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Sexuality of midlife and older women: A review of theory use

Sarah Jen

School of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

ABSTRACT

Sexual experiences of older adults remain underexplored. This review examined 21 articles focused on the sexuality of midlife and older women to identify theories used and understand how theory informs this literature. Reviewed articles described a dominant narrative of sexual decline in later life but positioned their own work as counternarratives. A majority applied social constructionist, critical, or interpretivist orientations, balancing material and socially constructed aspects of sexuality. Theories were most likely to inform the purpose and conclusions and least likely to inform limitations or descriptions of study samples. Findings support the need to affirm diverse sexual experiences of women.

KEYWORDS

Sexuality; theoretical;
women's issues

Introduction

As academics and researchers, we must periodically assess the state of theoretical development in bodies of literature to effectively critique and strengthen their explanatory power (Bengston & Settersten, 2016). As a discipline, gerontology has been described as “data rich, but theory poor” (Birren & Bengtson, 1988). In their analysis of eight prominent gerontology journals, Bengtson, Burgess, and Parrott (1997) found that almost three quarters of articles published between 1990 and 1994 made no mention of theory, with theory defined as “explicit explanations in accounting for empirical findings” (p. 72). A review of articles published in the same journals between 2000 and 2004 identified a 12% increase in uses of theory (Alley, Putney, Rice, & Bengtson, 2010). However, the majority of reviewed literature (60%) remained largely atheoretical, a lack that weakens the link between theoretical and applied gerontology, while also limiting the cumulative nature of inquiry (Hendricks, Applebaum, & Kunkel, 2010).

While these reviews of gerontological theory have made significant contributions to the field, little work has examined uses of theory pertaining to subsets of the older adult population or narrower aspects of older adult's social and personal lives. In particular, gerontology has largely overlooked experiences of sex, while sexuality-based literature focuses on youth and

young adult samples. To address this gap, this review examines articles published between 2000 and 2015 focused on the sexuality and sexual lives of midlife and older women to understand what theories are being used and how they are used within and across articles. This analysis has important implications for how researchers use theory to shape a body of literature as well as how practitioners can support the sexual needs of their clients.

Background literature

Women constitute the majority of individuals living into late life, making up 57% of Americans age 65 and older and 67% of those age 85 and older (Federal Interagency Forum, 2012), and sexuality and sexual development vary empirically and theoretically by gender. For instance, women's sexuality tends to be more fluid and vulnerable to contextual influences than that of men (Diamond, 2008; Peplau, 2001). Women and men also face distinctive social expectations and possible scripts, or socially prescribed ways of being, for sexuality in later life, shaped by the surrounding cultural, social, and political environment (Hurd Clarke, 2006). Women face added pressure to maintain their bodily appearance and experience the intersectional influences of sexism and ageism, creating the impression that they must rely on anti-aging technologies and products to maintain their sexual self-worth (Hurd Clarke, 2011). These differences point to the importance of developing a theoretical understanding of women's sexual lives that is distinct from men's experiences.

Researchers have explored theories relevant to women's sexuality (one's understanding of oneself as a sexual person) and sexual lives (one's sexual behaviors and experiences) over portions of the life course, particularly within feminist studies. However, most have failed to theorize sexuality specifically in later life, such as Betty Freidan's survey and resulting book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which focused on the experiences of women in their 20s and 30s (Ray, 2006). Historically, feminist and sexuality-based literature has pushed age to the margins of intersectional identity research, favoring gender, race, and class as categories of analysis (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; King, 2006). Accordingly, this literature has largely focused on "problems of the sexually desired," such as abortion, sexual harassment, and sexual objectification, thereby "sidelining old women from its theories" (King, 2006, p. 49). Additionally, sexuality research in gerontology has historically focused on biological, rather than social or cultural, aspects of sex. In order to move beyond theories developed from the experiences of younger women or those limited to analyses of physiology, theory must be built directly from the voices and experiences of older women, thereby valuing these personal and collective narratives as meaningful in their own right (Holstein, 2015). The possible impact of recognizing this standpoint is

evident considering that prominent feminist writers have not considered aging issues until reaching mid- or late life themselves (e.g., Friedan's *The Fountain of Age* [1993]; de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* [1972]; Steinem's *Doing Sixty & Seventy* [2006]). Thus, the experience of aging informs the study and theorizing of age, illuminating late-life sexuality as a previously invisible or unexamined topic.

There are some exceptions to the general paucity of literature and theorizing on later-life sexuality. Many of these efforts explore social constructions of older bodies and embodied aging, where gerontology and feminist research meet (Marshall & Katz, 2006; Morell, 2003). Critical and poststructuralist researchers have interrogated representations of older bodies (Bradway & Beard, 2015; Drummond et al., 2013; Montemurro & Seifken, 2014) to understand how stereotypes of asexuality, the “cougar,” or the “cultural entwinement of sexuality with youth” (Bradway & Beard, 2015, p. 505) have informed societal perceptions of sex. Humanists have theorized varying types of age (e.g., chronological, biological, felt, etc.) as they impact the lives of older women as well as how reproductive technologies create the potential for “graying the cyborg” (Joyce & Mamo, 2006). While these areas of study inform understandings of late-life sexuality, they do so through theorizing the body or age as opposed to examining sexuality more specifically. Exceptions include the work of Lisa Diamond (2008) and Laura Carpenter (2010), who describe the fluid and gendered nature of women's sexuality over time, although their theorizing is based on the life course as opposed to late life in focus. While theorizing changes over the life course is useful and old age does not occur in isolation, this approach may continue to produce explanations of older women's sexuality that are based on younger women's experiences. Therefore, this review seeks to center midlife and older women and is guided by two research questions: (RQ1) What theories are being used to understand the sexual lives of midlife and older women? and (RQ2) How are these theories are being used? (i.e., what do they accomplish or not accomplish, how do they shape the field, etc.?).

Key conceptual tenets

Drawing on this literature, this review is guided by three key tenets of gerontological and feminist theories, which have important implications for conceptualizing the sexuality of midlife and older women. These tenets include the life course as a continuous process, the concept of fluid sexuality, and a belief that the personal is political. These tenets provided a framework to guide decisions made throughout the research process, including the framing of research questions, determining the search criteria, and guiding the analysis and writing process.

Life course perspective

The life course perspective (Elder, 1991) accounts for mid- and later life as one segment of experience but also views older women as all of the younger women they have been (Holstein, 2015). Over the course of their lives, women accumulate sexual experiences that are incorporated into their understanding of sexuality (Connidis, 2006). Acknowledging the life course as a whole and continuous process problematizes the conceptualization of life as various independent segments broken up into life stages and allows us to consider the timing of events in a particular historical, cultural, and interpersonal context. Given this conceptual tenet, this review seeks to include a wider range of women's life stages, beginning at age 45, to account for later life as well as the transition into later life.

Sexual fluidity

The life course perspective also considers continuity and change, for “the longer we live, the more we experience change as a constant feature of our lives” (Connidis, 2006, p. 129). Rather than seeing sexual identity development as a linear process moving in one direction toward asexuality or a “true” experience of one's sexual self, this review is informed by an understanding of sexuality as dynamic and fluid. Diamond's theory of dynamic sexuality describes how “complex patterns *emerge, stabilize, change, and restablize* over time as a result of ongoing interchanges between individuals and their environments” (Diamond, 2012, p. 74, emphasis from original). In contrast to models of sexuality that depict only continuity or unidirectional development, fluid sexuality is continually reimagined throughout the life-long aging process. Therefore, all sexual experiences are segments of the same sexual narrative, and the experiences of all women, regardless of sexual identity, are included in this review.

Personal as political

As informed by feminist theory, critical research is guided by the belief that the personal is political (Ray, 2006). Therefore, sexuality, often assumed to be a personal realm of experience, is also understood to be a political sphere in which socially constructed discourses around sexuality and aging shape our ability to study and theorize them. As stated by Ray and Fine (1999), feminist gerontology seeks to “examine older women's personal experiences with an eye toward gaps, inconsistencies, and evasions” (pp. 176–177), calling for theorists and researchers to challenge and resist the status quo by examining the assumptions that influence our theorizing and study of older women's lives. In this way, we can challenge dominant systems that impose expectations of asexuality in older adults or create pressure to stay sexually active in order to age “successfully.” This review seeks to engage with the literature on midlife and older women's sexuality by critically considering the theoretical

assumptions made, limitations of the current state of theorizing, and next steps toward developing future research.

Defining “theory”

For the purpose of this review, “theory” is defined as a set of interrelated constructs that seek to explain, predict, or describe a given phenomenon (Creswell, 1994). In contrast to that of Bengston et al. (1997), this definition includes explicit explanations that might inform the conceptualization of a study in addition to those that serve to explain or interpret findings. Theories operate at a variety of levels, differentiated by their scope and focus, such as theories of explanation (which describe how social processes occur or unfold) and theories of orientation (which provide an overarching worldview to frame and interpret a phenomenon). Therefore, this review includes methodologies, or ways of theorizing about research practice (Harding, 1987), as they orient the researcher and reader to explanations of how knowledge is constructed, discovered, or created.

Design and methods

Literature search

Peer-reviewed articles published in English between the years 2000 and 2015 were included in this review if they focused on an examination or interpretation of some aspect of the sexuality or sexual lives of midlife and older women. A systematic literature search was carried out in three databases, Academic Search Complete, PsychInfo, and Sociological Abstracts, to include journals from a variety of disciplines. A Boolean phrase search included terms referencing gender (*woman, women, female*), mid- to late-life stages (*middle-aged, midlife, later life, older adult, gerontology, aging*), and sexuality (*sexuality, sexualities, intimacy, sexual identity*). Only empirical articles met the search criteria, as theoretical and conceptual articles did not focus on mid- or later life. Books and book chapters, reviews, dissertations and theses, practice-oriented articles, and historical analyses were beyond the scope of this analysis.

Empirical articles were included if samples: (a) included only individuals who identified as women at the time of the study and (b) included only women age 45 and older *or* included a subset of women age 45 and older whose experiences were explored separately or distinguished from the rest of the sample. In accordance with the second sample criteria, qualitative studies that included women younger than 45 years old but also reported the ages of each participant quoted were included in the review. Samples of any size were included.

Rather than focusing solely on older women, a range of later-life stages are included from midlife to older adulthood in order to conceptualize a more continuous life course. The age of 45 was chosen because the average age of menopause onset is 51; however, women's bodies often begin undergoing biological changes in their mid-to-late 40s, signaling the beginning of menopausal transition (National Institute of Aging [NIA], 2011). While this review is not focused on biological transitions, menopause also signifies a cultural transition regarding the socially constructed meanings imposed on or resisted by women (Hunter & O'Dea, 1997; Murtagh & Hepworth, 2005; Winterich, 2003).

Figure 1 details the literature search and exclusion process. After the search was completed, articles were read to distinguish whether they included an explicitly stated theory. Of the 27 articles originally included, 16 made no mention of theory, most of which were quantitative articles. Eleven articles were retrieved that included a stated theory (either substantive theory or methodology), and a secondary search through the references of those articles yielded an additional 10 articles for a total of 21 included articles.

Analysis and writing process

In their review of theory in social gerontology, Alley et al. (2010) describe theory as serving three critical purposes. Theories (a) guide research questions and hypotheses, (b) explain or interpret research findings, and (c) inform intervention development. In determining how theory was integrated

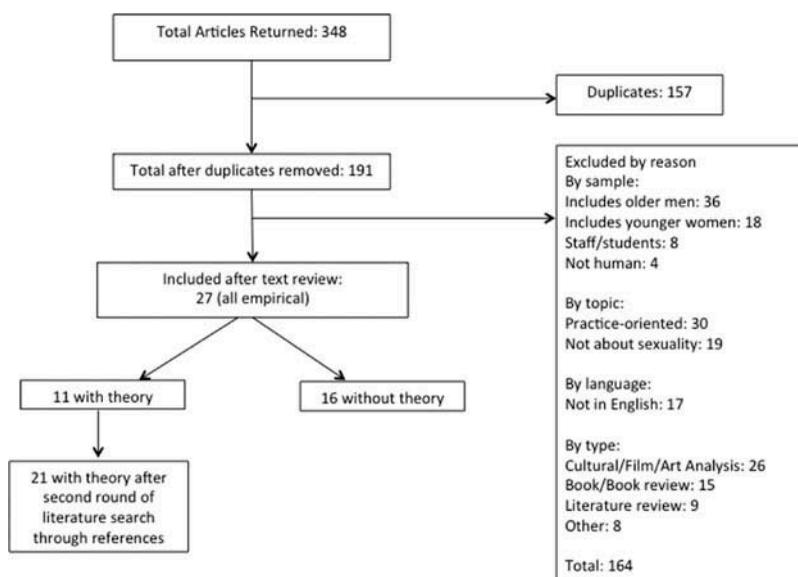


Figure 1. Flow chart of exclusion criteria in the literature search.

into each article in this review, the first two purposes of theory were used as criteria, since only one article could be classified as an intervention (Baldissera, Bueno, & Hoga, 2012). Therefore, articles were categorized into two groups: (a) *integrated* (theory guided the conceptualization of the study and its research questions *or* the interpretation of findings) and (b) *well integrated* (theory guided the conceptualization of the study and its research questions *and* the interpretation of findings).

Articles were also reviewed for eight dimensions: (a) purpose/goals; (b) audience (readers explicitly addressed by the author); (c) sample recruitment and characteristics; (d) theory; (e) methods; (f) findings, discussion, and conclusions; (g) reflexivity (statements that explicitly refer to the researcher and their role); and (h) limitations, as well as how their substantive theory and methodology informed each of these dimensions. These dimensions were identified in accordance with the matrix method (Garrard, 2014), in which key aspects of the articles are selected for analyses based on their potential to inform the research questions of the review. From these analyses, a table was created to identify the substantive theories and methodologies used (see Table 1), and networks were developed to position substantive theories and methodologies into a common narrative (see Figures 2 and 3). These tools formed the foundation of analyses from which the findings were developed. Memo writing served as a parallel but separate process alongside the analysis, creating both a source of reflexivity and documentation. Findings are presented in narrative form, as this approach offers the advantage of examining literature in a relatively undeveloped or fragmented field (Collins & Fauser, 2005—as cited in Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012), while also allowing for integration across various methods and disciplines.

Results

Article characteristics and theories used

Of the 21 articles reviewed, 19 were qualitative empirical studies with sample sizes ranging from six to 95 ($M = 28.4$), one of which was also an action research intervention (Baldissera et al., 2012). One article reported findings of a quantitative empirical study of 127 women ages 45–66 (Woloski-Wruble, Oliel, Leefsma, & Hochner-Celnikier, 2010), and one reported both qualitative and quantitative findings from a sample of 307 women ages 39–56. Eight articles were based on samples in the United States; six in Australia (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello, & Pitts, 2015a; Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello, Pitts, & Dune, 2015b; Perz & Ussher, 2008; Thorpe, Fileborn, Hawkes, Pitts, & Minichiello, 2015; Ussher, Perz, & Gilbert, 2014; Ussher, Perz, & Parton, 2015); two in

Table 1. Substantive Theories and Methodologies With Relevant Citations.

Authors	Substantive theory	Methodology
Baldissera et al. (2012)	Pedagogy of autonomy (Freire, 1987)	Pedagogy of autonomy (Freire, 1987)
Bradway & Beard (2015)	Theory of feminine plasticity (Baumeister, 2000)	Grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
Drummond et al. (2013)	None	Adapted phenomenological approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Tesch, 1990)
Fileborn et al. (2015a)	Affirmative aging (Sandberg, 2013)	None
Fileborn et al. (2015b)	Continuous production of difference (Sandberg, 2013)	None
Hinchliff & Gott (2008)	None	Foucauldian discourse analysis (Willig, 2001)
Hurd Clarke (2006)	Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969)	Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
Jones (2002)	None	Discourse analytic approach (Abell, Stokoe, & Billig, 2000)
Koch, Mansfield, Thureau, & Carey (2005)	"New view" (combines social interpretive and feminist/critical perspectives) (Kaschak & Tiefer, 2001; Tiefer, 2001)	None
Laganà & Maciel (2010)	Biopsychosocial theoretical model of medicine (Engel, 1977, 1980)	Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003)
Loe (2004)	None	Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
Mahoney (2008)	Principles of feminist psychotherapy (Kaschak, 1992)	None
Montemurro & Gillen (2013)	None	Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
Montemurro & Siefken (2014)	None	Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
Perz & Ussher (2008)	Feminist critical realist epistemological standpoint (Bhaskar, 1989)	Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990)
Thorpe et al. (2015)	None	Poststructuralist approach (Sondergaard, 2002)
Ussher et al. (2014)	Material-discursive intrapsychic (MDI) perspective (Gilbert et al., 2010; Ussher, 2000)	None
Ussher et al. (2015)	Material-discursive-intrapsychic (MDI) perspective (Gilbert, Ussher, & Perz, 2010; Ussher, 2000)	Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990)
Vares et al. (2007)	None	Feminist theory
Winterich (2003)	Feminist theory (hooks, 1994; Pringle, 1992)	None
Woloski-Wruble et al. (2010)	Successful aging (Havighurst, 1961; Rowe & Kahn, 1998)	None

Canada (Drummond et al., 2013; Hurd Clarke, 2006); two in the UK (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Jones, 2002); and one each was based in New Zealand (Vares, Potts, Gavey, & Grace, 2007), Brazil (Baldissera et al., 2012), and Israel (Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010).

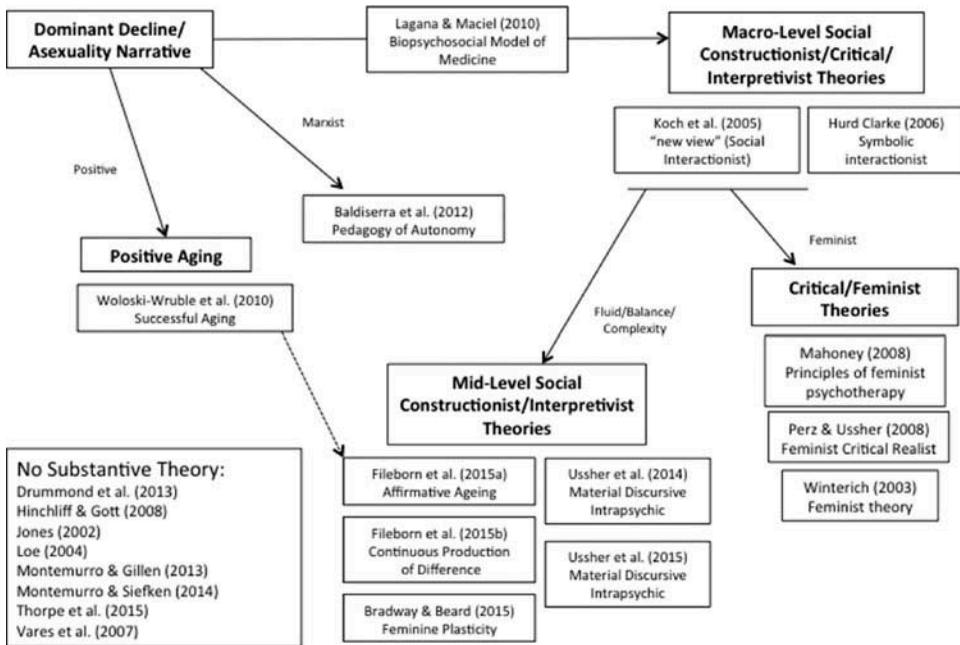


Figure 2. Substantive theory network.

In terms of sample characteristics, a wide variety were reported, including age, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, relationship status, and education level. Fourteen articles (or two-thirds) included only women age 45 and older, three included women age 30 and older, and three included women age 20 and older, while one reported only the average age of participants (51.5 years). Six articles included samples that were 90% or more White/Caucasian/Anglo, two samples were 60%–75% White/Caucasian/Anglo, one sample was entirely Brazilian women and one entirely Mexican women without further information provided, and 11 articles did not report racial characteristics. In regard to sexuality, five samples included only heterosexual women, nine samples were 60%–96% heterosexual, and a single sample had a minority of heterosexual women (30%), while six articles did not report sexual identities of participants.

In the 21 articles reviewed, 13 included a substantive theory that served to explain the conceptualization and/or the findings of the study. Of the substantive theories, the majority were based in macro- or midlevel social constructionist, critical, or interpretivist (SCCI) orientations, emphasizing the socially constructed nature of sexuality and sexual experiences. Macrolevel theories sought to explain human experience at the level of societies (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010), while midlevel theories were narrower in terms of the setting, population, and historical context in which they are applied (Cresswell, 1994). Two articles used macrolevel theories of symbolic

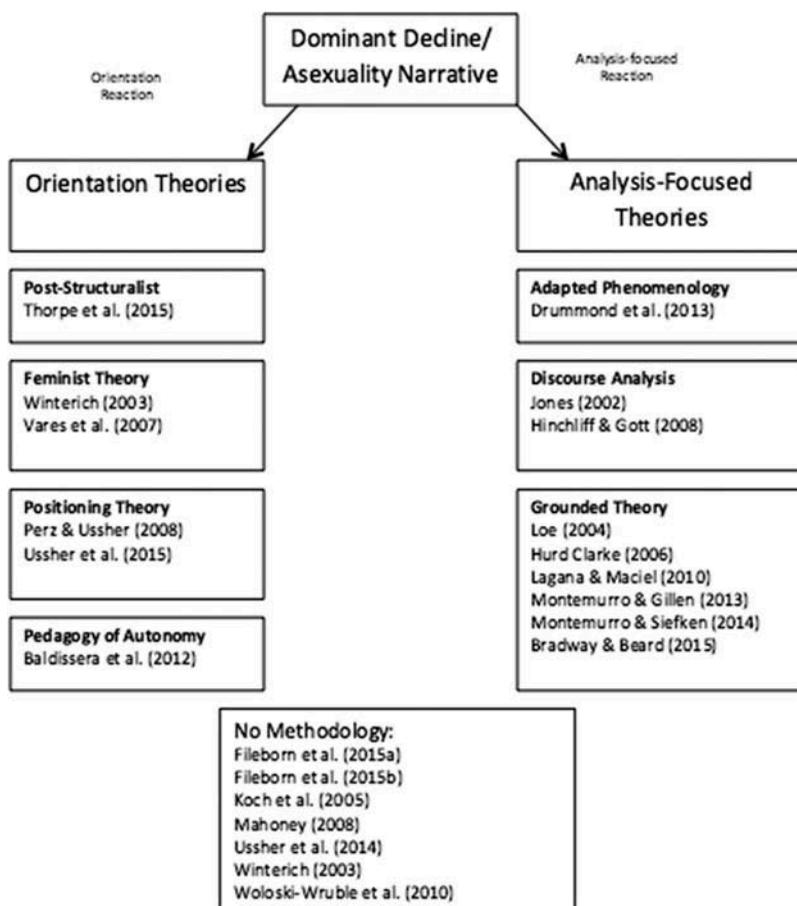


Figure 3. Methodology network.

interactionism (Hurd Clarke, 2006) and a “new view” informed by feminist and social interpretive orientations (Koch et al., 2005). Midlevel SCCI theories include affirmative aging (Fileborn et al., 2015a), continuous production of difference (Fileborn et al., 2015b), feminine plasticity (Bradway & Beard, 2015), and the material-discursive intrapsychic (MDI) perspective (Ussher et al., 2014, 2015). Three articles were guided by feminist theories, which were positioned under the SCCI orientations. These included a feminist critical realist perspective (Perz & Ussher, 2008), principles of feminist psychotherapy (Mahoney, 2008), and feminist theory more broadly (Winterich, 2003). The other three substantive theories included the biopsychosocial model of medicine (Lagana & Maciel, 2010), pedagogy of autonomy (Baldissera et al., 2012), and successful aging (Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010).

Fifteen articles included a theoretically grounded discussion of methodology that guided the methods but also informed the authors’ conceptualizations of participants, the researcher’s role, and how knowledge is constructed.

Six of the methodologies provided macrolevel orientations, including post-structuralism (Thorpe et al., 2015), feminist theories (Vares et al., 2007; Winterich, 2003), positioning theory (Perz & Ussher, 2008; Ussher et al., 2015), and pedagogy of autonomy (Baldissera et al., 2012). The other nine methodologies were focused on the analytic approach, including adapted phenomenology (Drummond et al., 2013), discourse analysis (Hichliff & Gott, 2008; Jones, 2002), and grounded theory (Bradway & Beard, 2015; Hurd Clarke, 2006; Laganà & Maciel, 2010; Loe, 2004; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014).

Positioning in the field: Theoretical narratives and counternarratives

Theory served as a primary tool through which authors positioned their work relative to the dominant narrative of asexuality or declining sexual activity in later life. This narrative differs from individual or personal narratives, in that it operates at a broader discursive level across the field of literature as a whole. The decline narrative is described as both a historical perspective in the field of gerontology and influential perception in society at large, which has foundations in the biomedical view of aging, wherein the body is expected to deteriorate with age due to the inevitable onset of disability and illness. Perz and Ussher quote, “No woman can escape the horror of this living decay ... even the most valiant woman can no longer hide the fact that she is, in effect, no longer a woman” (Wilson, 1966, p. 93). By citing this statement from Wilson’s influential medical text *Feminine Forever*, Perz and Ussher draw attention to the way in which their feminist critical realist perspective provides a contrasting view of aging as change rather than decline while balancing both the materiality and cultural mediation of the aging body. In fact, all authors positioned their work as counternarratives, characterized by their various key assumptions and beliefs. The relative positioning of both substantive theories and methodologies are depicted in [Figures 2](#) and [3](#) respectively.

Substantive theory network

Biomedical approaches

Lagana and Maciel’s (2010) biopsychosocial model of medicine serves as a stepping-stone toward a stronger stance on the importance of social constructionist orientations. By incorporating a biopsychosocial framework, their work remains largely informed by a medical approach to the body, but with the caveat that other key factors also influence sexual health. This theoretical move might be interpreted as merely broadening the biomedical model to incorporate a larger context; however, the authors also describe the

importance of cultural norms that impact sexuality, moving their analyses toward a more social constructionist lens.

Social constructionist/critical/interpretivist macrolevel approaches

Authors named possible reasons that the asexuality/sexual decline narrative was widely accepted in the field of gerontology until recently as well as why it has held the attention of the popular societal imaginary despite being rarely supported by empirical evidence (Jones, 2002; Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010). These reasons largely focus on the influence of socially constructed meanings of aging sexuality and women's negotiation of contrasting discourses around sexuality. Ten of the 13 substantive theories and six of the 15 methodologies used incorporate an orientation informed by SCCI approaches. Social constructionism is an epistemological claim that meaning is not objectively true or inherent in an object or experience but is constructed through social processes, while critical approaches incorporate a more political interpretation of socially constructed meanings and interpretivism "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations" of experience (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Several authors also state that the materiality of the body and the lived experience of being in an aging body are undeniable, but experience is also mediated through social constructions and interpretations of the body (Fileborn et al., 2015b; Perz & Ussher, 2008; Winterich, 2003). In the words of Winterich (2003),

I do not claim that biological changes are insignificant or pure social constructions. Rather, my research shifts the focus from rates of vaginal dryness and sexual activity to a cultural understanding of what menopausal changes mean for women's sex lives. (p. 628)

At the macrolevel, Koch et al. (2005) draw on a combination of theories. They distance themselves from the biomedical/positivist perspective in which biological changes of aging women are forefronted, instead positioning themselves within a "new view" (p. 215) in which social interpretivism contributes a broader understanding of context, while a feminist/critical perspective calls for work that is meaning centered and consciously political. Similarly, Hurd Clarke (2006) draws on a macrolevel symbolic interactionist perspective to examine change over time in socially constructed meanings of sex.

Feminist and midlevel approaches

Three articles under the SCCI umbrella draw on feminist theories or principles (Mahoney, 2008; Perz & Ussher, 2008; Winterich, 2003). These articles are placed under SCCI because traditional theoretical foundations of feminist theories build on these orientations. An additional, but separate counter-narrative under the larger SCCI umbrella includes five articles that draw on

midlevel theories that rely heavily on the assumption that both the material body and socially constructed scripts or narratives are key to analyzing changes in sexuality (Bradway & Beard, 2015; Fileborn et al., 2015a, 2015b; Ussher et al., 2014, 2015). Being narrower in their scope compared to the macrolevel and feminist theories, these articles react to the dominant decline/ asexuality narrative by resisting the binary of success versus decline and by theorizing fluidity or plasticity of female sexuality over the life course (Bradway & Beard, 2015; Fileborn et al., 2015a, 2015b). Some also acknowledge changes at the intrapsychic as well as material and social discourse levels, which in turn impact intimate relationships (Ussher et al., 2014, 2015). Perz and Ussher's (2008) use of a feminist critical realist perspective begins to make a connection to these midlevel theories by incorporating an understanding of the material body within a discursive, cultural context.

Positive aging approaches

Only one article, and notably the only quantitative article (Woloski-Wruble et al., 2010), draws on a theory informed specifically by the field of gerontology, that of successful aging. It is striking that this theory stands alone in the substantive network, with only a single "bridge" of connection to the other theories. Theoretical bridging creates transdisciplinary connections, informed by concepts or theories from multiple disciplines that merge to form a more holistic understanding (Bengston & Settersten, 2016). In the network of substantive theories, successful aging conceptually connects to the theory of affirmative aging in the work of Fileborn et al. (2015a). These authors discuss successful aging as an influential and widely used model within the field of gerontology, which served as an earlier reaction to the decline narrative of aging. Affirmative aging can therefore be interpreted as a second-generation theory whereby the initial turn from aging as decline made way for a subsequent reaction away from the binary of decline versus success.

Pedagogy approaches

Finally, a single article was written using the pedagogy of autonomy, which informed an action research study meant to raise critical consciousness of Brazilian women through emancipatory education (Baldiserra et al., 2012). The key tenets of the theory are informed by a Marxist orientation, distinguishing its placement from the other articles. Pedagogy of autonomy also informed both the conceptual orientation toward critical consciousness raising, creating an active subject-subject relationship between the participant and researcher, as well as how the educational intervention was carried out. Therefore, this theory is present in both the substantive theory and methodology networks.

Methodological approaches

Methodologies take up broad-level orientations similar to those of the substantive theories, including poststructuralist, feminist, and positioning theories as well as pedagogy of autonomy. However, two-thirds of the methodologies were analysis focused, with six using grounded theory, making up the majority of analysis-focused theories, which also included discourse analysis and adapted phenomenology. These theories can be understood as reactions to the dominant decline narrative through the importance placed on discourse, meaning making, critical consciousness raising, and an openness to a variety of sexual scripts. Grounded theory offers another reaction by emphasizing the emergence of sexuality theory from the voices of midlife and older women's narratives as opposed to the deductive positivist approach toward building theory, which dominates biomedical approaches to sex.

Theoretical integration

When theories were analyzed for integration, approximately half of the studies ($n = 10$) were well integrated (included theory explicitly in the conceptualization of the study *and* interpretation of findings), while the others were integrated ($n = 11$, included theory explicitly in the conceptualization of the study *or* interpretation of findings). However, this analysis provided limited information as to *how* theory was integrated within articles. In the analysis of integration within articles, the most common dimensions to be informed by theory were the purpose/goal (90%), findings/discussion/conclusions (76%), and methods (71%). Dimensions less likely to be informed by theory were the audience (29%), sample recruitment and characteristics (29%), reflexivity (24%), and limitations (24%).

Discussion

Although a wide variety of theories are represented, the dearth of theoretical work in this area is striking and perhaps indicative of a continued lack of theoretical development in the broader gerontological literature as well as the nature of older women's sexuality as an undervalued and underexplored topic. Researchers suggest many reasons for the underdevelopment of this area, including the problematizing of older bodies (Bradway & Beard, 2015), continued emphasis on sexual behaviors as opposed to social meanings (Hurd Clarke, 2006), and a heteronormative focus on penetrative intercourse (Fileborn et al., 2015b). The placement of midlife and older women's sexuality as an invisible or underexplored topic serves as a backdrop for the narrative/counternarrative structure of the field, which might be understood to represent the current paradigm, or shared disciplinary understanding

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), of sexuality in this body of research. In future research, it may benefit the field of midlife and older women's sexuality to move beyond the narrative/counternarrative structure, so that empirical research will no longer need to distinguish its theoretical stance from the decline narrative, allowing researchers to introduce added theoretical creativity and differentiation into the field.

A more recent emphasis on socially constructed meanings is particularly evident, as all five of the midlevel articles were published in the last two years (2014 and 2015), in contrast to the feminist-informed articles, which were published between 2003 and 2008. Although based on a small number of articles, this contrast may indicate a move toward midlevel theories that offer more concrete, testable explanations of sexual development as a social and personal phenomenon. These theories also strike a balance between the decline and successful aging narratives, taking up the claim of Simone de Beauvoir that "old age can only be understood as a whole: it is not solely a biological, but also a cultural fact" (1972, p. 13).

This pattern reflects a similar shift that has occurred in the broader field of gerontology, wherein the negative biological framings of aging as decline triggered the development of the positive aging movement, popularized by Rowe and Kahn's (1998) influential publication on successful aging. Successful aging has since become a widely critiqued perspective, with many arguing for more holistic, balanced, or less dichotomized approaches to aging. Movement away from binary categories is also foundational to the field of queer studies (Somerville, 2007), which may be a fruitful area for future transdisciplinary theoretical exploration, particularly as queer theory offers conceptualizations of how individuals might resist or reimagine dominant social scripts (Fabbre, 2014).

The connection linking successful aging to affirmative aging illustrated by the substantive theory network illustrates another possible way for the field to continue moving forward by offering an example of how gerontological theories can be combined with theories from other disciplines. This may be a rich area for future theoretical development, as gerontological theories are largely absent from this literature, including the life course perspective or life span development theories, which are the two most commonly cited theories in gerontological journals (Alley et al., 2010). While many authors cited in this review use the term "life course" or conceptualize sexuality as changing over time, the life course perspective goes unnamed as an explicit theoretical influence. This lack of specificity is common in the broader field of gerontology as well. Authors use "life" words" such as "life course," "life span," or "life cycle" without precision (Alwin, 2012), creating confusion about what key tenets of the "life" process they are referencing. Gans, Putney, Bengston, and Silverstein (2009) have argued that defining the mechanisms through which life

course development occurs (such as cumulative advantage/disadvantage) is a likely area for future gerontology theorizing. This issue may also be taken up in the narrower body of literature around the sexuality of midlife and older women.

Regarding the integration of theories, it is clear that earlier methods of evaluating integration with simplistic categories may overlook critical aspects of how theory informs a field more deeply. In particular, the elimination of methodologies from theoretical reviews limits analyses of how these conceptual framings impact many dimensions of empirical articles. The small scale of this review made it possible to develop alternative methods to evaluate integration, revealing that certain dimensions are less likely to be explicitly informed by theory. While it may be expected that sample recruitment and limitations are less likely to be connected to theory than the purpose or interpretation of findings, we must ask what possible conceptual gains we forfeit by overlooking these connections. Theory also offers an additional lens through which to view the limitations of an empirical study's method and design. While many authors acknowledge that their samples are largely White or Caucasian and heterosexual, this lack of diversity has implications not only for the generalizability or transferability of findings but also for theoretical development that accounts for and is driven by the experiences of racial and sexual minority women. Therefore, future research would benefit from examining the limitations of theoretical frameworks with in-depth reflection as to how and why a particular theory might limit examination of certain phenomena as well as how theoretical development is limited by methodological issues. If researchers were to consistently engage in this type of reflection, the connection between empirical findings and theory would be strengthened, leading to a steady stream of critiques, suggestions, and possible improvements to shape future theorizing.

It may be expected that substantive theories are more likely than methodologies to inform various dimensions of an article, and this was generally true. For instance, grounded theory often did not have explicit connections to other dimensions of the articles beyond shaping the data collection and analysis processes. However, there is certainly potential for grounded theory to inform the direction of research questions or iterative sample recruitment processes. Overall, methodologies varied widely in terms of how well described or deeply integrated they were into other dimensions of articles. For instance, Jones (2002) offers an in-depth description of how a discourse analytic approach informed an understanding that narratives are not merely reflections of reality but also shape the social world, while Montemurro and Gillen (2013) simply stated that a grounded theory approach demands that theory be "built from, rather than being imposed upon, data" (p. 7). The writing of Drummund et al. (2013) serves as a counterexample to the

expected lack of methodological integration. These authors used key tenets of adapted phenomenology (i.e., meaning making through subjective experiences of a phenomenon) to connect their methodology to almost all dimensions of their article, illustrating that a methodology may in fact deeply shape the conceptualization of the full research process. Thus, researchers must also consider the depth as well as breadth of theoretical integration.

Implications for practice

While the findings of this review have implications for future research and theorizing, they also extend to direct practice and education of practitioners. Through their uses of theory, authors are able to speak back to the culturally dominant but empirically unsupported narrative of sexual decline and asexuality in later life, thereby supporting the role of practitioners in affirming the diverse sexual experiences of older women and acknowledging how societal constructions of sexuality impact their lives. Adding specificity to understanding diversity and life course development will also benefit applied gerontology by contributing more explanatory models of sexual difference and cultural influences, which can inform future interventions to support older women as they explore and negotiate sexuality in later life. Baldissera et al.'s (2012) use of pedagogy of autonomy also indicates that theories from literature outside of gerontology may be fruitfully used to support intervention development in this area.

The narrative/counternarrative structure of this field suggests that direct health and social service providers must understand common misperceptions about aging sexuality in order to support the sexual needs of clients. Practitioners may play the role of an advocate for their clients and should be aware of and affirm the diverse ways women are able to resist and reimagine possible sexual scripts available to them. An awareness of the fluidity, complexity, and contextual responsiveness of women's sexuality will also allow providers to meet clients in their experiences with openness and empathy. This knowledge will allow providers to strike a balance between the "decline" and "success" narratives of aging sexuality, with the intention of supporting sexual expression and creativity in solutions to sexual problems when this form of expression is desired without pressuring clients to maintain sexual behaviors. While it is not the focus of this review, practice and education efforts would also benefit from research examining the sexual experiences of midlife and older men in order to better understand what factors impact their sexuality and sexual expression as well. Finally, the possibilities of transdisciplinary bridging do not end in theoretical development but also extend into practice settings, where providers from a variety of disciplines can offer creative and diverse solutions to sexual issues to match the diversity of sexual experiences.

Although this review signifies an important critical reflection of peer-reviewed literature on midlife and older women's sexuality and sexual experiences, there are several limitations to consider. This review was limited to peer-reviewed sources; thus, many other forms of writing were excluded, limiting the focus to writing and ways of theorizing that are typically privileged in academic spaces, a concept which is antithetical to feminist understandings of theorizing. Therefore, this review should be understood as an analysis of theories that influence and shape the academic, peer-reviewed theoretical narrative of midlife and older women's sexuality, as opposed to the broader literature on this topic. There are also possible limitations related to the theoretical framing of this article. Keeping in mind the theoretical tenets of the life course perspective, sexual fluidity, and feminist perspectives is likely to have influenced my sensitivity to particular patterns in the analysis, while making others less visible. While the analysis and my own openness to various patterns benefited from memo writing, my own theoretical and subjective positioning (as a woman, academic, and feminist) have inevitably shaped this review. However, while the narrow focus of the review and my own subjectivity can be understood as limitations, they are also strengths that created opportunities for added depth and critical reflection throughout the process.

Despite these limitations, this review offers a critical perspective on the theoretical development of an underexplored topic within the broader gerontology literature. By focusing on the sexuality and sexual lives of midlife and older women, the scope was narrowed to a level of specificity not previously achieved in theoretical reviews in social gerontology, allowing for a more in-depth assessment of how theory is used to shape the overall narrative of a field as well as how theoretical integration might be evaluated in the future to examine both breadth and depth of integration. In the words of Bengtson and Settersten (2016):

The principal value of theory, then, lies in building knowledge and understanding in a systematic and cumulative way, such that empirical efforts will lead to integration with what is already known, and to help us to see gaps or inconsistencies in existing knowledge or between new knowledge and old. (p. 4)

Through examining the theoretical state of this body of literature, this review takes stock of what progress we have made, the narratives we have constructed, and how researchers might move forward through future theorizing, research, and practice. This continual process of critique and reflection will strengthen the connection between theoretical and applied gerontology, as well as the narrower field of literature on midlife and older women's sexuality.

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