

157 - SEXUALITY AND DAILY LIFE IN THE ELDERLY: THE VILA VICENTINA JÚLIA FREIRE CASE

STEFÂNIA CARTAXO PESSOA
 FRANCISCO IVO DANTAS CAVALCANTI
 UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO NORTE – PPGCSA
 Natal – Rio Grande do Norte – Brasil
 stefaniapessoa@terra.com.br

The idea that sexual appetite is reduced with age has been discredited in recent years. This idea appears to have come from a lack of understanding of elderly life. This study of senior citizens outlines many different reasons explaining the inaccuracy of this erroneous preconception.

At Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire in João Pessoa, Brazil, the residents act as if the main living room of the home is the village square where they meet to participate in friendships and courtships alike. This daily sociability stems from each participant's need to belong. It is how they assume and internalize temporary values in the unique environment they were thrown into by circumstance.

The senior citizen home in question resembles a condominium of small collective or individual apartments. The residents are constantly mingling, engaging in joint activities, as well as walking and eating together in an effort to strengthen ties. To a certain degree, this tight knit socialization is imposed on them by proximity. As a result, institutionalization is quickly turned into a sense of belonging to a large family made up of people with completely different cultures, lifestyles and histories.

It was observed that relationships are created according to affinity, and can reach a more intimate degree such as dating or even marriage.

The residents constantly refer to the fact that their present reality is painfully different from that of their youth. Loss of movement, decreased health and limited activity has led to the idea that they can no longer be or do what they wish. However, when it comes to dating or marriage, this idea is rarely cited as an impediment. They realize that they are no longer the youths of their past, but do not feel incapable of building new relationships. This is reflected in the number of couples formed within the group, and the various reasons for the forming of these bonds will be discussed in this article.

These relationships were found to result from want of companionship much more than from a concern about sexual activity. Couples are also formed owing to the need to feel alive and to be protected by someone.

The residents Vicentina Júlia Freire consist of 38 men and 29 women, totaling 77 elderly. This number was determined at the beginning of our study; however, by the end of our research, the Vila was accommodating 70 senior citizens, its maximum capacity. Of this total, 5 men and 5 women underwent a Narrative Interview. The purpose of the consultation was to report on how the subjects see themselves and others, and their quality of life, based on body image.

Since sexuality is influenced by individual values, great caution was observed during the interview. People of this generation often perceive this topic as offensive and taboo. When one resident was questioned about the possibility of marriage at her age, she responded by equating marriage with a lifetime of spousal care:

I wouldn't marry or befriend anyone. Do I want the work? Old men are a lot of work.
 (Roselaine, 82 anos)

This answer raises the idea that marriage only serves to create more work for women. In this case the relationship associated with marriage is not one of friendship, love and sex, but an arrangement where one spouse cares for the other as a companion. The responsibility weighs much more on the woman since she takes on both the spouse and the household as her obligation.

In this case marriage is a channel of feminine submission. This also extends to sexual relations, which become part of the 'conjugal obligations'. The topic of sexuality was investigated to determine how it is perceived and assimilated by the elderly in the study.

In each interview it was explicitly determined whether the subjects were differentiating between past behaviors and present day actions, even though memory failed them at times.

Many viewed themselves as attractive, even though the elderly were generally considered homely. Many also continued to have active sex lives. The exceptions were those who associated sexuality with body image. Since sexual appetite is linked to desire and appearance, the passage of time can significantly alter this yearning. Keeping in mind that sexual stimuli are present in the life of every human, sexual lifespan has no predetermined cut off point. It must also be considered that factors such as health, life conditions, and other unforeseen events can interfere in sexual activity.

Vicente speaks of an exciting youth and adds that since women favored him, he dated frequently. He also boasts of his fame with women of his age and how much he is criticized by Antonio, another resident, who accuses him of not wanting the women in the Villa:

When I feel like it I chat with them, but when I don't I leave. I liked Lila, and I had already bought her an engagement ring, but Lila left me. We are on good terms; she still talks to me. We dated for a long time. I bought her things, but she didn't want them... I left her.
 (Vicente, 74 anos)

From the tone of voice, we can deduce a strong personality. He can also be characterized as a responsible and altruistic person, traits reflected by his gardening chores at the Villa. Vicente also had a relationship with Sayonara, another resident. When he talks about the separation, one can detect a lack of faith in the marital institution:

I left her. She thought it would last, but she loved me more than I loved her. One day a new resident arrived and he gave me some advice about her. He said "Let me tell you something, I got tired of her. She told me you were dating her at the time, but you weren't. I didn't want to have anything to do with her anyway, I only wanted to chat, maybe date a little." I said no! She wanted to marry, I didn't. Why should we get married? We were talking one day, and I said "Ok, Sayonara,, thanks a lot. He's my friend from home! You think everything is ok, but you want to get married and I don't." I never married.
 (Vicente, 74 anos)

The girlfriend to who he is referring to was still a virgin and wanted a traditional wedding with all the trimmings. Vicente elaborated on his relationship to explain the difference between dating a woman and a girl (virgin). He claims they had a love

based on respect, but when he refused to marry her she decided to date another man. He agreed reluctantly.

Some residents reported that the desire and disposition for sexual activity still exists. One of these seniors proceeded to list his various health problems, gesticulating to clarify his narrative. This conveys the image of someone taken by surprise by old age, finding himself suddenly needing medical attention. The subject continued his discourse by enumerating the surgeries that he needed most urgently.

It was observed that when men referred to their physical fitness, they mentioned infirmities and ailments before anything else. This may be to justify their age, although they only rarely admit to sexual impotence. In fact, even when a narrative is shrouded in embarrassment owing to the female interviewer, they confess to an active sex life, as stated by LIMA (1998):

Age does not desexualize the individual, but society imposes orgasmic dysfunction and a lack of desire/excitability on the elderly. Society has stereotyped sexuality and led us to believe that it is only embodied by young healthy people. (apud Lopes e Maia, 1994)

Although the intention was not to demonstrate a need for sexual activity, the subjects of this study made it understood that even as single people they were sexually active. They also said that getting involved with a partner is a difficult step to take, considering past experiences in relationships that often never amounted to much. In CAPODIECI, (2000:146), the idea that man needs to feel 'active' is directly linked to his image in society:

Men can very easily place too much emphasis on physical ability, equating it with masculinity. The elderly often feel judged by their contemporaries and compare their sexual activity with that of young men. These comparisons rarely refer to the quality or value of the sexual experience.

If truth be told, these men are 'selling' their image to the group. Thus, assuming a sexually active label is being healthy and youthful, even though health problems are a constant worry.

When asked whether he needed someone, Antônio answered that he hoped to find a partner promptly. He also stated that living with someone is always pleasant and is the aspiration of every human being; this, he said, became clear to him after having to bear living alone.

What seems most evident within the context of this nursing home is the constant concern with the appearance of well being, demonstrating that body image is associated with personal body care. This is more prominent in women who use jewelry, make-up, and hair accessories to always look well cared for. Such worries seem to be legitimate, independent of age, when considering the image one wishes to project to the world. Furthermore, personal hygiene is a basic requirement in present day society. This is a personal attitude, but extends to others, because of the way we habitually assess each other. We believe we are what we wear and use.

The interviews revealed that the residents attempt to express their perspective of the world and old age through projected self image. Everything is appraised: from make-up to collective behaviors. Every detail is perceived, since they are in a restricted environment, where they are their own references of the world. Visitors and family are seen as strangers with specific visiting hours; it is those left behind that are part of daily life and personal conflicts.

DATING AND MARRIAGE

Due to the proximity in Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire, the lives of the residents consist of the daily activities which take place between pairs. Naturally the people closest to them are chosen as mates. We found two couples that met at the Villa Silvana/Ronaldo, who are now married, and Emilton/Sayonara who were dating at the time. These relationships were permeated with complicity and special attention, especially from the woman. This strengthens both of them, one supporting the other within the social circle of the Villa.

In his discourse, Tanyson relates his concern with expenditures within the Villa. He suggests that residents form couples to reduce costs. This could be, in some cases, a way of reducing the need for tertiary care within the home, since the women would care for their husbands. This theory is also defended by another home cited at the beginning of the article.

Residents also discussed living quarters and personal hygiene. This is a common concern, and dismisses any preconceptions about neglected body image in the elderly. The care of personal space is an extension of personal hygiene. By ensuring an organized and neat disposition, the residents have become cleanliness enthusiasts. Tanyson tidies his own living space and always cleans and irons his clothes himself. In his narrative, Tanyson relates how he sees his body and his personal hygiene. He recognizes that it is his obligation to always be clean and tidy. He recounts the day he cut his hair in a salon and quite proudly quotes the owner of the shop as saying "You look much younger Tanyson."

The residents of the Villa talk about their lives within the institution in a way that leads one to believe that the outside world is only a small detail in the scenario of their lives. They refer to their childhood or younger years as if it were part of another world left behind. It is as if the door to the outside world had shut, leaving them to watch the world go by through the window. They refer to family as characters in a movie seen long ago, and often confuse them, or even forget their existence.

Sexuality should not be associated with the physical, biological, psychic or social conditions of the individual, but with how human beings connect in everyday contact (LIMA 1998). This is what determines the feelings uniting people. It is also this emotion, or lack of, which creates the desire motivating sexual relations. It is difficult to determine what people will feel or how they will behave when faced with the necessities of their vital existence. Sexuality is unique and particular to each human being. Individuals age differently and have their own biological clock, which in turn, is what determines exclusive sexual needs.

ONACHES AND PAINS AND LIFE

The activities at Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire are carried out with the help of volunteers who perform several different functions. Students often complete their university requirements here. Commonly, pupils from Physical Education, Nursing, and Social Assistance are sent as interns, doing field work or simply volunteering their services.

When discussing their health, each one is quick to state that old age is riddled with problems. However, Sofia has no health complaints; she is just grateful to be alive and appears to be a shining example of someone who does not complain of getting older. Her memory faltered considerably when she discussed her childhood, but she was very proud of the few French words she could still remember and called attention to her good nature and docility.

Without complaining, she refers to a leg problem caused by a fall, adding that things could be worse. She claims she always asked not to suffer in her old age (96 years), referring to her religious beliefs and serene existence:

I don't know if I'm going to heaven, do I? But I don't think I have made that many mistakes. I don't want to change what I think of God. For me, God is everything. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here. If I wasn't here, or if God didn't exist, maybe I would be in the street, without a roof. I'm an only child, and don't have any family. Everybody disappeared. I had few children. I think they've all died. I lived in Rio for forty years. I loved that place.

(Sofia, 96 anos)

She refers to everything in her life in a very serene way. Her serenity seems to have been molded by life, and at times by suffering. Sofia moves with great difficulty because of her leg problem. She no longer remembers the names of her children, but recounts her life in Rio. She is proud of being elderly and of not being sickly or disease ridden, even though her leg is visibly impaired

In comparison, another resident, Larissa, has remarkable fluidity of thought. He talks of past events as if reliving a scene and vividly describes details. At the beginning of the interview this subject was reticent, claiming that his life was private and of no interest to anyone. He eventually tells us that he resents the world for its materialism, before becoming very anxious because of the interruptions of another resident, Sayonara She voices her discontent with her present life situation:

I am upset. Not one day is a good day for me. When I came here I was well. Now I am sick and nervous. There is no medication. They don't give anyone anything. They only deceive people here. (Larissa, 68 anos)

After determining her normal state of stress in this interview, we looked deeper into the source of her skepticism about the benefits of interviews. She stated that she had given numerous interviews that had resulted in no life improvement: "These interviews are useless to me. They don't improve anything, it's just getting worse." This attitude made her interview difficult, but made us reflect on the usefulness of scientific work. In whose interest is scientific research? How does this revert to the object of the study? This type of field experience and studies to come will help those who need better living conditions.

Since the population age at Villa Vicentina Júlia Freire varies from 52 to 96 years, a large range of behaviors and mentalities is brought together. Behaviors, lifestyles, and world perspectives vary greatly owing to the different backgrounds. Whereas some lived in the capital their whole lives, others came from cities and small villages where religious and family morals were rigorously upheld. This variability was observed throughout the study and is addressed in another article on the religious beliefs of Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire residents.

The most prominent finding was the need for greater attention and care.. For most of the residents, being surrounded by kindness and medical care is almost a humanitarian necessity. These people are separated from the world, yet their income permits them to enjoy a certain quality of life, which includes necessary medical care, attention and physical activity.

Another senior citizen, Tanyson, not currently residing at the Vila, has many complaints concerning the administration of the institution. These loaded comments show a concern dating from his stay at the residence. Tanyson recounted his time spent at the home, as well as his observations about the administration.

What becomes obvious is the different world views of each resident. Past experience permeates the narratives, as the residents relate attempts at choosing different paths for the future. They also see their living space in a different way; but all try to live within the same community, carefully avoiding problems or disagreements with each other and the administration, in order to facilitate a peaceful co-existence.

New interpersonal relationships can only occur when opportunity permits; one needs to be looking and the other needs to be found. Within the Vila, where isolation barriers and solitude must be faced daily, these possibilities are created through social activities.

CONSIDERATIONS

It is our assessment that stereotypes pressure senior citizens to accept the improbability of sexual relations within their age group. However, they remain concerned with staying active, socially and sexually, proving that age is not correlated with sexual practice.

Other considerations such as living conditions, sports, leisure activities, and quality of life are more worrisome. The elderly need to be protected from unscrupulous individuals who want to manipulate them and their money, potentially putting their lives at risk. This is becoming an issue, as more elderly protection agencies and institutions appear. Stricter controls are needed to safeguard the elderly's rights as citizens, thus helping families give them the care and attention of past eras. In this study, the elderly have been abandoned, deprived of their families, and live alone in nursing homes, while suffering from various afflictions. They are tormented by seclusion and lack of attention, as well as being labeled as discardable burdens.

This is a disquieting reality and should be addressed more often by studies and society. The quality of life model includes living conditions, leisure, health and physical activity. These specific points need to be studied more carefully in order to restore elderly self-esteem, security, and faith in the future.

The elderly must be allowed to express themselves freely and to respect themselves as much as they do others. Institutions should be inviting the elderly to participate in a joint effort towards a future of dignity and respect.

This study found that the residents of Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire suffer from need, owing to their physical and social conditions. As a result, the subjects reach out to others in search of the support and care needed in the daily life of the nursing home.

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Stefânia Cartaxo Pessoa (UFRN) Rua Antônio Gama, 660. Apt. 203-B – Tambauzinho
João Pessoa – Paraíba – Brasil
CEP 58041-110 – Telefone: (83) 3531-6059 Celular: (83) 8871 3331

SEXUALITY AND THE DAY-TO-DAY OF OLD AGE: THE CASE OF VILA VICENTINA JÚLIA FREIRE

ABSTRACT

This article is part of a doctoral thesis begun in 2006 at the Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire nursing home in João Pessoa, Brazil. The aim was to follow and record the life and behavior of the residents, in relation to their personal life, socialization and way of living, with an emphasis on body image. In this perspective, we chose the narrative interview model, using techniques that allowed us to obtain the maximum of information from the subjects. Respecting the freedom and independence of the narrative report, we encouraged them to reveal as much as possible about their lives, taking into consideration the subjects' line of thinking and the personal chronology of the residents. The method consisted of six steps, with four phases: preparation, initiation phases, main narration, questioning, conclusive discourse and finally the construction of a memory protocol from which we selected the topics shared by all the discourses such as: what the elderly individuals of a nursing home think of themselves, in relation to their body, to others and to the idea of quality of life, that is: a. the elderly as seen by themselves and by others; b. religiosity as a moral factor; c. intimacy and relationships. The criteria for choosing the aforementioned categories were based on the relevance of the themes raised by the subjects. In this article, we included only the narratives that dealt with the third category in the daily life of the elderly residents. **KEYWORDS:** Sexuality, elderly, nursing home.

SÉXUALITÉ ET QUOTIDIEN AU TROISIÈME AGE: LE CAS DE LA "VILA VICENTINA JÚLIA FREIRE".

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article fait parti d'une recherche de doctorat, commencée en 2006 à la maison de retraite "Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire" à João Pessoa – Paraíba, qui a pour objectif d'accompagner et d'enregistrer la vie et le comportement des résidents par rapport à leur vie personnelle, à la socialisation et au mode de vie, se concentrant sur leur image corporelle. Dans cette perspective nous avons utilisé le modèle d'entrevue narrative, utilisant des techniques qui permettent d'extraire le maximum d'information des sujets. Tout en respectant la liberté et l'indépendance du récit, nous avons stimulé la capacité de présenter leurs vies, prenant en considération la ligne de pensée des interviewés et la chronologie personnelle des résidents. La méthode comprend six étapes de quatre phases, c'est à dire la préparation, la phase d'initiation, de narration, de questionnement et de conversation conclusive, terminant par l'établissement d'un recueil de mémoires dont nous avons sélectionné ce qui de mieux a été discuté dans toutes les conversations et que nous considérons de plus important comme: ce que pense une personne âgée d'une maison de retraite à l'égard de lui – même, par rapport à son image personnelle, par rapport aux autres et à son idée de la qualité de la vie, soit: a) la personne âgée vu par lui-même et par les autres; b) la religiosité comme facteur moral; c) l'intimité et les relations. Les critères de choix des catégories ci-dessus décrites sont basés sur l'importance des thèmes abordés pendant les entretiens. Dans cette article nous abordons seulement les récits qui se réfèrent à la troisième catégories dans le quotidien des résidents.

MOTS-CLÉS: sexualité, personne âgée; maison de retraite.

SEXUALIDAD Y DÍA A DÍA EN LA TERCERA EDAD: EL CASO DE VILLA VICENTINA JÚLIA FREIRE

RESUMEN

El presente artículo forma parte de una investigación de doctorado, iniciada en el año de 2006, en el asilo de ancianos Villa Vicentina Júlia Freire, en João Pessoa – Paraíba - Brasil, y trata de acompañar y registrar la vida y el comportamiento de los residentes en relación a su vida personal, a la socialización y al modo de vida, poniendo el foco en su imagen corporal. En esa perspectiva, elegimos el modelo de Entrevistas Narrativas, utilizando técnicas que permiten extraer el máximo de información de los sujetos. Respetando la libertad e independencia del relator, incentivamos la capacidad de presentar más sobre sus vidas, llevando en consideración la línea de pensamiento de los entrevistados y la cronología personal de los residentes. El método abarcó seis pasos, con cuatro fases, siendo estas la preparación, fases de iniciación, de narración central, de duda y de conversación conclusiva, finalizando con la construcción de un protocolo de memorias del cual seleccionamos lo que fue compartido por todas las charlas y consideramos de mayor relevancia, como: lo que piensa el anciano de una institución asilar respecto a sí mismo, en relación con su imagen corporal, en relación al otro y su idea de calidad de vida, es decir: a. el anciano visto por sí y por el otro; b. la religiosidad como factor moral; c. intimidad y relaciones. Los criterios de elección de esas categorías arriba descritas se han basado en la relevancia de los temas abordados por los entrevistados. En este artículo, abarcamos sólo las narraciones que referidas a la tercera categoría en el quehacer diario de los residentes.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Sexualidad, anciano, asilo.

SEXUALIDADE E DIA-A-DIA NA TERCEIRA IDADE: O CASO DA VILA VICENTINA JÚLIA FREIRE

RESUMO

O presente artigo é parte de uma pesquisa de doutorado, iniciada no ano de 2006, na instituição asilar Vila Vicentina Júlia Freire, em João Pessoa - Paraíba, que objetivou acompanhar e registrar a vida e o comportamento dos residentes, em relação a sua vida pessoal, à socialização e ao modo de vida, com foco na sua imagem corporal. Nessa perspectiva, escolhemos o modelo de Entrevistas Narrativas, utilizando técnicas que permitem extrair o máximo de informação dos sujeitos. Respeitando a liberdade e independência do relato da narrativa, incentivamos a capacidade de apresentar mais sobre suas vidas, levando em consideração a linha de pensamento dos entrevistados e a cronologia pessoal dos residentes. O método abrangeu seis passos com quatro fases, considerando a preparação, fases de iniciação, de narração central, de questionamento e de fala conclusiva, finalizando com a construção de um protocolo de memórias do qual selecionamos o que de maior relevância foi compartilhado por todas as falas, como: o que pensa o idoso de uma instituição asilar a respeito de si mesmo, em relação a sua imagem corporal, em relação ao outro e sua ideia de qualidade de vida, ou seja: a. o idoso visto por si e pelo outro; b. a religiosidade como fator moral; c. intimidades e relacionamentos. Os critérios de escolhas dessas categorias acima descritas basearam-se na relevância dos temas abordados pelos entrevistados. Nesse artigo, abrangemos apenas as narrativas que contemplaram a terceira categoria no cotidiano dos residentes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Sexualidade, idoso, albergue.

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