Evaluation of a modified dot-probe task measuring biased attention in women with body dissatisfaction

Ben Lane 1, Kate Mulgrew 1, Melanie White 2, Doug Mahar 1

1University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, 2Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract: People with body image disturbances are considered to demonstrate a preferential allocation of attention to certain materials, such as body-related images or words. However, current methods for measuring such biased attention remain questionable and have a number of limitations. For body image disturbances specifically, information-processing theory posits that a self-schema interwoven with body-related ideas must first be activated before attentional and other cognitive biases begin to operate. This may occur, for instance, in an individual’s daily life following exposure to media images of people with an ‘idealised’ body shape and appearance. As such, this study tested a modification of the dot-probe task that includes the addition of cues (e.g., a picture of a woman with an ideal body shape) to each dot-probe trial. This cued dot-probe task is intended to prime participants on each trial to measure the effect of activation of body-related thoughts on subsequent attentional processes, enhancing the ecological validity of the measurement. The performance of women with body dissatisfaction on the cued task was compared to performance on the traditional dot-probe task. Participants completed a set of trait body image measures and then a week later completed the single session dot-probe task. Preliminary analyses suggest that the cued task has utility beyond the traditional dot-probe task. The focus of the presentation will be about the potential implications of this cued dot-probe task for attention bias modification procedures. Particularly, training attention with a link between a cue and subsequent disengagement from an emotional stimulus may enhance an individual’s capacity to successfully disengage attention following a relevant emotional experience in daily life.

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