Sexualizing the Third Age: 
Medicalization and the Reconstruction of Sexual Life Courses

This paper takes the medicalization of late-life sexuality as a starting point for exploring some contemporary ways in which sexual and gender difference are constructed and negotiated in aging bodies. Revised standards of sexual functionality, premised on biotechnical possibilities, are reconstructing sexual life courses in ways that have forged new expectations around sexuality in mid- and later- life, or what cultural gerontology terms the 'third age'. The 'third age' represents a cultural terrain centrally defined by a rejection of that which is 'old'. Sexual function and sexual activity are linked to health and vitality, and 'sexiness' becomes an important means of distinguishing oneself as 'not old'. I review the historical relationship between sexual function and discourses of 'positive aging' and illustrate, through analysis of a variety of texts and images, the contemporary sexualisation of later life.

Biography
A member of Trent’s Department of Sociology since 1989, Prof. Marshall is also an adjunct professor with the Women’s Studies program. At the graduate level, Professor Marshall is a participant with the Canadian Studies and Theory, Culture and Politics programs. In addition to her work on sexuality, she has published several books and journal articles on feminist and social theory, and has presented her work at a wide range of Canadian and international conferences. Media interest in her research on sexuality has also resulted in a number of interviews with Canadian newspapers and magazines, including the Globe and Mail, National Post, and Macleans. In 2006, Professor Marshall won the Distinguished Researcher Award at Trent University for her outstanding achievements in research and scholarship. She will assume leadership of the Department of Sociology as chair in July 2007.