioned before, men have weaker ejaculation. There is a greater percentage of men who experience erection problems (no erection or partial erection). The results of research (Perlmutter,

Hall, 1992) demonstrate that already in men in their thirties symptoms of penis' ageing can be noticed such as hardening and loss of elasticity of blood vessels. Due to the fact that the mechanism of erection depends on the condition of blood vessels the above mentioned changes may have a negative influence on the time to reach erection and its durability.

Summing up the above mentioned research results, a strong influence of sexual behaviors on sexual satisfaction of subjects under study has to be emphasized. This fact is in agreement with the results of other research projects, in which it was also found that sexual functioning was strongly correlated with sexual satisfaction such that a greater degree of functioning was related to greater sexual satisfaction (Pujols, Meston, Seal, 2010). Moreover, in the discussed period of life no significant differences between men and women were found concerning sexual behaviors – unlike the described earlier sex differences related to the conditions of these behaviors. Discussing the question of sexuality in late adulthood it also has to be emphasized that in many cultures (among others in Polish) there is still a stereotype of an older person as asexual, unattractive and without any sexual needs (Zajac-Lamparska, 2008; Grabowska, 2009). Some parts of the society still believe that in old age sexual activity is neither necessary nor possible. Stereotypically older people are described as asexual, unattractive, having no sexual needs, whereas their sexuality evokes pity, repugnance, laughter or even contempt (Lips, 2005). What is interesting, the same sexual behaviors undertaken by young people are described as a 'sign of vitality', whereas in case of older people they are, according to the studied subjects, a 'sign of lust' (Lips, 2005). Sexuality is also associated with youth and its attributes such as slim, well-built body, smooth, healthy skin or good physical fitness – such associations lead to perceiving older people (who lack these attributes) as asexual (Hyde, 1979). As it was already mentioned, the situation of older homosexual persons may be especially difficult since they are likely to suffer from a double stigma: from homophobia and ageism. It was found that many older homosexual persons have not publicly revealed their sexual preference. They may experience additional stress due to a perceived need to hide their sexual orientation (McDougall, 1993), and this in turn may result in a decreased satisfaction from being sexually active in late adulthood.

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