

Trait Sexual Motivation Questionnaire: Concept and Validation

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Trait sexual motivation defines a psychological construct that reflects the long-lasting degree of motivation for sexual activities, which is assumed to be the result of biological and sociocultural influences. With this definition, it shares commonalities with other sexuality-related constructs like sexual desire, sexual drive, sexual needs, and sexual compulsivity.

Aim. The Trait Sexual Motivation Questionnaire (TSMQ) was developed in order to measure trait sexual motivation with its different facets.

Methods. Several steps were conducted: First, items were composed assessing sexual desire, the effort made to gain sex, as well as specific sexual behaviors. Factor analysis of the data of a first sample ($n = 256$) was conducted. Second, the factor solution was verified by a confirmatory factor analysis in a second sample ($n = 498$) and construct validity was demonstrated. Third, the temporal stability of the TSMQ was tested in a third study ($n = 59$).

Main Outcome Measure. Questionnaire data.

Results. The exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses revealed that trait sexual motivation is best characterized by four subscales: *Solitary Sexuality*, *Importance of Sex*, *Seeking Sexual Encounters*, and *Comparison with Others*. It could be shown that the test quality of the questionnaire is high. Most importantly for the trait concept, the retest reliability after 1 year was $r = 0.87$.

Conclusion. Our results indicate that the TSMQ is indeed a suitable tool for measuring long-lasting sexual motivation with high test quality and high construct validity. A future differentiation between trait and state sexual motivation might be helpful for clinical as well as forensic research. **Stark R, Kagerer S, Walter B, Vaitl D, Klucken T, and Wehrum-Osinsky S. Trait sexual motivation questionnaire: Concept and validation. J Sex Med 2015;12:1080–1091.**

Key Words. Trait Sexual Motivation; Sexual Motivation; Sexual Desire; Retest Reliability

Introduction

Sexual motivation is a psychological construct that describes the driving force for sexual activity. It is related to the importance of sexual activity for the well-being of a subject. People's extent of sexual activity varies over time due to different factors, for instance, the availability of a sexual counterpart, fitness, experienced stress, or age. Beside these fluctuating, mainly external influences, a more general motivation for sexual activity differs between individuals. Some people are eager

for sexual experiences, while others seem to have almost no interest in sexual encounters. The sexual motivation of an individual might be reflected by the desire for sexual activities, the importance of sexual activities for a person, the effort to gain sexual activity, and the actual frequency of sexual activities.

With this definition, sexual motivation shares commonalities with other constructs such as sexual interest, sexual desire, or maybe to a lesser extent with sexual drive. The term sexual drive links sexual activity closely to a biological need.

Modern sexual motivation theories question the extent of the influence of a biological drive [1]. The differentiation of sexual motivation from constructs like sexual interest or sexual desire is difficult and thus the above-mentioned terms are often used synonymously.

The history of the conceptualization of sexual motivation and related concepts started with Freud, who abstractly defined sexual drive as libido [2]. Later, Kinsey, Pomery, and Martin [3] proposed more specifically that the number of orgasms in a given time period (called outlets) best reflects sexual motivation. In contemporary models of sexual behavior (e.g., [1,4–6]), sexual motivation is conceptualized as the driving force behind sexual engagement accompanied by subjective sexual feelings (i.e., experienced sexual arousal), physiological sexual responses (e.g., genital responses), and sexual behaviors. The extent of sexual motivation depends on sexual incentives, cognitions, memories, and sex-related biological states. These incentive sexual motivation models are in line with up-to-date general motivation theories, which emphasize the importance of conditioned cues for motivated behavior [7,8].

Most of the sexual motivation models stress the importance of present incentives and the current biological state of the organism for the current sexual motivation, but they usually also propose more stable, long-lasting influences from biological (e.g., genes) or sociocultural factors. Therefore, it is reasonable to differentiate between state and trait sexual motivation. Trait sexual motivation can be conceptualized as stable over time, mainly reflecting genetic as well as long-lasting sociocultural influences (aspects of these influences can be assessed, e.g., by the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory [9]). In contrast, state sexual motivation is the result of an interaction of trait sexual motivation and several fluctuating influences, e.g., the presence of adequate sexual cues, current biological state. This clear distinction between state and trait sexual motivation has—to our knowledge—not been made so far. Established concepts like sexual interest, sexual desire, or sexual drive reflect aspects of trait sexual motivation, but are sometimes also used for aspects of state sexual motivation. Therefore, a clarification by using a more precise terminology seems necessary.

There is a long-lasting controversy about the relative contribution of biological and cultural factors in determining human sexuality [10]. Corresponding to this, the opposing positions are

reflected by *essentialism*, which assumes that sexual phenomena are mainly determined by internal biological factors as, e.g., hormones and genes, and *social constructionism*, which emphasizes external, cultural influences [11]. The balance between nature and culture might be different between the sexes: Baumeister [10] presented evidence that the cultural influences are greater on female sexuality than on male sexuality, resulting also in greater erotic plasticity in women than in men. Is it possible that cultural influences, which can change over time, contribute to a trait, which is a long-lasting property by definition? The answer is yes and no, depending on whether these influences are stable or unstable over time.

The concept of trait sexual motivation is justified by findings from animal and human studies, which were able to show genetic influences on sexual behavior. From rat studies, it is known that dopaminergic transmission in the nucleus accumbens is involved in sexual behavior [12–14] and this transmission is partly under the control of genes (see review by Le Foll et al. [15]). A direct genetic contribution to sexual motivation has recently been demonstrated: Rats selectively bred for high novelty exploration were more sexually motivated than rats with low novelty exploration [16]. In humans, there is evidence that sexual motivation is at least partly determined by genetic influences. However, in these studies, aspects related to sexual motivation were assessed rather than the construct per se: Infidelity and the number of sexual partners were found to be under a moderate genetic influence [17], risky sexual behavior was found in a twin study to be partly determined by genetic factors [18], and sexual promiscuity was related to the dopamine D4 receptor gene variation [19]. Polymorphisms in the dopamine D4 receptor gene were also found to contribute to individual differences in human sexual desire [20].

Besides genetic influences, long-lasting sociocultural environments contribute to trait sexual motivation. For example, in a large international study, Schmitt [21] studied sociosexuality from Argentina to Zimbabwe in 48 nations. He reported a strong influence of sociocultural environments on sociosexual orientation, which reflects human mating strategies (e.g., monogamous vs. polygamous) that are probably also related to trait sexual motivation. Another example for long-lasting sociocultural influences is religiosity: For example, Ahrold et al. [22] could demonstrate an influence of religiosity on different sexual attitudes in a Canadian sample.

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