

Correlates of Men's Sexual Interest: A Cross-Cultural Study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Low sexual desire has been studied more extensively in women than in men.

Aim. The study aims to analyze the correlates of distressing lack of sexual interest and the self-assessed reasons for the lack of sexual interest among heterosexual men from three countries.

Methods. A web-based survey was completed by 5,255 men aged 18–75 years from Portugal, Croatia, and Norway.

Main Outcome Measures. We used an item that assesses lack of sexual interest from the British NATSAL 2000. Anxiety and depression were measured with the SCL-ANX4 and SCL-DEP6. Relationship intimacy was measured using a five-item version of the Emotional Intimacy Scale. A shortened version of the Sexual Boredom Scale was used to assess proneness to sexual boredom in relation to the duration of relationship, and personal distress was evaluated using an item created for this study.

Results. Distressing lack of sexual interest lasting at least 2 months in the previous year was reported by 14.4% of the participants. The most prevalent comorbidity among these men was erectile difficulty (48.7%). Men with low confidence levels in erectile function, not feeling attracted to the partner, and those in long-term relationships were more likely to have experienced lack of sexual interest than were men with high confidence levels and those who felt attracted to their partner and those in shorter-term relationships. Professional stress was the most frequently reported reason for lack of sexual interest. Sexual boredom as a result of a long-term relationship was significantly and negatively correlated with the level of intimacy ($r = -0.351$, $P < 0.001$) and sexual satisfaction ($r = -0.497$, $P < 0.001$).

Conclusions. Distressing lack of sexual interest in heterosexual men was associated with a number of intrapersonal (self-confidence in erectile function, stress), interpersonal (relationship duration, partner attractiveness), and socio-cultural variables. **Carvalheira A, Træen B, and Štulhofer A. Correlates of men's sexual interest: A cross-cultural study. J Sex Med 2014;11:154–164.**

Key Words. Sexual Desire; Sexual Interest; Men; Relationship Duration

Introduction

Sexual desire and its determinants have not been examined as extensively in men as in women [1]. After a long period in which research focused on performance problems, research on male sexual response has been directed toward sexual arousal (for a review, see Janssen [2]).

Presuming gender differences in sexual desire, theorists have recently suggested that greater diversity exists within gender than between gender [3–5]. Scientific literature on conceptual, clinical,

and empirical work concerning male hypoactive sexual desire disorder is scarce [6].

The National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs) [7] reported results of 1,249 in-person interviews with American men aged 18–59 years who had at least one sexual partner in the past year. Dichotomous items were used to measure the presence of sexual problems during the previous 12 months. The prevalence of “lacking desire for sex” ranged from 14% (for those 18–29 years old) to 17% (for those 50–59 years old). Distress was not measured on this study.

The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) [8] consisted of computer-assisted self-interviews with 11,161 British men and women aged 16–44 years. Lack of interest in sex was the most prevalent problem in men, reported by 17% of those who had at least one heterosexual partner in the past year. Sexual distress was not measured. Persistent lack of interest in sex (lasting for at least 6 months in the previous year) was reported by 2% of male participants [8].

Another study, using a random cross-sectional design, conducted computer-assisted telephone interviews with 876 Australian men aged 18–59 years [9]. Results showed that the prevalence of lack of interest in sex lasting “several months or more” (distress was not measured) ranged from 16% (in participants 50–59 years old) to 19% (in participants 18–29 years old) [9]. In a nationally representative Swedish survey using face-to-face interviews with 1,475 men aged 18–74 years, “decreased interest in sex” was the most frequent sexual complaint (16% of men; sexual distress was not measured) [10]. A positive correlation was found between low sexual interest and age, and there was significant comorbidity with sexual dysfunctions: 45% of men with low sexual interest also had erectile difficulties, and 26% had rapid ejaculation. This is one of the few studies that examined the comorbidity of sexual complaints in men.

The Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviours studied 13,618 men aged 40–80 years from 29 countries [11]. Distress was measured and a symptom severity measure was included; for example, participants were asked how often the symptom had occurred during the last 12 months. The response scale included three possible answers: “occasionally,” “sometimes,” or “frequently.” Among the 11,205 men who had had intercourse at least once in the previous year, the prevalence of low desire lasting 2 months or more ranged from 13% to 28% (depending on which of the seven geographic regions was studied). However, when the analyses were restricted to those men who “frequently” experienced low sexual interest, the prevalence was between 1.3% in Southern Europe and 3% in the Middle East. The authors showed that lack of interest in sex was significantly associated with older age, poorer health, depression, thinking about sex infrequently, and infrequent sexual activity.

In a Norwegian study with a random sample of 399 heterosexual couples, self-administered postal questionnaires were used to analyze factors associated with loss of sexual desire [12]. In 16% of the couples, the male partner had experienced a dis-

ressing loss of sexual desire. Most of the men believed their loss of sexual desire was related to stress (38%), disease (18%), “other” (19%), and to poor communication within the relationship. Reduced capacity for sexual arousal and the frequency of conflict with the partner over sex were significant predictors of distressing loss of desire in men. In another Norwegian study [13] using 1,671 web interviews with participants aged 18–67 years, 13% of respondents reported considerably reduced sexual desire during the previous 12 months. Findings revealed that sexual desire reduces further with age: 6% of the participants aged 18–29 years, 17% of those aged 30–39 years, 12% of those aged 40–59 years, and 27% of those aged 60–67 years reported low sexual desire.

The study of factors associated with lack of desire is complex because of the difficulty in isolating the interaction of factors. There have been efforts to identify physiological and hormonal correlates [14–20], but few studies have examined the association between low sexual desire and cognitive, emotional, relational, and sociocultural factors in men.

Specific emotional states can promote or inhibit the sexual response [21]. The relationship between mood and sexual desire in men is complex and not necessarily linear. Depression and anxiety are usually associated with reduced sexual desire [22–27]; however, some studies revealed a paradoxical effect on sexual desire [21,23]. A survey by Bancroft and colleagues [21] with 919 heterosexual men revealed that, of those reporting the experience of depression, 9% indicated increased sexual interest and 42% decreased sexual interest when depressed; among those experiencing anxiety/stress, 21% reported increased sexual interest and 28% reported decreased sexual interest. A qualitative study using in-depth interviews with 43 participants from that survey supported the survey's findings. Moreover, similar findings were reported in a separate study with gay men [23]. The Massachusetts Male Aging Study, a community study, found no direct association between depression and loss of sexual interest [28]. In addition, Mathew and Weinman [27] studied a mixed-gender group of 57 depressive subjects and found that whereas 31% had a loss of sexual interest, 22% reported increased sexual interest. In Angst's study [29], 26% of depressed men reported decreased sexual interest and 23% reported increased sexual interest. The underlying mechanisms of this paradoxical association between depression and increased sexual interest are still

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