Exploring the Meanings of Sexuality: What Young Adults Learn from Mature Women

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Abstract

In this study we explored young adults’ perceptions of sexual expression among older women in the context of confronting ageism and sexism from a feminist perspective.

Findings

Guided by a critical feminist theoretical framework, we coded and analyzed the students’ responses using a constant comparative method. We arrived at 4 interrelated themes from the students’ responses.

How Young Adults Perceive Older Women’s Sexuality:

Both female (95%) and male (93%) students acknowledged that contrary to stereotypes and thus expectations, women still feel sexual in their later years. They viewed older women as having a bold and complex attitude towards sexuality and saw that sexual expression was much more than intercourse. Conversely, students believed that it was not easy being old. They identified obstacles to sexual expression such as finding a partner and the women’s ambivalence towards their aging bodies.

Perceptions about Ageism and Sexism:

Students recognized that societal prejudices helped shape older women’s sexual selves. Though they applauded the older women’s sexual agency, most students were less reflective about how ageism and sexism influenced their interpretation of the film.

Students’ Comfort Level with Discussing Aging Women’s Sexuality:

Students revealed their ageism and sexism in their descriptions of their comfort level with the film. Most students (61% women; 57% men) expressed at least some comfort with being able to talk about sexuality in late life. 30% of the women and 28% of the men reported some discomfort and portrayal of women who did not fit normative, heterosexual ideals.

Life Lessons - Learning From the Old:

Students reported that the film enabled them to consider their own futures as aging people. Females especially noted that intimacy and romance was important over the life course, whereas male students tended to use graphic language in their attribution of a bold attitude to older women.

Sample & Data Collection

- 82 male and 195 female undergraduate students
- Students were not asked to identify demographic information beyond gender, but course statistics indicated:
  • Age: Average age of the male students in the class was 20.4 years (SD = 1.46; range = 18 - 24); average age of women in the sample was 19.8 years (SD = 1.07, range = 18 - 23)
  • Race: 72% White; 7% Asian; 4% African American; 2% Hispanic; 2% International; less than 1% Native American; 12% unknown.
- Students were asked to respond in writing to 6 questions:
  1. What new ideas about old women are generated from viewing the film?
  2. What is sexy about old women?
  3. What is sexy about sex after 65?
  4. What messages did the women convey about their own bodies?
  5. What can younger people learn from older women about sexuality and intimacy?
  6. What have you learned about your own comfort level in discussing issues of women, sexuality, and aging in an open forum from watching this film with others?

Implications & Conclusions

Encouraging self-awareness about sexuality as a life course issue helps students face their own identity issues and prepares them to sensitively confront personal stereotypes of aging, and change them. The operation of this process was evident as the young women, in particular, came to understand that the old women in the film would be them in 50 years.

Infusing lifespan issues in a wide variety of subject matters though general university undergraduate curriculum requirements provides opportunities for students to think beyond age boundaries and achieve greater intellectual integration and practical consideration of contemporary issues. Dispelling stereotypes of aging can ultimately enhance personal and family lives, as well as facilitate positive interactions across generations.