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Self-Transcendence, Sexual Desire, and Sexual Frequency

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ABSTRACT
Self-forgetfulness is a facet of self-transcendence characterized by tendency to experience altered states of consciousness. We examined associations of self-forgetfulness with sexual desire and frequency. Two hundred sixty-one Portuguese men and women completed the self-forgetfulness subscale of the Temperament and Character Inventory–Revised, a measure of openness to experience, and a questionnaire on desired and actual frequency of vaginal intercourse, noncoital sex, and masturbation in the past month. In simple and partial correlations controlling for openness to experience and relationship status, women's self-forgetfulness correlated with desired frequency of intercourse and noncoital sex. For men, self-forgetfulness correlated with actual frequency of intercourse and noncoital sex.

Introduction
Absorption as a personality trait can be defined as the tendency to momentarily focus the attention on sensory and/or imaginary experiences with such an intensity that there is a change from the ordinary perception of self, time, and space (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), that is, tendency to experience a type of altered state of consciousness. Persons with a personality predisposition to absorption appear to be prone to mystical experiences (Spanos & Moretti, 1988) and daydreaming as a means to find solutions to problems (Hoyt et al., 1989). Another possible feature of individuals inclined to absorption is higher sexual excitability.

Higher sexual arousal was related to states of higher absorption during sexual activity (Costa, Pestana, Costa, & Wittmann, 2016) and in response to erotica (Koukounas & McCabe, 1997, 2001; Sheen & Koukounas, 2009), but there are apparent mixed findings regarding the relationship between trait absorption and sexual responsiveness. In two studies, trait absorption did not correlate with men's arousal to visual erotica (Koukounas & McCabe, 1997, 2001). However, a series of absorption-related traits (hypnotic susceptibility, vividness of imagination, and synesthesia; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974) were associated with indices of sexual responsiveness. Correlations were observed between vividness of imagination and sexual arousability (Harris, Yulis, & Lacoste, 1980), between hypnotic susceptibility and women's capacity to attain coital orgasm (Bridges, Critelli, & Loos, 1985), and between visuo-sexual synesthesia and higher sexual desire (Nielsen et al., 2013). In another study, higher female sexual desire was related to greater personality disposition to absorption, as indexed by “creative self-forgetfulness” (or simply “self-forgetfulness”), a facet of self-transcendence (Costa, Oliveira, Pestana, & Costa, 2016). Women with higher self-forgetfulness were also more sexually aroused by a romantic movie scene (Costa, Oliveira, et al., 2016).

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The two studies that did not find associations between trait absorption and sexual arousal involved simply watching erotica (Koukounas & McCabe, 1997, 2001), while all the others assessed sexual responses that can occur in partnered contexts (Bridges et al., 1985; Costa, Oliveira, et al., 2016; Harris et al., 1980; Nielsen et al., 2013). This raises the possibility that this trait only applies to interpersonal sexual experiences, which might explain the previous seemingly inconsistent findings. In fact, there are reasons to sustain this argument. Tellegen and Atkinson (1974) proposed that absorbed attention on someone else may enhance empathy. They further stated that persons more prone to absorption would have a readiness for being fascinated and desiring deep emotional involvement in relationships, temporary or lasting (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974).

Hence, the present study aimed at testing the hypotheses that self-forgetfulness (an index of trait absorption and a facet of self-transcendence; Cloninger, Svrakic, & Przybeck, 1993; Goncalves & Cloninger, 2010; Pelissolo et al., 2005) is related to higher desire for, and actual frequency of, partnered sexual activity.

Relationship status can influence sexual desire and frequency, and openness to experience was associated with both self-forgetfulness (Costa, Oliveira, et al., 2016) and higher sexual responses (Birnbaum & Gillath, 2006; Costa, Fagan, Piedmont, Ponticas, & Wise, 1992; Costa, Oliveira, et al., 2016; Harris, Cherkas, Kato, Heiman, & Spector, 2008). Therefore, we tested for the influence of openness to experience and relationship status in the relationships between self-forgetfulness and sexual variables.

**Method**

**Participants**

Three hundred thirty-eight Portuguese men and women from the Lisbon area participated in the study. They were all recruited from the local university participant pool. The study was advertised as a study on sexuality and personality. For the present purpose, exclusion criteria applied to those not reporting data on sexual desire and activity (n = 5), and with psychotropic medications or health conditions that could interfere with sexual responses (n = 30). In addition to questions specifying noncoital sex, we had questions specifying penile-vaginal intercourse; therefore, we excluded coitally inexperienced participants (n = 27), as well as those reporting that their sexuality was best described as totally or almost totally with the same sex (n = 18). Thus, the final sample of the present study consisted of 167 women and 94 men (total N = 261). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. The study was approved by the local Ethics Committee. Findings with subsamples of this study were reported elsewhere (Costa, Oliveira, et al., 2016; Costa, Pestana, et al., 2016). All participants gave their informed consent, and received a 10-euro voucher or course credits. The study complied with the declaration of Helsinki.

**Table 1.** Demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women (N = 167) Mean (SD) or %</th>
<th>Men (N = 94) Mean (SD) or %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23.29 (5.35)</td>
<td>24.52 (6.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University student</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University attendance</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With regular sexual partner</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship duration (months)</td>
<td>36.49 (29.90)</td>
<td>34.85 (34.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. SD = standard deviation.*
Measures

Self-forgetfulness was measured with the respective subscale of the Temperament and Character Inventory–Revised (TCI-R; Goncalves & Cloninger, 2010). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha was .82 for women and .83 for men. The 10 items are rated on a 5-point scale from total disagreement to total agreement. Examples include “Often I have unexpected flashes of insight or understanding while relaxing,” “Sometimes I have felt as if I was part of something with no limits or boundaries in time and space,” “Often when I look at an ordinary thing, something wonderful happens—I get the feeling that I am seeing it fresh for the first time,” “It often seems to other people like I am in another world because I am so completely unaware of things going on around me,” and “Often I become so involved in what I am doing that I forget where I am for a while.”

Openness to experience was assessed with a four-item short version (Bertoquini & Pais-Ribeiro, 2006) of the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1995).

For measuring desire, participants were asked to report the number of days in the past month they desired to engage in the following sexual behaviors: penile-vaginal intercourse (henceforth, intercourse), noncoital sex without same-day intercourse, and masturbating alone (Brody & Nicholson, 2013). For measuring sexual frequency, participants were asked to report the number of days in the past month they actually did engage in those behaviors (Brody & Nicholson, 2013; Costa & Brody, 2008).

Satisfaction with sex life was assessed with a single 6-point item from very dissatisfying to very satisfying. This item was taken from the Li-Sat (Life Satisfaction) scales, and validity studies have confirmed its utility (Brody & Costa, 2009; Fugl-Meyer, Oberg, Lundberg, Lewin, & Fugl-Meyer, 2006; Fugl-Meyer, Stothard et al., 2006; Moncada, Micheltorena, Martinez-Sanchez, & Gutierrez, 2008; Oberg & Sjogren Fugl-Meyer, 2005).

Relationship status was assessed by asking participants if they had a regular sexual partner.

Results

For both men and women, self-forgetfulness correlated positively with openness to experience ($r = .34$, $p < .001$, and $r = .27$, $p < .001$, respectively). For men and women, relationship status was unrelated to self-forgetfulness ($r = -.02$, $p = .83$, and $r = -.02$, $p = .84$, respectively).

In simple correlations, self-forgetfulness correlated with women’s desired frequency of intercourse ($r = .18$, $p = .025$) and noncoital sex ($r = .22$, $p = .004$), and with men’s actual frequency of intercourse ($r = .21$, $p = .046$) and noncoital sex ($r = .31$, $p = .003$). These associations remained significant after controlling for openness to experience and relationship status: in partial correlations, women’s self-forgetfulness correlated with desire for intercourse ($r = .16$, $p = .040$) and noncoital sex ($r = .21$, $p = .010$), and men’s self-forgetfulness correlated with actual frequency of intercourse ($r = .22$, $p = .036$) and noncoital sex ($r = .34$, $p = .001$).

In simple correlations, self-forgetfulness correlated with men’s desire for intercourse ($r = .24$, $p = .025$), and women’s desire for masturbating alone ($r = .15$, $p = .050$), but after controlling for openness to experience and relationship status, these associations became marginal ($r = .20$, $p = .060$, and $r = .15$, $p = .061$, respectively).

For both sexes, sexual satisfaction was unrelated to self-forgetfulness in simple correlations (women: $r = -.06$, $p = .487$; men: $r = .000$, $p = .999$) and in partial correlations controlling for openness to experience and relationship status (women: $r = -.02$, $p = .845$; men: $r = .03$, $p = .782$).

Discussion

The present results extend previous ones (Costa, Oliveira, et al., 2016) by showing that self-forgetfulness is related to women’s greater sexual desire and men’s more frequent sexual activity. It is women’s desired and men’s actual frequency of intercourse and noncoital sex that were clearly related to self-forgetfulness; men’s masturbation frequency was uncorrelated, and women’s desire for masturbation was only marginally correlated after controlling for openness to experience and relationship status. Thus,
self-forgetfulness seems to reflect an approach tendency to partners or potential partners, which is consistent with the theoretical expectations discussed in the introduction (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). Of note, absorption was found to correlate with greater capacity to be aware of and verbalize emotions, as indexed by low alexithymia (Norton, 1989), which plausibly favors the conscious perception of partners’ willingness to have sex, as well as the awareness of one’s own sexual motivation.

Consistent with mystical experiences being related to creativity (Cowling, 1985), self-forgetfulness correlated with openness to experience, but neither openness nor relationship status explained the relationships of self-forgetfulness with desire and sex frequency. Our findings are consistent with other studies showing that absorption-related traits are associated with female desire (Costa, Oliveira, et al., 2016; Nielsens et al., 2013) and coital orgasm (Bridges et al., 1985), as well as male and female sexual arousability (Harris et al., 1980). The reason why significant correlations occurred with desired frequency among women and with actual frequency among men was not predicted and warrants future inquiry.

Given that states of absorption lay the ground for spirituality, future research might examine to what extent absorption explains associations of sexual behaviors with some facets of spirituality that were previously related to greater intercourse frequency, such as feelings of connectedness with people beyond their lifetime (Burris, Smith, & Carlson, 2009) and ascribing spiritual qualities to intercourse (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005). In a preliminary presentation of this study with a smaller data set, connectedness to persons beyond their lifetime was marginally related to higher female desire ($r = .16, p = .056$), but the near-significant relationship disappeared after controlling for self-forgetfulness (Costa & Oliveira, unpublished results).

At a subjective level, individuals more predisposed to absorption may have more vivid sexual fantasies and get more attentionally focused on stimuli of sexual significance (Costa, Oliveira, et al., 2016); therefore, they might be more fascinated by actual and potential partners. Given that one core characteristic of self-forgetfulness is the propensity for transient reductions in awareness of time and surrounding space, it is worth noting that, for women during sex, desire correlated strongly with loss of awareness of time and moderately with loss of awareness of surrounding space. For men during sex, desire correlated moderately with loss of space awareness, and was uncorrelated with time awareness (Costa, Pestana, et al., 2016). Since desire can be triggered outside sexual relations, a personality tendency to lose the awareness of time and space transiently might reflect on higher desire, perhaps more strongly so in women (Costa, Pestana, et al., 2016; Swartz, 1994).

In conclusion, an emergent body of research reveals that higher sexual responsiveness is a common feature of those with greater inclination for experiencing absorbed states.

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