

# A Study on Knowledge and Attitudes Regarding Sexuality of Elderly People in Korea

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**Purpose.** The purpose of this study was to examine the level of knowledge and the attitudes of Korean adults toward sexuality of elderly people.

**Methods.** This was a descriptive study using a convenience sample of 241 adults. The questionnaire had 34 items for knowledge and 26 items for attitudes.

**Results.** The result showed that, related to sexuality of elderly people, the level of knowledge was average and attitudes were conservative. The level of knowledge was significantly higher in groups that were highly educated and of low economic status ( $p < .05$ ). Attitudes toward sexuality of elderly people were significantly more conservative in female, older, less educated, and high economic status group.

**Conclusion.** The findings suggest a need for more education for Korean adults regarding sexuality in elderly people.

**Key Words :** Knowledge, Attitude, Sexuality, Elders

## INTRODUCTION

Until recently, sexuality of elderly people has not been discussed openly and freely in many countries, including Korea. Up to 20% of the total population in Korea will be elders by 2026 (Ministry of Health & Welfare, 2004), and yet most people consider even the thought of sexuality of elderly people as absurd. The thoughts of Koreans were more indifferent or negative about sexuality in elderly women than men. Because they believe in the virtue of monogamy, elderly women tend not to remarry when they lose their spouses (Han, 2003). These studies may reflect a sociocultural bias in Korea that regards sexual desires by elderly people to be a disgrace. Lee (1997) reported that 11.3% of older men and 30% of women indicated that they were not able to enjoy sexual satisfaction nor could they hope for remarriage because of this sociocultural bias, so valued in Korea.

Objection of their children to remarriage was another factor contributing to suppression of sexual desires (Oh, 1998).

However, there is no evidence that elderly people stop sexual activities because of physical aging; they continue to have a desire to belong and to be loved by someone (Drench & Losse, 1996). Sexuality is a dynamic process that begins with birth and continually changes and progresses until death. However, due to the tendency of Korean society to ignore the existence of sexuality in old age, older women, in particular, have been discouraged from dealing with their sexual problems actively or discussing them with health care professionals. Therefore, a better understanding of the sexuality of elderly people is needed by Korean people (Kim, 2001; Oh & Shin, 1998). Yet, only limited studies have been reported on sexuality of elders in Korea. Therefore, this study examined the level of knowledge and attitudes of Korean people toward sexuality of elderly people. The results will

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help health professionals, as well as older people understand the reality of their sexuality and provide care appropriate for their needs.

### *Study aims*

The specific aims of this study were as follows.

- 1) Describe the level of knowledge of Korean adults about sexuality of elderly people,
- 2) Describe the attitudes of Korean adults toward sexuality of elderly people, and
- 3) Analyze the differences in the level of knowledge and attitudes of Korean adults toward sexuality of elderly people based on sociodemographic characteristics.

## METHODS

### *Design and subjects*

This study used a descriptive survey design. The participants in this study were adults 18 years of age or older and lived in Seoul City or Kyungki Province, Korea. Data were collected from 241 adults conveniently selected from public places such as shopping malls and open lounges near movie houses ( $n = 173$ ) and from two senior centers in Seoul ( $n = 68$ ) from June through December 2001. Adults in the public places were individually approached and were provided with an explanation of the study aims and the survey. Adults at the two senior centers were approached after approval for the study and access to elders were obtained from the directors to whom an explanation of the purpose of the study and the procedure had been given. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and they could refuse to participate in the study. Upon verbal approval, data were collected either by self-report using the questionnaire or interviews based on the questionnaire items. Approximately 20 minutes were required to complete the questionnaire. Participants received a small token gift for their time to complete the questionnaire.

### *Instrument*

The Aging Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale (ASKAS) developed by White (1982a) was translated and back-translated by experts fluent in both English and Korean. The ASKAS was developed to measure of knowledge about sexuality and attitudes toward sexuality of elderly people. Cronbach's alphas of ASKAS were 0.90~0.93 for knowledge and 0.76~0.86 for attitudes

among various types of sample and the results of the factor analysis showed that the two-factor (knowledge and attitude) solution was a good solution, and that each item loaded most heavily on its hypothesized factor membership (White, 1982a). In this study, content validity was examined by a professor of nursing who had majored in gerontological nursing. The Cronbach's alpha values in this study were 0.89 for the knowledge questionnaire and 0.71 for the attitude questionnaire.

The level of knowledge about sexuality in elderly people was evaluated by 34 true-false or "don't know" questions. The scores ranged from 0 to 34, and a higher score indicated a higher level of knowledge. The attitudes toward sexuality of the elderly were evaluated by 26 questions on a scale of 1 (absolutely disagree) to 7 (absolutely agree). Total scores ranged from 26 to 182. A higher score indicated a more conservative attitude.

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis was done utilizing the SPSS-WIN program (version 11.0). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze all the variables. Means, standard deviations, and ranges of the score of knowledge and attitudes were described. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the correlation between knowledge and attitudes. ANOVA and t-test were used to identify differences in knowledge and attitudes based on sociodemographic characteristics. The significance level was set at a probability value of 0.05.

## RESULTS

### *Sociodemographic characteristics*

The total number of participants in this study was 241 adults; 137 men (56.8%) and 104 women (43.2%). Ninety-five participants (39.4%) were in the age range between 18 and 34 years (men 41.6%, women 30.8%); 72 participants (29.9%) were 35 to 59 years (men 29.2%, women 30.8%), and 74 participants (30.7%) were over 65 years (men 29.2%, women 32.7%). Fifty-one percent of the participants were college graduates, and 52% of the participants were married. In terms of religion, 40% of the participants had no religion; 24% were Protestants; 21% Catholics; and 15% Buddhists. Eighty-three percent of the participants ( $n = 198$ ) perceived their economic status as average.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 241)

Variables	Category	N*	%
Gender	Male	137	56.8
	Female	104	43.2
Age	18-34	95	39.4
	35-64	72	29.9
	65 or older	74	30.7
Education	Middle school graduation	39	16.3
	High school graduation	79	32.9
	College graduation	122	50.8
Marital status	Single	82	34.6
	Married	121	51.1
	Widowed/Divorced	34	14.3
Religion	Protestant	57	24.4
	Catholic	48	20.5
	Buddhist	36	15.4
	None	93	39.7
Occupation	(Public) office worker	58	24.4
	Sales/self-employed	16	6.7
	Professionals	27	11.3
	Students/other	46	19.3
	Unemployed	91	38.2
Perceived economic status	High	18	7.5
	Middle	198	82.8
	Low	23	9.6

\*Numbers exclude missing data.

### **Knowledge and attitude of adult toward sexuality of elderly people**

The average score for knowledge regarding sexuality of elderly people was 17.1 out of a total of 34 and the scores ranged between 0 and 29. The average score for attitude toward sexuality of elderly people was 89.1 out of a total of 182, and the scores ranged between 38 and 154 (a higher score indicates a more conservative attitude).

**Table 2.** Attitude and Knowledge Regarding Sexuality of Elderly People (N = 241)

Variables	Mean (SD)	Actual range	Possible range
Knowledge	17.1 (6.1)	0–29	0–34
Attitude	89.1 (24.8)	38–154	26–182

Eighty-two percent of the participants thought that being sexually active would be beneficial for elderly people, but 69.1% thought that sexual activities could increase the risk of heart attacks in elderly people, and 69.8% answered incorrectly the question ‘Masturbation in older men and women has beneficial effects on the

maintenance of sexual responsiveness’. Most participants strongly supported the idea that “education should be given,” but they answered that they would not use certain facilities such as nursing homes if those facilities permitted and supported sexual activities of the elders.

### **Correlation between knowledge and attitude toward sexuality of elderly people**

Pearson’s correlation coefficient for knowledge and attitude showed a significant reverse correlation,  $r = -.295$  ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that those with a higher level of knowledge had a less conservative attitude toward sexuality of elderly people.

**Table 3.** Correlation between Knowledge and Attitude

	Knowledge
Attitude	-.295 (.000)

### **Difference in the level of knowledge regarding sexuality of elderly people based on demographic characteristics**

The level of knowledge of adults regarding sexuality of elderly people was not significantly different according to gender or age ( $t = 1.100$ ,  $p = .270$ ,  $F = 1.006$ ,  $p = .367$ ). But male participants who were 65 years or older showed significantly higher levels of knowledge than female participants in the corresponding age group. The average score of male participants in that age group was 18.4 compared to that of 15.5 for female participants ( $t = 2.120$ ,  $p = .004$ ). There were no significant differences in the level of knowledge based on marital status ( $F = .010$ ,  $p = .990$ ), religion ( $F = 1.300$ ,  $p = .280$ ), or occupation ( $F = .493$ ,  $p = .741$ ). But education and financial status ( $F = 5.900$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $F = 3.340$ ,  $p = .040$ ) were factors that showed differences in the knowledge scores. In a post hoc test, the knowledge score of college graduates was 18.2, which was significantly higher than that of middle school graduates of 14.5. The knowledge score was 20.2 in participants with low economic status, and this was significantly higher than those who were in the high economic status group (15.5).

### **Differences in attitudes toward sexuality of elderly people based on sociodemographic characteristics**

The attitude scores were significantly different according to age group (Table 5). Of the three age groups, the older participants were more conservative in their atti-

**Table 4.** Mean Scores for Knowledge According to Sociodemographic Characteristics (N = 241)

Variables	Category	Knowledge		
		Mean (SD)	t/F	p
Gender	Male	17.4 (6.3)	1.102	.272
	Female	16.6 (6.0)		
Age	18-34	17.0 (6.9)	0.021	.979
	35-59	17.2 (5.3)		
	60 or older	17.0 (5.9)		
Education	Middle school graduation	14.5 (5.3)	5.855	.003
	High school graduation	16.7 (6.4)		
	College graduation	18.2 (6.0)		
Marital status	Single	17.1 (6.5)	0.011	.988
	Married	17.1 (5.7)		
	Widowed/Divorced	17.2 (7.2)		
Religion	Protestant	16.0 (7.1)	1.300	.275
	Catholic	16.9 (5.4)		
	Buddhism	18.1 (4.8)		
	None	17.7 (6.0)		
Occupation	(Public) office worker	17.1 (6.9)	0.600	.663
	Sales/self-employed	15.9 (6.4)		
	Professionals	18.6 (4.9)		
	Students/other	16.8 (6.8)		
	Unemployed	16.9 (5.7)		
Perceived economic status	High	14.7 (7.7)	3.342	.037
	Middle	17.0 (6.0)		
	Low	20.0 (5.6)		

**Table 5.** Mean Scores for Attitude According to Sociodemographic Characteristics (N = 241)

Variables	Category	Attitude		
		Mean (SD)	t/F	P
Gender	Male	85.9(22.7)	-2.265	.025
	Female	93.6(26.9)		
Age	18-34	77.5(19.2)	33.545	.000
	35-59	88.5(22.7)		
	60 or older	106.9(23.9)		
Education	Middle school graduation	108.3(19.3)	21.123	.000
	High school graduation	94.1(22.9)		
	College graduation	80.5(23.6)		
Marital status	Single	79.7(20.3)	11.832	.000
	Married	92.1(25.6)		
	Widowed/Divorced	103.6(25.0)		
Religion	Protestant	84.8(22.8)	7.564	.000
	Catholic	90.5(25.9)		
	Buddhist	106.2(23.2)		
	None	84.00(23.5)		
Occupation	(Public) office worker	77.3(17.4)	13.438	.000
	Sales/self-employed	83.6(19.5)		
	Professionals	82.1(21.1)		
	Students/other	84.8(23.4)		
	Unemployed	104.1(25.5)		
Perceived economic status	High	105.3(24.2)	4.426	.013
	Middle	88.2(24.0)		
	Low	82.6(27.2)		

tudes toward sexuality of elderly people. The male participants tended to have less conservative attitudes than the female participants ( $t = -2.265$ ,  $p = .025$ ). Analysis of those who were 65 years old or older showed that the attitude score for male participants in this age group was 99.95 (SD = 23.91), which was significantly lower than the 114.52 (SD = 21.86) for female participants in the same age group ( $t = -2.474$ ,  $p = .016$ ).

Comparison of education levels showed that participants with higher education tended to have a more conservative attitude toward sexuality of elderly people ( $F = 21.120$ ,  $p = .001$ ). There were also significant differences in attitudes toward sexuality of elderly people according to marital status ( $F = 11.830$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Those divorced or widowed demonstrated the most conservative attitude compared to those who were single or married. From the religious perspective, Buddhists were significantly more conservative than Protestants, Catholics, or the no-religion group ( $F = 7.560$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Attitude also varied according to differences in economic status ( $F = 4.430$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ): those with high perceived economic status were more conservative than the two other groups.

## DISCUSSION

The level of knowledge of sexuality of elderly people among the participants aged from 18 to over 65 was average (17.1). Furthermore, average knowledge scores were not significantly different among age groups of 18-34, 35-64, and 65 and older. This finding is similar to U.S. studies, in which the reported average scores were 18.2 in 400 elders (White, 1982b), 18.7 in 200 adults (Johnson, 1997), and 17.5 in 176 college students (Hillman & Stricker, 1994). Male participants showed higher scores than female participants in the older age group (i.e., age group of 65 and older), although there were no overall significant differences in other age groups. This finding is similar to the result of the Korean study by Han, Kim, and Chi (2003) but different from that of Steinke (1994), who used the ASKAS (the same instrument as was used in this study). Steinke found that the level of knowledge regarding sexuality of elderly people was not different according to gender for a convenient sample of 759 elders or a random sample of 800 elders (400 men and 400 women). The lower level of

knowledge among Koreans about sexuality in elderly people may be related to limited information and lack of dissemination of information on sexuality of elderly people in Korea. This is more problematic for elderly women as they do not have as much access to information, and female participants reported lower levels of education compared to male participants in this study. For instance, for female participants only 8.8% reported college graduation compared with 35.5% in male participants, and 47.1% reported less than middle school graduation, compared to only 22.5% for male participants.

Misconceptions about the negative effects of sexuality on health seemed to be common among the participants. They thought that sexual behaviors in elderly people would have a negative impact on health. This is consistent with Borz and Wallace's study (1999) of 1,202 elderly men in the U.S., in which it was found that participants' concerns about the health condition of their spouse was a major barrier to maintaining a sexual life. Hence, it is important to realize that knowledge about health-related issues and psychological issues, in addition to physical changes caused by aging process, can be factors affecting the sexuality of elderly people (Meston, 1997).

In general, the attitude toward sexuality in elderly people identified in this study was a conservative attitude. The older participants' attitudes were more conservative, which is quite the opposite from other studies. Steinke (1994) found in his study that elderly people had a very permissive attitude. Likewise, Kontula, Rimpela, and Ojanlatva (1992) found that there was a tendency to have a more understanding attitude toward sexuality as the participants got older. The Confucian upbringing of people in Korea seems to have had an impact on conservative attitudes to sexuality of elderly people in Korea compared to western countries (Oh, 1998).

Men were less conservative in their attitude toward sexuality of elderly people than were women, and the difference in attitude between men and women was significant among older adults. This result seems to reflect more societal acceptance of sexuality in men, in contrast to sexuality in women. This finding is in agreement with that of Lee (1997), who reported that elderly women were more conservative toward sexuality than elderly men. On the other hand, Spector and Fremeth's study (1996) showed that there was no difference in attitude toward sexuality between men and women who were Jewish and institutionalized in long-term care facilities.

The differences could be explained by the different cultures and ethnic backgrounds with play important roles in attitudes toward sexuality in elderly people.

The study by Hillman and Stricker (1994) reported a positive correlation between knowledge and attitude in all age groups. A relatively consistent pattern of results can also be seen by a positive linear relationship between knowledge and attitudes toward sexuality of elderly people among health care professionals (Kim, 2000; Hammond & Bonney, 1985; White & Catania, 1982), college students (Hillman & Stricker, 1994), and elders (Han, Kim, & Chi, 2003; White & Catania, 1982). However, Adams, Rojas-Camero, and Clayton (1990) observed that participants could not change their conservative attitudes through an education program because of their strong religious faith. Thus, intermediate factors such as religion should be considered when interpreting the correlation between knowledge and attitudes and when developing educational programs.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of more conservative attitudes and lower levels of knowledge among older individuals and women, albeit not statistically significant, indicate that educational programs should be geared toward these groups. To be more effective, educational programs should consider incorporating demographic factors such as religion, educational level, and economic status. The lower levels of knowledge and more conservative attitude toward sexuality of elderly people shown by Korean participants in this study (based on literature comparisons with that of U.S. study participants) suggest that Korean society in general needs to approach issues of sexuality of elderly people in different ways from foreign societies. To identify specific strategies, gaps between attitudes to sexuality of elderly people in older Koreans and those in the general Korean population need to be more specifically defined.

This is a descriptive study using a relatively small convenience sample, thus limiting generalizability of the findings. This study focused on the correlation between knowledge and attitudes without regard to factors that may influence the relationship. Therefore, studies with larger samples that identify factors that may influence the relationship between knowledge and attitudes toward sexuality are recommended.



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