

Review articles

Disability and sexuality in intersection: a systematic literature review

Deficiência e sexualidade em intersecção: uma revisão sistemática de literatura

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Abstract

The intersection of disability, sex, and sexuality constitutes a powerful analytical category for examining prejudices, myths, and barriers related to the sexual and affective experiences of people with disabilities. This study aimed to investigate Brazilian scientific articles addressing sexuality and disability. A systematic literature review was conducted using the CAPES and SciELO databases. Twenty articles published between 2019 and 2024 were identified. Half of these studies consisted of literature reviews and document analyses, while the other half involved field research, predominantly including participants without a disability diagnosis. The analysis highlighted methodological weaknesses in some review articles and the invisibility of people with disabilities in Brazilian research, where their sexuality is often examined through third-party discourse. Future research should prioritize centering the voices of people with disabilities and developing educational activities on sex and sexuality.

Keywords: special education; disabled persons; sexuality; sex education; systematic literature review.

Resumo

A intersecção entre deficiência, sexo e sexualidade configura-se como uma categoria potente de análise sobre preconceitos, mitos e barreiras relativas às vivências sexuais e afetivas de pessoas com deficiência. O objetivo desta pesquisa foi investigar artigos científicos brasileiros que abordam sexualidade e deficiência. Para tal, realizou-se revisão sistemática de literatura nas bases CAPES e SciELO. Foram encontrados 20 artigos publicados entre 2019 e 2024. Metade destas produções contou com revisões de literatura e análises documentais. A outra metade contou com pesquisas de campo envolvendo majoritariamente pessoas sem diagnóstico de deficiência. A partir da análise do material destacou-se a fragilidade metodológica de alguns artigos de revisão e invisibilidade das pessoas com deficiência nas pesquisas brasileiras, que têm sua sexualidade investigada a partir do discurso de terceiros. Em futuras pesquisas, seria interessante a centralização dos discursos das pessoas com deficiência e construção de atividades orientadoras sobre sexo e sexualidade.

Palavras-chave: educação especial; pessoa com deficiência; sexualidade; educação sexual; revisão sistemática de literatura.

INTRODUCTION

Disability is a topic that intersects with many contemporary discussions, such as gender, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and social class. Sex and sexuality are essential dimensions of the human experience; however, they are aspects that may be denied or disregarded in the daily lives of people with disabilities. The intersection of disability, sex, and sexuality prompts reflections on notions of the body, affective and sexual experiences, knowledge, autonomy, and the capacity to make decisions about one's own life. These processes may be hindered

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by social, cultural, and historical barriers that limit the independence, access to information, and development of this population.

According to the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, a person with a disability (PwD) is defined as someone who has physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which may be congenital or acquired. These impairments may compromise their full participation in society. Types of disability include physical disability (PD), intellectual disability (ID), sensory disability, subdivided into visual disability (VD) and hearing disability (HD), and multiple disabilities (Brasil, 2015).

Regarding PwD and their experiences in society, one of the topics currently discussed is sexuality and sex at their intersection with disability. Drawing on Foucault (2017), sex is understood as the use of the body and its pleasures. Sexuality, in turn, refers to the discourses constructed about sex, which may be colloquial, scientific, or religious. These phenomena are present in the lives of all individuals and are regulated by the State, the economy, and religion, while also intersecting with other analytical categories of society, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and social class (Collins; Bilge, 2020).

Some manifestations of social control directed at the sexual experiences of PwD include prejudice, myths, and derogatory discourses regarding their sexual lives. PwD are often interpreted as asexual individuals, detached from bodily arousal and sexual desire or, when such desires are acknowledged, as incapable of expressing and experiencing them. These myths contribute to prejudice and misconception that PwD are eternal children devoid of sexuality, characterizing what are known as the myths of disability asexuality (Desjardins, 2012). On the other hand, myths of hypersexuality portray PwD as having exaggerated and uncontrolled sexual desires and bodily arousal, while also being incapable of expressing their sexuality in a mature manner. These two groups of myths, assexuality and hypersexuality, form the duality that Giami (2004) referred to as “the angel and the beast.”

These disability-related myths may be harmful to development, social interaction, and the establishment of relationships. Scientific production can play an important role in demystifying the prejudices surrounding sexuality and disability, challenging derogatory discourses about the body, sex, sexuality, functionality, and disability. In light of these issues, the research question guiding this study was: how is the intersection between disability and sexuality portrayed in recent Brazilian scientific production? The aim of this study was to investigate Brazilian scientific articles that address the themes of sexuality and disability.

METHOD

The study conducted was descriptive in nature, with a qualitative approach, and was designed based on the method of systematic literature review. According to Costa and Zoltowski (2014), a systematic literature review is a method of investigation within scientific production that follows specific procedures: formulation of a research problem; identification of guiding themes; conversion of these themes into descriptors and Boolean operators; selection of databases for searches; and the execution of the searches themselves. After the initial searches, the retrieved articles are selected based on inclusion criteria established by the researchers, refining the list of identified studies and thereby constructing the final sample (Sampaio; Sabadini; Koller, 2022). For this study, the potential of the systematic literature review method for research in the field of Education was considered, as it is a strategy based on the systematic search and selection of scientific literature, proving significant for summarizing knowledge on a given topic and subsequently contributing to the development of new research (Campos; Caetano; Gomes, 2023).

The research question guiding this review was: “How is the intersection between disability and sexuality portrayed in recent Brazilian scientific production?” The guiding themes were disability and sexuality, which were converted into the following descriptors and Boolean operators: “Disability” AND “Sexuality.” The databases selected were the CAPES Journal Portal (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel)¹ and the Scientific

¹ Brasil (2024).

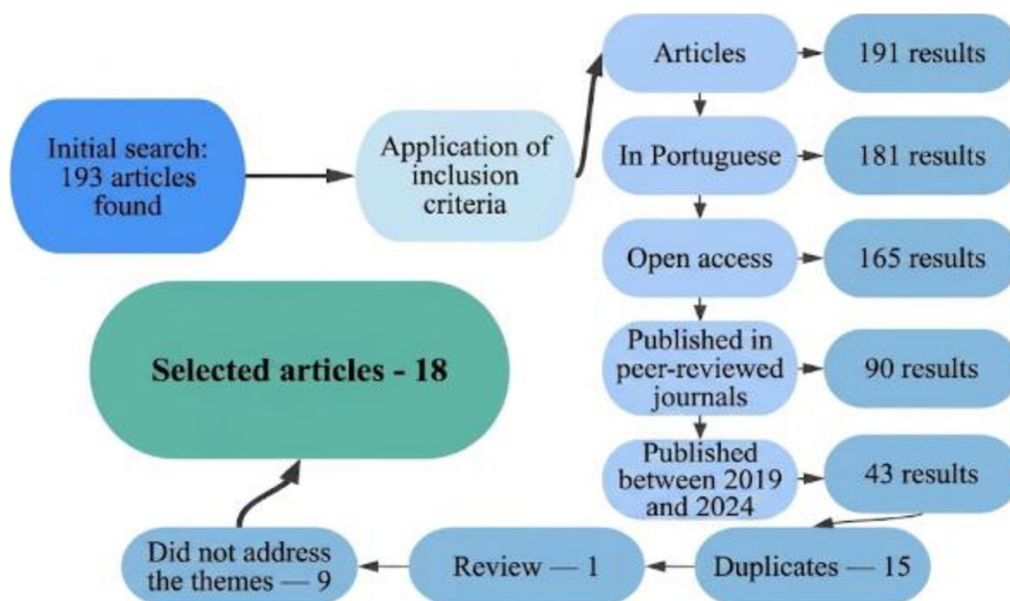


Figure 1. Procedure for searching and selecting articles from the CAPES Journal Portal⁴.
Source: Prepared by the author.

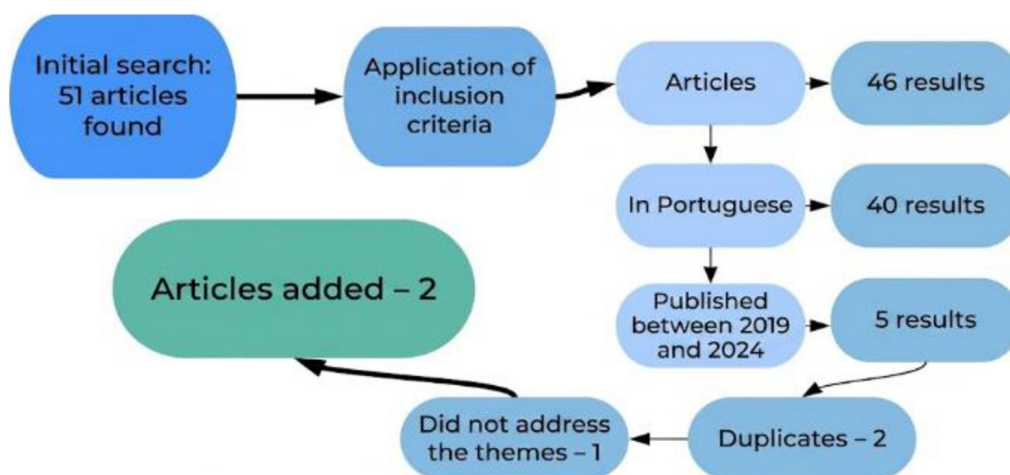


Figure 2. Procedure for searching and selecting articles from the SciELO database⁵.
Source: Prepared by the author.

Electronic Library Online (SciELO)². The inclusion criteria used in the selection process were: texts in the form of scientific articles³; written in Portuguese; published in open-access format; published in peer-reviewed journals; and, finally, published between the years 2019 and 2024.

The process of searching and selecting the sample can be observed in the figures below. Figure 1 illustrates the selection of articles retrieved from the CAPES Journal Portal.

The selection of articles was complemented by a search conducted in the SciELO database, which can be seen in Figure 2.

In this way, the final sample consisted of 20 articles, which were described and discussed through a meta-synthesis (Sampaio; Sabadini; Koller, 2022). The items analyzed in the meta-synthesis were: the nature of the research conducted, the population studied, the type

² Scientific Electronic Library Online (2024).

³ In order to encompass the widest possible range of results, articles based on field research, literature review articles, and theoretical essays were included according to this inclusion criterion.

^{4,5} Searches were conducted on July 29, 2024. The searches and the application of the inclusion criteria were verified by three judges.

of disability investigated, and the discourses on disability, sexuality, and sex presented in each article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The total number of articles analyzed comprised diverse and varied productions. Regarding the nature of the studies, eight theoretical articles were identified, including one theoretical essay and seven literature reviews. Two articles involved document analysis: one focusing on important Brazilian legislation related to disability and another analyzing a virtual webpage. In addition, 10 articles conducted field research with diverse populations, including people with disabilities (PwD).

Among the theoretical articles analyzed, Amato, Carvalho and Gesser (2022) developed a theoretical essay revisiting the history and importance of queer and crip movements for the achievements of recent decades. These movements intertwine discussions on disability, sexuality, and gender. According to the authors, the struggles of PwD intersect with those of feminist and LGBTQIAPN+⁶ movements, as both groups are subjected to similar processes of violence and exclusion in modern capitalist society. The authors' objective was to reflect on the practices of psychologists in combating violence and ensuring the rights of PwD, understanding that this profession must undergo internal transformations in order to embrace and value different forms of embodiment, gender identities, and sexual experiences.

Abreu and Pederiva (2023) conducted a bibliographic study of Brazilian graduate research produced between 2000 and 2020 that addressed the sexuality of individuals with intellectual disabilities in intersection with educational aspects. The authors identified a total of 14 master's theses, which focused on themes such as interventions with youth and adolescents, perceptions of family members and teachers, and sexual and reproductive violence against women with disabilities. They highlighted the low level of production on sexuality and intellectual disability within Brazilian graduate programs, despite the broad time frame considered. Another relevant finding was that production is concentrated mainly in two graduate programs in the southwestern region of Brazil. The authors recommend increasing scientific production on these topics, promoting research across different programs and regions of the country, and critically examining crystallized notions of disability, adolescence, and puberty.

Galiza (2022) conducted a bibliographic study of materials addressing the sexuality of PwD within the school context. The author did not specify the time frame, search procedures, or the total number of studies analyzed. The sample was characterized as a convenience sample. The results of this bibliographic study indicate that educators are aware of the importance of ensuring the rights of PwD, including the right to experience sexuality; however, these same educators report difficulties in addressing such topics in the classroom, which are often permeated by prejudice and a disregard for the cultural diversity of their students.

Arend et al. (2021) conducted a bibliographic study in the form of an integrative review, investigating publications that addressed the sexuality of adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The authors emphasized health-related databases in their searches and examined studies published between 2015 and 2020, justifying this time frame based on the enactment of the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Brasil, 2015). In the end, five articles were selected, all of them international. The results of the review indicate that prejudices related to gender and adolescents' intellectual capacity, described in the articles based on intelligence quotient (IQ), are associated with the type of sexual guidance provided to adolescents. Adolescents with lower IQ levels receive less guidance and are more strongly restricted from expressing sexual experiences. The authors highlight the limited production in this field and recommend the development of educational interventions with adolescents with ASD.

⁶ Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, travestis, transsexuals, queers, intersex people, asexuals, pansexuals, and other sexual orientations and identities.

Gavério (2021, p. 52) conducted a bibliographic review of studies addressing the pathologization directed at individuals who feel attracted to people with disabilities (PwD), referred to as “desire for disability”. The author used the term “desire for disability” in the searches but did not specify the databases consulted. Fifty-eight studies were selected, all published between 1977 and 2015. The author reports that production on this topic was relatively limited until the 1990s and was primarily conducted by health professionals. From the 2000s onward, scholars from the human and social sciences intensified their contributions to this field.

In this review, Gavério (2021, p. 54, *our translation*) emphasizes the importance of the definitions of devotees, pretenders, and wannabes:

Devotees are individuals who feel sexually attracted to people with disabilities; pretenders are those who seek to “pass” as disabled; and wannabes are individuals who aspire to become persons with disabilities.

The author argues that this terminology has been widely used in discussions within the health field, where it has been interpreted as pathology and behavioral deviation. However, as discussions on disability have advanced, under the influence of social movements and the sociology of disability, these terms have also acquired an identity-based character, including proposals to replace *wannabe* with *needtobe*. As a result of the analysis, the author proposes the term “transability” to refer to the dynamics of desires and identifications involved in the desire for disability, encouraging reflection on these desires beyond their sexual and pathological dimensions, extending into identity-based, inclusive, and emancipatory aspects.

Cardoso et al. (2021) conducted an integrative literature review, examining studies published between 2011 and 2020 in the Virtual Health Library (VHL) that addressed sexual violence against individuals with intellectual disabilities. The authors selected eight studies in total. The results of the review indicate that participants with intellectual disabilities had limited knowledge about sexuality and sexual violence, which may contribute to the occurrence of such violence. The authors highlight the limited production in this field, which may hinder the protection of people with disabilities from situations of sexual violence, and also emphasize the importance of disseminating knowledge among healthcare professionals.

Serra et al. (2020) conducted a literature review using the descriptors “disability, sexuality, and gender” in the SciELO database, identifying studies published between 2000 and 2019. The authors selected seven articles for analysis. The findings indicate that the intersection of disability, sexuality, and gender is addressed predominantly in theoretical discussions. The authors identify that being a woman and having a disability constitutes a condition of double vulnerability, and they note discourses of inferiority directed at people with disabilities in their sexual experiences, which add to the other barriers faced by this group. The authors also point to the scarcity of research in this field.

Gomes et al. (2019) conducted an integrative literature review, seeking articles addressing feminist disability studies. The authors selected the CAPES Journal Portal as the source for their search and, ultimately, included 24 articles published between 2010 and 2015. Based on the findings, the authors identify gaps in feminist studies, which either exclude or insufficiently address issues related to disability. When disability is addressed, the focus tends to be on care directed at people with disabilities. Body image, prejudices regarding motherhood, and choices related to pregnancy were also present in some of the articles analyzed.

According to the authors:

[...] the biomedical model, by establishing a standard of normal sexual response, reinforces the process of construing people with disabilities as asexual, thereby limiting the sexual and reproductive rights of this social group (Gomes et al., 2019, p. 10, *our translation*).

All the theoretical articles analyzed agreed on the scarcity of scientific production addressing sex and sexuality among people with disabilities (PwD). This finding is consistent with previous literature reviews (Mendes; Denari, 2020); however, scholars in disability, sexuality, and gender studies show that these discussions are constantly intertwined (Chaveiro, 2024), as highlighted by Gomes et al. (2019, p. 10, *our translation*):

The struggles of social movements of people with disabilities converge with those of feminist movements and of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, travestis, transsexuals, transgender individuals, and intersex people when they challenge the construct of the body as a natural given that precedes the formation of subjects. We understand that the denaturalization of the body has the political potential to demonstrate that the experiences of these social groups are shaped by power relations grounded in normative standards, producing deviance and denying their condition of humanity.

Even though the themes of disability, sexuality, and gender are interconnected, there is a notable scarcity of studies that address them together. Another issue that emerged from the analysis of the theoretical articles was the methodological fragility of some reviews. Gavério (2021), despite addressing a novel and necessary topic, did not specify the database used for the searches. Serra et al. (2020) relied on only one database, which resulted in a limited number of findings. The study could have benefited from the inclusion of additional databases. On the other hand, some studies failed to specify the time frame, search procedures, chosen databases, or the total number of analyzed publications, as in the case of Galiza (2022). Arend et al. (2021) defined the time frame of their review based on the publication of the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Brasil, 2015); however, all the analyzed studies were international. The authors also employed unclear exclusion criteria, such as “[...] articles that did not provide clear methodological information” (Arend et al., 2021, p. 4). The use of additional databases and more precise inclusion criteria would be beneficial for addressing national studies influenced by the enactment of important legislation in this field.

Methodologically grounded bibliographic studies, such as systematic reviews, integrative reviews, and bibliometric analyses, when conducted with clear and explicit procedures, contribute significantly to a rigorous and transparent assessment of scientific production within a given field of knowledge. Given that topics related to sex, sexuality, and disability remain underexplored in the current literature, such methodological rigor may be essential for advancing academic production at this intersection (Koller; Couto; Hohendorff, 2014; Stange; Hayashi, 2015).

Two of the articles analyzed in this study involved document analysis. Simões (2022) conducted a documentary analysis of the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Brasil, 2015), developing the concept of disability presented in the document and its implications for the sexual experiences and reproductive rights of people with disabilities (PWD). According to the author, this document updated the definition of disability, shifting from definitions permeated by the notion of “incapacity” in earlier documents influenced by medical discourse to the use of the term “impairment,” a change shaped by theoretical and political debates.

Another advancement of this law, according to the author, was the guarantee of the right to sexuality and marriage for all PWD, including those under legal guardianship. While this represents a significant expansion of rights, it also opens up a range of new discussions. Although this right has been formally established, it still needs to be effectively ensured, as family members, professionals, and institutions that work with PWD continue to hold prejudiced and mistaken views regarding their sexual experiences:

We have advanced legislation that redefines “disability” based on a social theoretical model, that produces civil capacity through “supported decision-making,” and that allows people with intellectual disabilities to emerge as subjects of sexuality; at the same time, social and legal practices reimpose on these individuals notions of incapacity, lack, asexuality, or hypersexuality as the possible expressions of these bodies (Simões, 2022, p. 290, *our translation*).

Maranhão (2021) conducted a documentary analysis⁷ of a webpage containing comments directed at the sexuality of people with disabilities (PWD), whose author was prosecuted for defamation in 2017. The study aimed to problematize prejudices and derogatory discourses about sexuality directed at this population. Among the discourses analyzed, the following stood out: “They are like puppy dogs. Cute when they are small, but when they grow up, they only think about having sex” (Maranhão, 2021, p. 7). This statement was directed at a photograph

⁷ What the author referred to as a “case study.”

of an 11-month-old baby diagnosed with Down syndrome. The author identified pathologizing elements in this discourse, associating sexual experience with lack of control, as well as references to animality and abjection, both linked to the myth of hypersexuality. In the case of the prosecuted blogger, no sentence was issued. The author laments this outcome, arguing that it naturalizes violence against PwD through the lack of effective measures to combat it, and highlights the limited interest of the media in reporting the case and its developments, reinforcing the ongoing invisibility of PwD.

The two articles that employed documentary analysis address different yet connected themes. The first discusses the advances and setbacks of Brazilian legislation, which, on the one hand, establishes the rights of PwD to sexual experiences, but, on the other hand, fails to provide mechanisms to ensure these rights. This gap may lead to discrimination and violence, as illustrated in the second article, which, in legal terms, resulted in no penalties. According to Rodrigues, Bernardino and Moreira (2022), when Brazilian legislation is ambiguous and vague, it directly contributes to the maintenance of inequalities, the occurrence of violence, and social exclusion. Official documents can produce physical and attitudinal barriers that hinder access and full participation in society for PwD, a situation that calls for changes in the conduct of various social actors.

The sample of analyzed articles included ten studies involving field research. Of these, five did not include PwD among their participants, although the themes of sexuality and disability were addressed in some way. Faria (2024) interviewed 16 mothers and 10 professionals from institutions in the city of Coimbra that serve PwD, with the aim of analyzing the narratives of mothers and professionals regarding the sexuality of women with Down syndrome (DS).

All the interviewed mothers expressed reluctance when introduced to topics related to sexuality, refusing to speak directly and preventing the researcher from asking questions. They render the sexual experiences of their children invisible, perceiving them as children and preventing them from engaging with discussions about sexuality. Some mothers reported that their daughters had been victims of sexual violence, which they associate with feelings of guilt. In the case of male children, some mothers maintain infantilizing views associated with the myth of asexuality, but also reported having hired sex workers, as illustrated by the following statement: "My [son] is a man, so it is different. He has his own needs [...]. They do not need this thing about the body and sex. It is a physiological matter; in my son's case, we once hired a professional" (Faria, 2024, p. 6).

The professionals participating in Faria's (2024) study reported that they provide sex education classes; however, these classes are conducted separately by gender. Classes aimed at male students focus on pleasure and knowledge of the body, whereas those aimed at female students focus on contraceptive methods and sexual violence. These classes often face disapproval from family members, particularly those directed at female students. Both mothers and professionals believe that adult affective and sexual experiences are not possible for individuals with Down syndrome, and also tend to assume that the only possible form of marriage would be between individuals with the same diagnosis, while interpreting involuntary sterilization as acceptable.

Moreira et al. (2022) conducted a field study in motels and guesthouses in the city of Belém, Pará, assessing the architectural accessibility of these establishments. To this end, the authors used questionnaires administered to employees and customers of 22 establishments in the city, in addition to on-site observation. The results showed that none of the establishments provided alternative forms of communication (such as sign language interpreters, enlarged materials, or Braille texts), nor tactile flooring. The height of switches and intercoms in most establishments was adequate; however, 12 establishments did not have bathrooms accessible to people with disabilities (PwD). The authors concluded that the majority of establishments were not accessible.

Soares and Cavaleiro (2020) conducted focus groups with family members of PwD in the city of Rio Grande, Rio Grande do Sul, with the aim of discussing experiences related to sexuality in relation to intellectual and physical disabilities. The group included four mothers and two fathers. Family members reported preventing their children from accessing knowledge about

sex, denying this demand, although they acknowledged receiving questions on the subject. According to the family members, their children exhibit behaviors such as public masturbation and express a desire to form a family in the future; however, this desire is discouraged by family members in cases of intellectual disability (ID) and encouraged in cases of physical disability (PD). According to the authors, family members tend to repress sexuality more strongly in cases of ID and less so in cases of PD and visual disability (VD).

Maia, Carvalho and Vilaça (2020) investigated sex education directed at students with disabilities in Portugal. To this end, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 primary school teachers from the Portuguese education system. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of teachers do not view sex education as a necessary part of their work, instead assigning it to the school as a whole or to specific subjects, such as natural sciences. When teachers reported addressing the topic, they did so cautiously due to concerns about students' families. All interviewed teachers reported a lack of knowledge regarding specific sex education guidelines for PwD, acknowledged the importance of training to address the topic, and expressed apprehension about discussing sexuality with this population due to their own assumptions of asexuality.

Gonçalves and Barbosa (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with three professionals and three caregivers of adults with intellectual disabilities, with the aim of exploring their discourses on the sexuality of this population. All participants were affiliated with the APAE institution in the municipality of Naviraí, Mato Grosso do Sul. Participants reported not perceiving the sexuality of PwD as different from that of individuals without such a diagnosis; however, some expressed infantilizing interpretations. Professionals reported cases of masturbation in the school environment, situations in which they intervened by asking the student to leave the classroom and go to the bathroom. Some caregivers reported administering contraceptives to their daughters without their consent. Both groups expressed favorable views regarding marriage and the exercise of reproductive rights by PwD.

Most of the analyzed studies relied on reports from family members, legal guardians, and professionals who work with PwD. This group tends to reinforce asexual and infantilizing interpretations, particularly in relation to women and individuals with intellectual disabilities:

Women with Down syndrome cannot have sexual desires because they are seen as children, even when they are not; and since they are prevented from having an active sexual life, they are perceived by their mothers, and by a large part of Society, as eternal children, as reported by many interviewees (Faria, 2024, p. 7, *our translation*).

Some caregivers and professionals even use or encourage the use of contraceptive methods and forced/compulsory sterilization. Situations such as these constitute violations of individuals' fundamental rights over their own bodies (Mello; Nuernberg; Block, 2014; Mendes; Denari, 2023).

The prejudice of asexuality attributed to people with disabilities (PwD) also contributes to the lack of access to spaces and services related to sexuality, as demonstrated by Moreira et al. (2022) in their study of motels. According to McRuer and Mollow (2012), when discussing access to sexual experiences, it is necessary to consider architectural accessibility to spaces intended for sexual activity. Occupational deprivation resulting from inaccessible establishments, rooted in prejudices of asexuality, contributes to the maintenance and proliferation of these same prejudices and hinders the sexual and affective experiences of PwD.

The remaining field studies analyzed, five in total, included PwD among their participants. Rizzo and Gonçalves (2022) conducted a case study with a 36-year-old student from an APAE institution in the interior of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, who is deaf and diagnosed with an intellectual disability. The authors used semi-structured interviews as a data collection instrument, in which the participant's mother insisted on being present. The interviews revealed that the participant had limited knowledge about the body, sex, and sexuality, which had been acquired through friends and the mothers of friends. Both the school and the family were found to be ineffective in providing information. In the case of the school, the lack of information and prevailing prejudices constitute barriers in the participant's life. She reported

that the APAE institution she attends does not provide sign language interpreters, a situation justified by the institution due to the small number of deaf students it serves.

Carvalho and Silva (2021) investigated social representations of sexuality among 20 university students from a public institution, half of whom were PwD and half without such a diagnosis, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that participants with disabilities experience prejudice in their romantic and sexual relationships, have difficulties in their relationship with their own bodies, and do not see themselves represented in social discourses on beauty; however, they report that disability is not a barrier to their sexual experiences. Participants without a disability diagnosis presented discourses that associate disability with notions of limitation, while also emphasizing individual capacities to overcome such limitations. Prejudices related to the heritability of disability were also observed, particularly regarding parenthood and family formation.

Brilhante et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 adolescents diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), aiming to investigate their perspectives on sexual experiences. Participants reported being targets of infantilizing discourses from their caregivers, who prevented them from dating and discouraged conversations about sex within the family context. They also reported surprise from professionals when expressing identities beyond heteronormativity and cisnormativity, such as participants who identified as homosexual, asexual, or non-binary. In such cases, the authors argue that double barriers are produced in the lives of these adolescents.

Silva et al. (2020) administered a questionnaire addressing health and sexuality demands to 113 high school students in the city of Redenção, Ceará, aged between 11 and 17 years. Among the participants were 10 adolescents with disabilities, most of whom had intellectual disabilities. The results showed that most adolescents held a conception of health focused on well-being, whereas adolescents with disabilities tended to understand health as the absence of illness. Regarding discussions of sexuality in the school environment, adolescents without disabilities demonstrated curiosity about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), whereas adolescents with disabilities did not show the same level of interest, instead raising more questions related to alcohol and other drugs. The authors suggest that these adolescents experience barriers in accessing information, particularly through the internet, which may explain the apparent lack of demand for discussions about sexuality among students with disabilities.

Carvalho and Silva (2020) interviewed 10 university students with physical disabilities to understand their conceptions of sexuality. Four participants had congenital disabilities and six had acquired disabilities. For these participants, their sexual experiences were not determined or limited by disability; however, the topic was rarely discussed in their daily lives. Participants reported experiencing prejudice and generalizations from society, which affected them emotionally. Most participants expressed a desire to have children, and two already had children. They also reported that their families had restricted romantic relationships and other affective experiences during adolescence, and that these experiences were only pursued later in adulthood through their own efforts,

The inclusion of studies that present the perspectives of people with disabilities (PwD) regarding their own lives is both relevant and necessary, given that this population has been rendered invisible in the scientific landscape, in rights-based struggles, and in discussions involving public policy. Their sexuality, like other aspects of their lives, has been predominantly reported by family members, legal guardians, professionals, and educators. However, it should be noted that such participation remains limited, as, in the articles analyzed here, the number of people with disabilities participating in field research is considerably lower than that of participants without such a diagnosis (Rizzo; Gonçalves, 2022).

In the articles that included the perspectives of PwD, it is possible to observe the absence of discussions about sex and sexuality in their lives, which they attribute to educational institutions and family environments. These individuals report encountering discourses from those around them that are disabling, infantilizing, and asexualizing. When sex is discussed in the lives of PwD, it is restricted to heterosexual and heteronormative frameworks. Homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, and other experiences are entirely disregarded. Regarding this phenomenon:

A better understanding by researchers of the construction of sexual desire among people with disabilities would contribute to dismantling the dominant model of sexuality, which is shaped by machismo, patriarchy, whiteness, and heteronormativity. Such a model affects not only people with disabilities, but also women, Black populations, LGBTQIA+ individuals, among others (Maranhão, 2021, p. 9, *our translation*).

Scientific research has the potential to challenge exclusionary paradigms of sexuality and disability, deconstructing prejudices of infantilized asexuality and animalized hypersexuality, as well as breaking down barriers related to heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and forms of violence rooted in gender and sexuality.

CONCLUSIONS

The intersection of sex, sexuality, and disability gives rise to discussions that reveal how these bodies continue to be marginalized, dehumanized, and excluded from full participation in society. Throughout history, people with disabilities have been interpreted as asexual, eternal children, “hypersexualized,” or “animal-like”, myths that reinforce the central prejudice that they are incapable of exercising a full sexuality.

The theoretical articles analyzed in this review agree on the scarcity of scientific production addressing the intersection of disability, sex, and sexuality. One issue that emerged from the analysis was the presence of methodologically weak literature reviews, which failed to specify the selected databases, time frames, inclusion criteria, or the total number of analyzed studies. The documentary analyses identified point to advances in Brazilian legislation related to disability; however, they also highlight the persistence of violence resulting from the lack of effective enforcement of the rights that have been established.

The articles that included field research presented varied discourses. Family members and professionals who work with people with disabilities (PwD) tend to reinforce myths of asexuality and infantilization, while lacking adequate guidance directed toward this population. In contrast, people with disabilities themselves reported the impacts of these prejudices in their daily lives, as evidenced by derogatory discourses, barriers imposed by family members on their affective and sexual experiences, and the absence of discussions about sex and sexuality in school and family environments.

The participation of PwD in research addressing their lived experiences is of utmost importance, as this population remains largely invisible in scientific production. Half of the field studies analyzed here presented the experiences of this group as reported by others, generally family members and professionals. The other half, although aiming to examine individuals’ perspectives on their own bodies, did not place these voices at the center, continuing to privilege third-party accounts due to the considerable number of participants without a disability diagnosis.

Scientific production, in conjunction with social movements advocating for the rights of people with disabilities, has the potential to challenge stereotypes and deconstruct myths, promoting the idea that all individuals have the right to affective and sexual experiences. Further research in the field of sexuality and disability remains necessary, especially studies that center the voices of PwD. It is hoped that this article contributes to ongoing discussions on sexuality, sex, and disability, encourages new research, and fosters critical reflection.

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