

Introduction

Hypersexual disorder, an obsessional interest in sex, has been argued to show strong parallels with drug addiction (Samenow, 2011). Frequent (yet sub-clinical) users of drugs exhibit a bias in attention to drug-related stimuli (e.g. Field et al. 2004) and the present study seeks to explore whether sexually promiscuous individuals display an analogous bias towards sexualised imagery.

Whilst most adults exhibit an attentional preference for erotic imagery (Lykins et al., 2006), it is unclear whether this preference is accentuated for individuals involved in higher levels of sexual activity. Such a bias in attention might contribute to heightened sexual motivation. One study compared individuals high and low on sexual desire and found, paradoxically, that individuals who scored low on measures of sexual interest exhibited a greater bias for erotic images (Prause et al., 2008). The present study will use participants who score high or low on measures of sexual promiscuity (**a measure of activity, rather than mere interest**) to examine evidence of biases in attention to sexual stimuli.

Experimental Protocol

80 (40 male and 40 female) heterosexual participants were divided into sexually promiscuous and low promiscuous groups following responses to the Relationship Exclusivity Measure (Schmitt and Buss, 2000).

The **Dot Probe Task** involved presentation of a series of image pairs (critical trials comprised one sexual and a neutral matched image) for 500ms. One of the images was replaced by an arrow. Participants had to respond as quickly and as accurately as possible to the arrow direction. Faster responses suggest participants are attending to the image replaced by the arrow.

Attentional bias score was the difference in response time when the arrow replaced the sexual, compared to the neutral, image.

Pre- and post-task, participants rated current urge for sex. In addition all images were rated for pleasantness (-3 to +3).

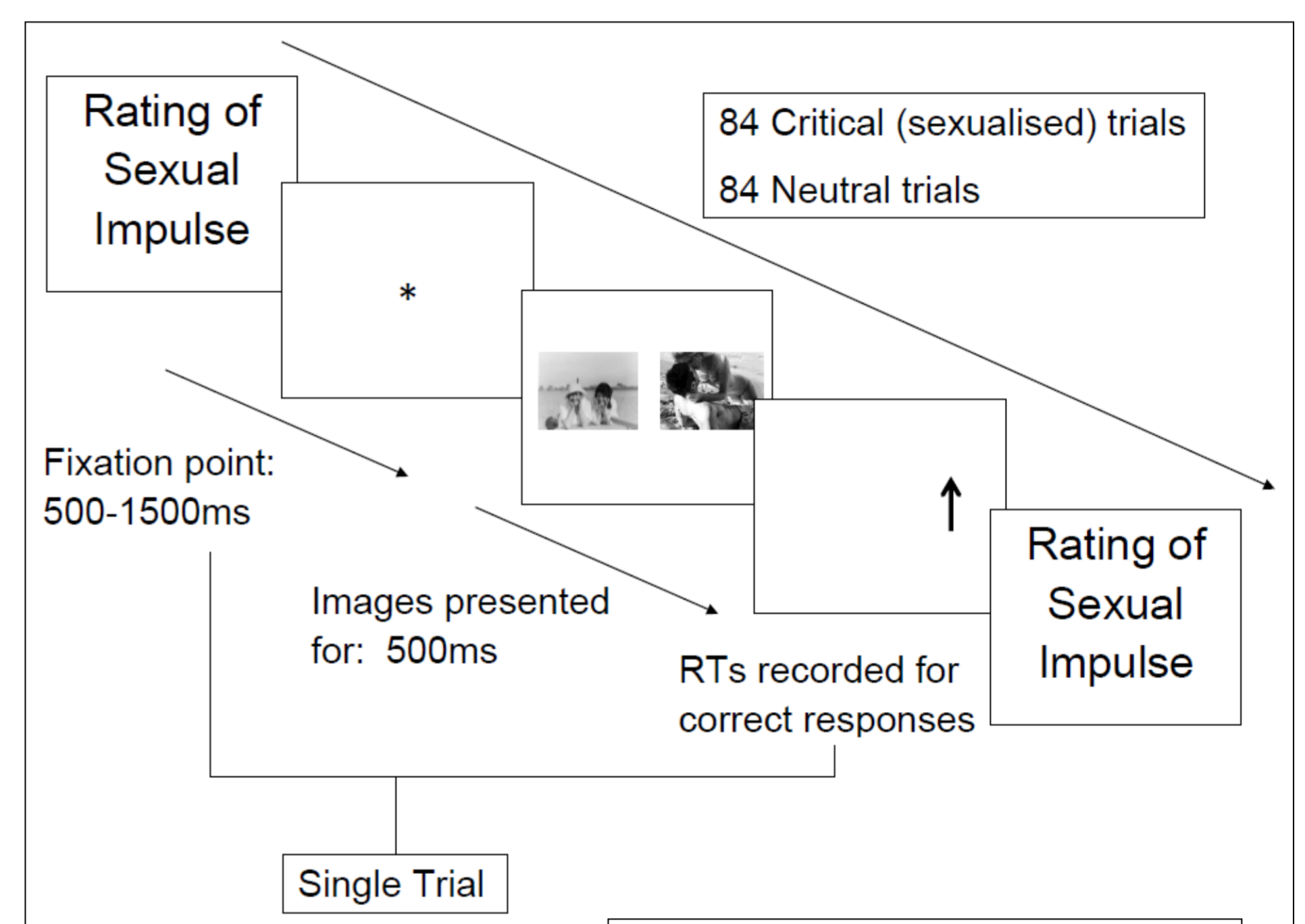


Figure 1: Task schematic

Results

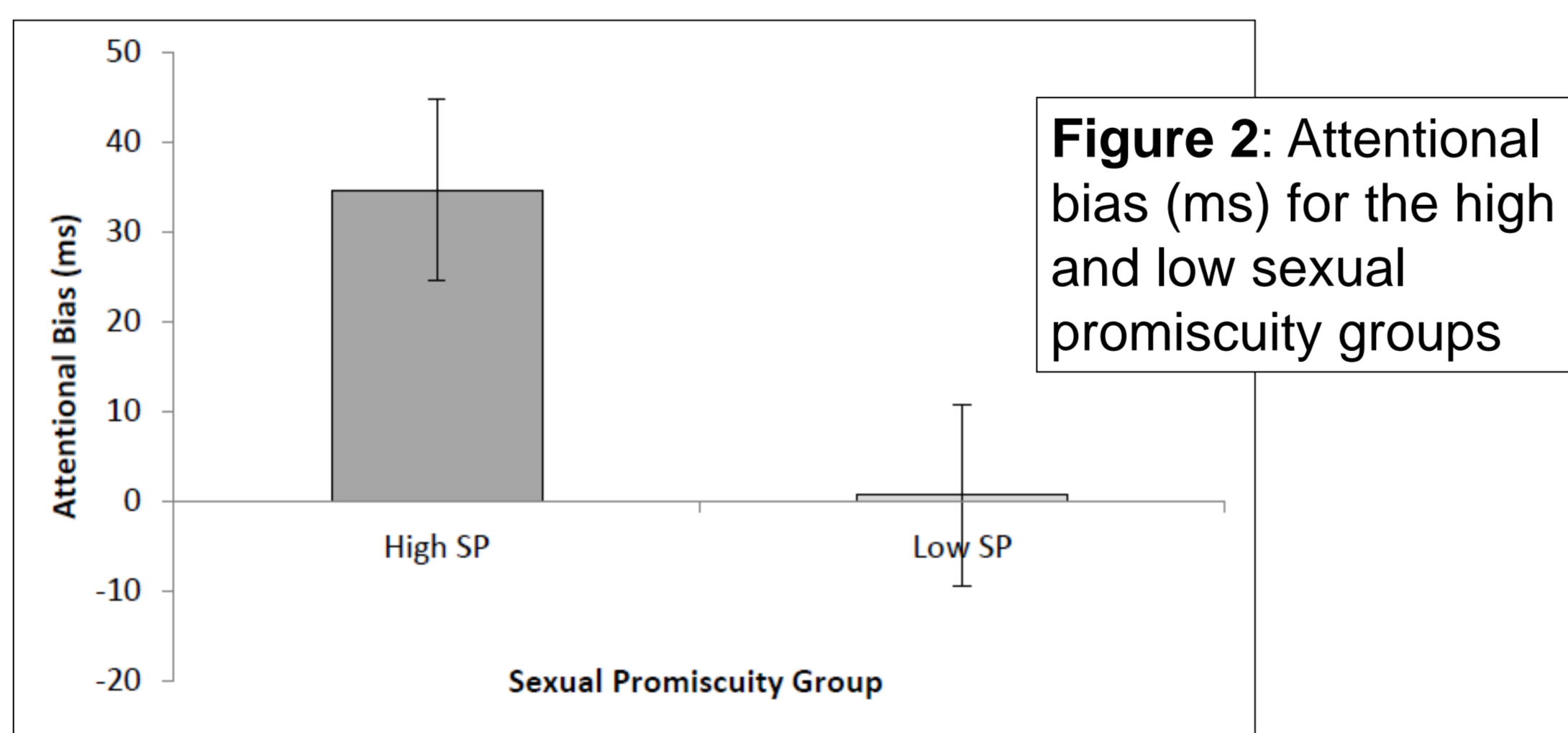


Figure 2: Attentional bias (ms) for the high and low sexual promiscuity groups

Urge for sex significantly increased following the study. Sexual images were rated as significantly more pleasant. However, neither of these variables interacted with sexual promiscuity group.

Attentional bias for the sexual images was significantly greater for the high sexually promiscuous group compared to the low group (see Figure 2), $F(1,76)=5.53$, $p=.02$, $\eta_p^2=.07$. The effect did not interact with gender ($F<1$).

Discussion

Sexually promiscuous individuals exhibited a significantly stronger attentional bias for sexual imagery. This is consistent with the drug literature, wherein, for example, high social drinkers (compared to low) exhibit a stronger bias for alcohol-related stimuli (Field et al. 2004). Through manipulating presentation times, future work will explore whether this bias is due to attentional capture or an inability to disengage attention. Furthermore, it should be noted that the cross-sectional design precludes any conclusions with respect to whether the attentional bias is a contributory factor or a consequence of sexually promiscuous behaviours.

