



Self-transcendence is related to higher female sexual desire



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ABSTRACT

One facet of self-transcendence is creative self-forgetfulness (CSF; tendency to be attentionally absorbed in mind-altering experiences). Proneness to mind-altering attentional absorption and other aspects of self-transcendence were previously related to vaginal intercourse frequency, sexual arousability, and female coital orgasm. Given that sexual responsiveness is enhanced by focused attention, it was tested whether CSF correlates with sexual responsiveness, and if maladaptive defenses, openness to experience, and testosterone explain the hypothesized relationships. One hundred thirty-nine Portuguese (98 women) provided saliva samples for testosterone determination by luminescence immunoassays before and after a romantic movie scene and reported how intensely they felt sexual desire and arousal during the movie. CSF was measured by the Temperament and Character Inventory–Revised, maladaptive defenses by the immature defenses subscale of the Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ–40), male and female past month desire by the desire dimensions of the International Index of Erectile Function (IIEF), and Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI). Female desire and arousal during the movie were independently predicted by CSF, openness to experience and testosterone, but not by immature defenses. Female past month desire was independently predicted by CSF, testosterone, and less immature defenses. Possible psychobiological processes linking self-transcendence and sexual responsiveness are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Self-transcendence and spiritual transcendence have been regarded as fundamental personality traits with several facets (Cloninger, Svrakic, & Przybeck, 1993; Goncalves & Cloninger, 2010; Piedmont, 1999). Generally, they refer to feelings of contact with a meaningful reality outside ordinary space and time. As guided by more subjective values, they may be completely independent of institution-based religiousness. Questionnaires for assessing these traits include the Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS) (Piedmont, 1999) and the Self-Transcendence scale of the Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI) and its revised version (Cloninger et al., 1993; Goncalves & Cloninger, 2010). The Affective Neuroscience Personality Scales were created to measure traits based on proneness to activation of neural systems of core mammalian emotions, but also include a spirituality scale, which is regarded as a higher-order human emotion (Davis & Panksepp, 2003, 2011).

Although spirituality and sexuality are commonly seen as two very distinct realms of human existence, research is unraveling crossroads between them. In a study with American college students, women's greater frequency of past month penile–vaginal intercourse (henceforth, intercourse) and women's greater number of lifetime sexual partners were related to higher spiritual transcendence as assessed by the STS,

especially to the facet of “connectedness” (Burris, Smith, & Carlson, 2009). In the STS, connectedness refers to feelings of relatedness to persons already deceased or not yet born (examples of items: “Although dead, images of some of my relatives continue to influence my current life”, “I still have strong emotional ties with someone who has died”, “I am a link in a chain of my family's heritage, a bridge between past and future” (Piedmont, 1999). In the study by Burris and colleagues, male spirituality was not related to more frequent intercourse and number of sexual partners. For both sexes, religiousness was related to lesser number of lifetime sexual partners and lesser past month intercourse frequency, that is, the opposite relationships found for women's connectedness (Burris et al., 2009). Similar results were obtained in another study with American college students (67% women): greater past month intercourse frequency, greater satisfaction from intercourse, greater lifetime variety of noncoital sexual activities, and greater lifetime number of sexual partners were associated with ascribing mystical-like qualities to intercourse, such as spiritual, holy, sacred, mysterious, miraculous (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005). By contrast, religiousness was related to lesser variety of experiences with noncoital sex and lesser number of lifetime sexual partners; religiousness was unrelated to intercourse frequency and satisfaction (Murray-Swank et al., 2005).

In Cloninger's personality model (Cloninger et al., 1993; Goncalves & Cloninger, 2010), one facet of self-transcendence is “creative self-forgetfulness” (CSF), which refers to the propensity for deep attentional focus on sensory and imaginary experiences in a way that the ordinary

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consciousness of space and time is profoundly altered (examples of items of the CSF subscale of the TCI-Revised: “I often become so fascinated with what I’m doing that I get lost in the moment—as if I’m detached from time and place”, “Often I become so involved in what I am doing that I forget where I am for a while”, “Sometimes I have felt as if I was part of something with no limits or boundaries in time or space”, “It often seems to other people like I am in another world because I am so completely unaware of things going on around me” (Goncalves & Cloninger, 2010). Thus, CSF has a great conceptual overlap with the trait of “absorption” (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974).

Sexual responsiveness is enhanced by focusing attention on physical sensations and mental imagery (Brody & Weiss, 2010; Smith & Over, 1987) and may carry profound changes in the awareness of time and surrounding space (Swartz, 1994); therefore, it is possible that CSF is a facet of self-transcendence that promotes sexual arousability, but there is lack of research on the associations of CSF with sexual responsiveness, and to fill this gap is the main aim of the present study. Such association is supported by previous studies. The personality disposition to form vivid mental imagery, an aspect of CSF, was found to be greater for men and women with greater tendency for sexual arousability (Harris, Yulis, & Lacoste, 1980). Further, hypnotic suggestibility was found to be greater in women who reach coital orgasm more easily (Bridges, Critelli, & Loos, 1985). Hypnotic suggestibility is related to the personality trait of “absorption” (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), which overlaps greatly with CSF in conceptual terms. Women who attained coital orgasm more easily also reported greater inability to control movements and thinking near the end of coitus, as well as enjoyment of the feeling of getting “carried away” by alcohol (Bridges et al., 1985). These behaviors related to female coital orgasm seemingly sign higher capacity for letting go of effortful cognitive control, a characteristic of altered states of consciousness in which there is loss of the usual sense of time (Wittmann, 2015). By contrast, it is not predictable that the other facets of self-transcendence in Cloninger’s personality model relate to higher sexual arousability. “Transpersonal identification” refers to feelings of unity with humanity, nature and the universe, and “spiritual acceptance” to feelings of interaction with a transcendent spiritual plane; they both overlap conceptually with measures of spirituality associated with lesser intercourse frequency, lesser lifetime sexual partners (Burris et al., 2009), and less acceptance of casual sex (Murray, Ciarrochi, & Murray-Swank, 2007).

Given that the tendency for some self-transcendence experiences seems to play a role in sexual responsiveness (Bridges et al., 1985; Burris et al., 2009; Harris et al., 1980; Murray-Swank et al., 2005), and absorbed attention is a common feature of both CSF and sexual responsiveness, the present study tested if CSF is related to (1) higher sexual desire during the past month and (2) higher sexual responses to romantic stimulation in the form of a movie scene portraying the initial romantic involvement between a man and a woman.

It could be argued that higher CSF may result from using maladaptive defense mechanisms, such as dissociation and autistic fantasy. Many maladaptive defense mechanisms could plausibly promote mental states with characteristics akin of CSF as a way of coping with unpleasant stressors by avoiding the awareness of their reality. Indeed, greater TCI-measured self-transcendence was related to greater tendency to dissociation in a sample of psychiatric patients and healthy subjects (Grabe, Spitzer, & Juergen Freyberger, 1999), as well as to more use of immature (maladaptive) defense mechanisms in alcohol-dependent and heroin-dependent inpatients (Evren, Cagil et al., 2012; Evren, Ozcetinkaya et al., 2012). In women, immature defenses (including dissociation and autistic fantasy) were associated with lower desire for intercourse and lesser intercourse orgasm capacity (Brody & Costa, 2013; Brody, Houde, & Hess, 2010; Brody & Nicholson, 2013; Costa & Brody, 2010, 2011, 2013). However, immature defenses were related to higher desire during solitary sexual fantasies, an association independent of risk of low desire for a partner (Costa & Oliveira, 2015). All this makes pertinent to examine a possible explanatory role of immature

defenses in the hypothesized associations between CSF and sexual responsiveness.

Openness to experience tends to be higher in persons with more spirituality (Piedmont, 1999; Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008), as well as in women who attain intercourse orgasm more consistently (Harris, Cherkas, Kato, Heiman, & Spector, 2008) and report sex as more pleasurable (Birbaum & Gillath, 2006). Therefore, openness to experience could be an additional explanatory variable.

In addition, higher androgen receptor availability appears to be more likely in those with higher TCI-assessed self-transcendence (Westberg et al., 2009), suggesting a possible role of testosterone (T) in the co-emergence of some self-transcendence traits and sexual arousability. Given that T can increase the attentional focus on sexual stimuli and thereby enhance desire and arousal (Alexander & Sherwin, 1991; Alexander et al., 1997; Bloemers et al., 2013; Poels et al., 2013; Rupp & Wallen, 2007; van Rooij et al., 2013), it is explored if T levels before and after the romantic movie scene explain the hypothesized associations between CSF and sexual responsiveness.

In sum, the aims of the study are to test the hypotheses that CSF is positively related to sexual desire in the past month and sexual responsiveness to a romantic movie scene and to examine the possible explanatory roles of T, openness to experience, and immature defense mechanisms.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Ninety-eight women and 41 men participated in the study. They were all Portuguese recruited in the Lisbon area from the university participant pool and received course credits or a ten euro voucher for their participation. This sample size was obtained after exclusion criteria being applied to those taking antidepressants. Participants were screened for other medications and health condition, but none that could affect testosterone or sexuality was reported. Because the stimulus portrayed an interaction between a man and woman, exclusion criteria were also applied to those reporting that their sexuality was best described as only or almost only with the same sex. Descriptive statistics are depicted in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

The TCI-Revised was used to measure CSF, which is a subscale of the Self-Transcendence scale (Goncalves & Cloninger, 2010). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha was .83.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

	Women (N = 98), mean (SD) or %	Men (N = 41), mean (SD) or %
Age (years)	23.92 (6.57)	24.76 (8.44)
<i>Occupation</i>		
University student	69.4	63.4
Employed	29.6	34.2
Unemployed	1.0	2.4
<i>Education</i>		
High school	4.1	9.8
University attendance	52.0	58.5
University degree	32.7	22.0
Masters degree or more	11.2	9.7
<i>Relationship information</i>		
With regular sexual partner	66.3	61.0
Cohabiting	20.4	19.5
Relationship duration (months)	38.84 (35.47)	33.72 (40.47)
Oral contraceptive use	54.1	–

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