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Attentional biases in eating disorders: A meta-analytic review of Stroop performance

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Abstract

The Stroop task has been adapted from cognitive psychology to be able to examine attentional biases in various forms of psychopathology, including the eating disorders. This paper reviews the research on the Stroop task in the eating disorders research area in both descriptive and meta-analytic fashions. Twenty-eight empirical studies are identified, which predominantly examine food and body/weight stimuli in bulimic, anorexic, or dieting/food-restricted samples. It is concluded that there is evidence of an attentional bias in bulimia for a range of stimuli but that the effect seems to be limited to body/weight stimuli in anorexia. The evidence to date is that there is no attentional bias in dieting samples. Limitations of the methodology employed in the extant literature include small sample sizes, unstandardized Stroop methodology, restricted gender, and a general lack of consideration of individual differences variables. Recommendations for future research are provided.

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1. Introduction

The models that have developed in the area of the eating disorders (Fairburn & Brownell, 2002; Garner & Bemis, 1985; Vitousek & Orimoto, 1993) emphasize multiple possible causal

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factors in these problems. Among these models, one of the notable developments in psychopathology research has been the growth of investigations and models that emphasize cognitive processes and content (cf. Dobson & Kendall, 1993). In part spurred on by the general “cognitive revolution” in psychology and in part by the success of cognitive-behavioral therapies, this emphasis has yielded several varied and rich technologies to examine psychological processes.

Among the range of cognitive factors that have been implicated in the eating disorders are such issues as attitudes and beliefs about ideal body weight, body dissatisfaction, and body image and perception; perfectionism have received considerable attention. For example, in a recent examination of the prediction of binge eating and purging (Byrne & McLean, 2002), it was found that overconcern with body weight and shape, coupled with the adoption of purgative behaviors, was predictive of binge eating and purging. Similarly, a recent review of the issue of body size dissatisfaction in anorexia nervosa (Skrzypek, Weheimer, & Remschmidt, 2001) found that although body size estimation is not impaired in this condition, it is the discrepancy between perceived body size and ideal size that is significantly associated with anorexia nervosa. Findings such as these highlight the role of negative attitudes and beliefs about food and body shape in the eating disorders and suggest the possibility of disordered information processing in these conditions. For example, individuals who have eating disorders have undue concerns about food or body image; it may be that these concerns could be demonstrated through a variety of methods that relate to different cognitive processes. One of the cognitive processes associated with eating disorders that has been the focus of considerable research is that of selective attention. Consistent with the idea that individuals with eating disorders have negative beliefs about food and body shape, it has been suggested that these individuals are also more attentive and responsive to these relevant stimuli than non-eating-disordered individuals. A body of research using a modification of the Stroop task has evolved in which selective attentional processes have been examined. In this paper, we review the use of the Stroop task in examining eating-disordered attentional processes and examine in meta-analytic format the existing data. Conceptual and methodological issues in the extant literature and directions for future investigations are provided.

1.1. The Stroop task

The original or Classic Stroop task (Stroop, 1935) was developed as a means to study basic human attentional and informational processes. This task consisted of the presentation of colors printed on either neutral words or incongruent color words. Participants first named the color name of the stimuli and then the color of the stimuli. This method was later revised to include color words (e.g., red and blue) that were printed in either the corresponding color (congruent condition) or other competing colors (incongruent condition). As these tasks are relatively easy, they form a basis for comparing the interference created by naming the color of the stimulus when the actual color is competing (e.g., the word “blue” written in green). Scores derived from the Stroop task consist of either the latency (typically in ms) to name each stimulus or the “interference effect,” which is

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