

Student Notebook: How Sexual Boredom Turned Into a Good Thrill

February 28, 2022



Author Leonor de Oliveira. Photo by Christian Lutjein

Let me start off with a confession: I'm easily bored. I reckon this does not make me any more special than your average millennial who, like me, is overstimulated and exhausted from endless browsing for the past 10 years. I can even be more revealing: I'm easily bored in bed. Again, this doesn't make me unique. Problems with sexual desire are among the most common (Kleinplatz, 2018). This is especially true for women: Some prevalence studies indicate that approximately 50% to 70% of women experience low sexual desire (West et al., 2008; Worsley et al., 2017). These rates drop if you assess levels of sexual distress and control for menopausal status, but they're still high. Too high. They make me feel uncomfortable, and suspicious: Should we be talking about "low" desire when numbers hint this might be the standard?

I thought I was going to find tons of papers on the topic, considering the prevalence of issues

involving sexual desire in clinical settings. It seemed obvious, after all: Women were not dysfunctional, they were just bored, and I could not be the only person thinking so.

In 2017, I was working in crisis intervention, finishing my training as a sexual therapist, and had to present my final work to become a sexual therapist in the Portuguese Society for Clinical Sexology. I was shattered from the emotional work I was doing and did not feel I had the energy (or time) to run a series of ideas by a supervisor. I decided to do something on my own that would potentially benefit my personal life as a serial monogamist—conduct a review of literature on sexual boredom. I thought I was going to find tons of papers on the topic, considering the prevalence of issues involving sexual desire in clinical settings. It seemed obvious, after all: Women were not dysfunctional, they were just bored, and I could not be the only person thinking so. Well, it appeared that I was. I found exactly three papers specifically targeting sexual boredom. I found a few more papers by stretching my search and using all sorts of word combinations, but the truth was evident: A review of literature was not going to solve my personal problem. Fortunately, it did allow me to get my certification in sexual therapy.

My dissertation ended up being more about boredom than about sexual boredom, but it laid the foundation for a tentative model of sexual boredom. In hindsight, this tentative model was quite naive. However, it caught the attention of Joana Carvalho, who became my supervisor and whose interest changed my life course and likely my career. It's interesting how genuine interest and encouragement make a difference. I remember her simply saying "I think this construct has great potential and is yet to be studied." A few months later, she told me the University of Porto was going to open a doctoral program in human sexuality, where she believed I would fit in. She feared I wouldn't be interested (I had well-paid contract as a clinical psychologist, a rarity in the Portuguese scenario), but I was. I applied, got in, and got a scholarship, too.

One of the challenges of studying a subject ignored by other researchers is that you must put in extra work in explaining why your topic matters and how studying it can be relevant for the field. To me, the importance of sexual boredom resides in its potential contribution to understanding sexual desire. In that sense, it's the El Dorado of sex research; many of my colleagues have also tried to figure out why desire wanes and how to handle it. Conventional treatment approaches have generally not proved effective (Leiblum, 2010). Despite the ubiquity of modern attempts to increase desire (Charest & Kleinplatz, 2018), there is no "pink" Viagra (Tiefer, 2004). It's difficult to have a cure when there may not be a disease.

But although the topic of sexual boredom has flown under the radar of sex researchers, renowned clinicians including Esther Perel, David Schnarch, and Barry McCarthy have all touched the subject in various ways. Why haven't scientists done the same? I used to think this could reflect an apparent overlap in issues with sexual desire and sexual satisfaction, and hence not be worth studying. I now feel it's something else. Sexual boredom is almost too intuitive. To me it was obvious back in 2017 and it's obvious today: Many people with low desire don't have sexual dysfunction, they only have a boring sex life. The question we should be asking is, why? Is sex uninteresting? Are they bored with life or their relationships? Is society demanding too much from them? Are they just easily bored? Our studies hint that all these factors might play a role, but we are missing pathways (de Oliveira, Carvalho, & Nobre, 2021; de Oliveira, Rosa, et al., 2021). That is, we still don't know what leads to what, or when.

Doing research that is personally driven is highly motivating. However, wanting to solve our own issues also carries powerful biases.

Doing research that is personally driven is highly motivating. However, wanting to solve our own issues also carries powerful biases. I often see what I want to see, but I realize that's partly because there are no perfect strategies to overcome my preconceptions, so I doubt myself constantly. Fortunately, instead of being shredded by anxiety, I was able to befriend it. I now welcome doubt, surrounding myself with senior and junior researchers whose criticism I invite. I also need encouragement, of course; if my supervisors did not promote my autonomy and share my enthusiasm, I wouldn't be able to explore new territory, let alone ensure that other researchers will want to pay attention.

I understand I might be overly optimistic about the potential of sexual boredom to explain long-lasting and distressful problems with sexual desire. Perhaps my passion makes me naive and creates a risk that others won't feel as fervent as I do. Maybe sexual boredom will carry on unnoticed. One benefit of boredom is that it seems to have the capacity to promote personal growth (Elpidorou, 2018) by signaling that change is needed (Danckert et al., 2018). My research zeal comes from my own susceptibility to boredom: Like most boredom-prone people, I'm always up for a thrill—in this case, of taking on the risks of pursuing a new research topic.

Student Notebook serves as a forum in which APS Student Caucus members communicate their ideas, suggestions, and experiences. [Read other Student Notebook columns here](#), and learn about [the benefits of Student Membership](#).

Interested in submitting a Student Notebook article of your own? Learn more and indicate your interest by [clicking here](#) (logged-in APS members only).

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org or scroll down to comment.

References

- Charest, M., & Kleinplatz, P. J. (2018). A review of recent innovations in the treatment of low sexual desire. *Current Sexual Health Reports*, 10(4), 281–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-018-0171-4>
- Danckert, J., Mugon, J., Struk, A., & Eastwood, J. (2018). Boredom: What is it good for? In *The function of emotions: When and why emotions help us*. (pp. 93–119). Springer International Publishing/Springer Nature.
- de Oliveira, L., Carvalho, J., & Nobre, P. (2021). Perceptions of sexual boredom in a community sample. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 47(3), 224–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2020.1854405>
- de Oliveira, L., Rosa, P., Carvalho, J., & Nobre, P. (2021). A cluster analysis on sexual boredom profiles in a community sample of men and women. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 59(2), 258–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2021.1931798>

Elpidorou, A. (2018). The good of boredom. *Philosophical Psychology*, 31(3), 323–351.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2017.1346240>

Kleinplatz, P. J. (2018). History of the treatment of female sexual dysfunction(s). *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 14(1), 29-54. [doi:10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-050817-084802](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-050817-084802)

Leiblum, S. R. (2010). *Treating sexual desire disorders: A clinical casebook*. Guilford Press.

Tiefer, L. (2004). The pink Viagra story: We have the drug, but what's the disease? In *Sex is not a natural act, and other essays* (2nd ed.). Westview Press.

West, S. L., D'Aloisio, A. A., Agans, R. P., Kalsbeek, W. D., Borisov, N. N., & Thorp, J. M. (2008). Prevalence of low sexual desire and hypoactive sexual desire disorder in a nationally representative sample of US women. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 168(13), 1441–1449.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/archinte.168.13.1441>

Worsley, R., Bell, R. J., Gartoulla, P., & Davis, S. R. (2017). Prevalence and predictors of low sexual desire, sexually related personal distress, and hypoactive sexual desire dysfunction in a community-based sample of midlife women. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 14(5), 675–686.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsxm.2017.03.254>