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3 Spatial Anticipatory Attentional Bias for 4 Threat: Reliable Individual Differences 5 with RT-based Online Measurement

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23 TEG and MV contributed to the conception and design of the study and data collection and
24 approved the manuscript. TEG programmed the task, analysed and interpreted the data and
25 drafted the article.

26 Bio's:

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34 and reward tasks that are used worldwide.

35

36 **Abstract**

37 Cues that predict the future location of emotional stimuli may evoke an anticipatory form of
38 automatic attentional bias. The reliability of this bias towards threat is uncertain:
39 experimental design may need to be optimized or individual differences may simply be
40 relatively noisy in the general population. The current study therefore aimed to determine the
41 split-half reliability of the bias, in a design with fewer factors and more trials than in previous
42 work. A sample of 63 participants was used for analysis, who performed the cued Visual
43 Probe Task online, which aims to measure an anticipatory attentional bias. The overall bias
44 towards threat was tested and split-half reliability was calculated over even and odd blocks.
45 Results showed a significant bias towards threat and a reliability of around .7. The results
46 support systematic individual differences in anticipatory attentional bias and demonstrate that
47 RT-based bias scores, with online data collection, can be reliable.

48 **Keywords**

49 Attentional bias; dot-probe; reliability; cued Visual Probe Task; threat.

50

51 1. Introduction

52 Selective attention refers to the selection of a subset of signals for further processing, as has
53 been computationally modelled via saliency maps (Soltani & Koch, 2010). While
54 traditionally bottom-up salience occurs due to low-level visual features, there is also a
55 bottom-up form of emotional salience: Certain stimulus categories may involuntarily draw
56 attention due to their emotional or motivational content. Intuitively, consider looking down
57 and seeing, close to your hand, a mug, a pencil, and a spider; where will attention swiftly be
58 directed? A spatial attentional bias refers to a tendency for selective attention to be
59 automatically drawn to the location of such emotional categories of stimuli (Cisler & Koster,
60 2010). Spatial attentional bias can be assessed using the dot-probe task (MacLeod et al.,
61 1986; Mogg & Bradley, 1999), in which pairs of task-irrelevant cue stimuli, one salient and
62 one non-salient, are used to hypothetically shift attention. This is usually tested by following
63 the cue stimuli with a probe stimulus, presented at the location of either the salient or the non-
64 salient cue. Bias scores can be calculated as reaction times to probes when they appear at the
65 location of the salient cue versus the non-salient cue. These biases are then taken as a
66 measure of attentional bias towards/away from the salient cues, which can then be used in
67 further analyses linking the bias to other individual differences. For instance, attention
68 towards threat has been linked to anxiety (Bantini et al., 2016; Cisler & Koster, 2010), and
69 complex patterns of attentional bias have been linked to risky drinking and alcohol addiction
70 (Field et al., 2004; Field & Cox, 2008; Townshend & Duka, 2001, 2007). However, the
71 reliability of bias scores has been found to be very low (in some cases near zero) in a number
72 of studies (Ataya et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2014; Chapman et al., 2017; Dear et al., 2011;
73 Kappenman et al., 2014; Puls & Rothermund, 2018; Schmukle, 2005; Waechter et al., 2014),
74 questioning whether such bias scores should be used to study individual differences
75 (Christiansen et al., 2015; McNally, 2018; Rodebaugh et al., 2016). We briefly note that the
76 issue of whether individual differences can be reliably measured must be separated from the

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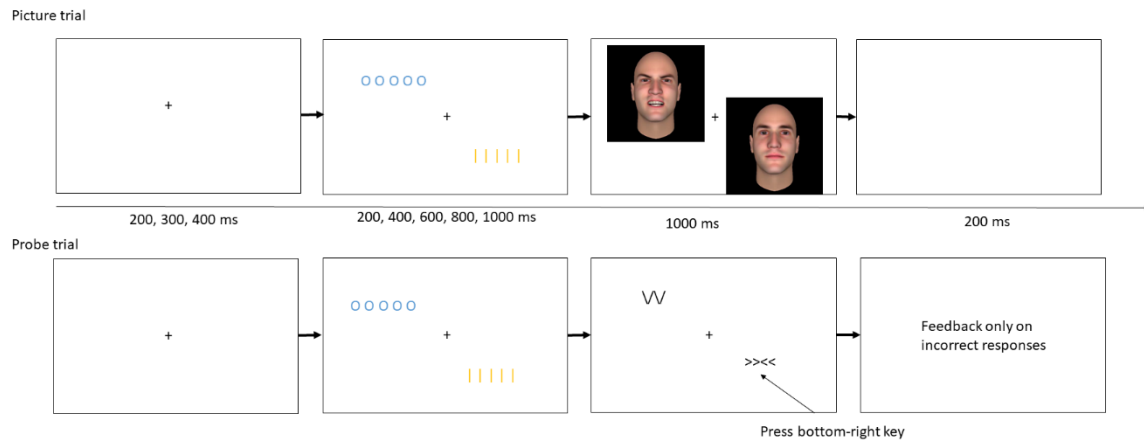
77 question of whether there is a strong average effect, i.e., whether within-subject effects are
78 strong; these are even somewhat opposing aims, as reliable individual differences benefit
79 from relatively large variation between individuals in a population, while such variation
80 would be noise in the context of within-subject effects (De Schryver et al., 2016; Goodhew &
81 Edwards, 2019; MacLeod et al., 2019).

82 However, there may be ways to improve reliability of spatial attentional bias scores. One
83 approach involves an adaptation of the dot-probe that uses visually neutral cues that predict
84 the locations of upcoming salient stimuli, termed the “predictive” or “cued” Visual Probe
85 Task, cVPT (Gladwin, 2016; Gladwin & Vink, 2018). The task is illustrated in Figure 1. The
86 essential feature of the task is that it presents two different, randomly intermixed trial types:
87 picture and probe trials. On picture trials, a pair of abstract, visually neutral predictive cues
88 are presented, followed by a pair of stimuli, one from a hypothetically salient stimulus
89 category and one from a control stimulus category. The locations of the salient and control
90 stimuli are fully determined by the predictive cues. These trials thus serve to establish and
91 maintain the predictive value of the cues. On probe trials, probe stimuli requiring responses
92 are presented *instead of* the pictures, to assess whether the predictive cues evoke a bias. Note
93 that the task-irrelevant stimuli do not occur on those trials on which behavioural responses
94 are given, and any bias must be due to the predicted stimulus categories. This differs from
95 traditional tasks in which the measurement of automatic biases relies on the actual
96 presentation of emotional stimuli, which are then expected to evoke an automatic stimulus-
97 response response. The rationale for using predictive cues to evoke an anticipatory form of
98 automatic processes was based on a variant of dual-process models called the Reprocessing/
99 Reentrance and Reinforcement model of Reflectivity, or R3 model (Gladwin et al., 2011;
100 Gladwin & Figner, 2014). This model was developed in response to criticisms of dual-
101 process/dual-system models (Keren, 2013; Keren & Schul, 2009). Its overall aim is to

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102 provide a theoretical space based as closely as possible on relevant elements of
103 neuroscientific knowledge and concepts. One specific element of the model was a definition
104 of reflectivity versus automaticity as a continuum based on the amount of processing
105 performed in an outcome-based response-selection loop. Automatic processes could then
106 involve predictive and outcome-related processes, simply with less reprocessing time
107 (Cunningham et al., 2007). In the cVPT, the predictive cues were therefore hypothesized to
108 evoke an automatic bias towards the predicted stimulus category, termed the anticipatory
109 attentional bias. A number of studies have confirmed and explored this expected effect. A
110 high reliability of around .75 was found for an alcohol-related anticipatory attentional bias
111 (Gladwin, 2019), which could not be explained merely by individual differences involving
112 cue features not related to their predictive value (Gladwin, Banic, Figner, et al., 2019); and
113 which furthermore has shown correlations with risky drinking (Gladwin, 2019; Gladwin &
114 Vink, 2018). An overall bias towards threat has been found which had relatively good
115 reliability compared to the stimulus-evoked bias (Gladwin, Möbius, Mcloughlin, et al., 2019)
116 and was robust to reversing the specific cues' predictive value (Gladwin, Figner, & Vink,
117 2019), but not as high – in the range of .4 to .56 - as for alcohol-related bias. This may be due
118 to use of multiple cue-probe intervals in previous work, reducing the number of trials per
119 interval and possibly introducing a source of noise. Finally, in a training study (Gladwin,
120 Möbius, & Becker, 2019), it was found that performing a cVPT that was designed to train
121 attention towards versus away from the predicted threat category induced a stimulus-evoked
122 bias in the trained direction. This suggests that the cVPT for threat indeed involves outcome-
123 focused processes; otherwise, the training would merely have affected responses to the
124 particular predictive cues used during training, and would not have affected biases involving
125 the predicted stimulus categories.

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127 Figure 1. Illustration of the cued Visual Probe Task.

128 A gap in the currently available information is that it has not yet been shown that the split-
129 half reliability of the anticipatory attentional bias for threat is not only relatively high but can
130 reach similar levels as for alcohol. This may reflect designs that were suboptimal for
131 providing reliable scores, or it may indicate that the underlying individual differences within
132 the general population are less robust. The primary aim of the current study was therefore to
133 assess the reliability of the threat-related bias using a single cue-probe interval and twice the
134 number of assessment trials as in a previous study (Gladwin, Figner, & Vink, 2019). This
135 effectively increased the number of trials used to calculate the bias by a factor of four. This
136 increase of trial numbers was predicted to result in a similar level of reliability as for the
137 alcohol-related bias.

138 2. Materials and Methods

139 2.1. Participants

140 The sample consisted of 64 students who enrolled for credit. One participant was removed for
141 having very low overall accuracy (below .5, clearly indicating insufficient task engagement).

142 In the analysis sample there remained 52 female and 11 male participants, mean age 20, SD =

143 4.

144 2.2. Materials

145 The cVPT was programmed using JavaScript, PHP and HTML. The task consists of two
146 types of trials, Picture and Probe trials; trial type is randomly selected per trial. Picture trials
147 started with a fixation period of 150, 200, or 250 ms (randomly selected with equal
148 probability). This was followed by a pair of predictive cues, onscreen for 400 ms. The cues
149 were the letter strings OOOOO and XXXXX, coloured yellow (RGB values 250, 250, 10) or light
150 blue (RGB values 10, 250, 250); which colour was assigned to which letters was randomized
151 per participant. The two cues were presented either at the top-left and bottom-right
152 diagonal of the screen, or on the bottom-left and top-right diagonal of the screen; the
153 diagonals alternated per trial. Which cue was presented at which location on the diagonal
154 was randomized per trial. Each of the cues was replaced by a picture centred on the cues'
155 positions. One of the cues was always replaced by an angry face, and the other was always
156 replaced by a neutral face; which cue predicted which expression was randomized per
157 participant. Faces were selected (without replacement until all exemplars had been used,
158 and then reshuffled such that faces were never repeated) from 36 photographs of faces per
159 category, taken from the Karolinska Directed Emotional Faces set (Lundqvist et al., 1998).
160 Pictures remained onscreen for 1000 ms. Trials ended with an inter-trial interval of 200 ms
161 during which the screen was empty. Probe trials were identical to Picture trials up to the
162 presentation of the pictures. Instead of pictures, probe stimuli were presented at the cue
163 locations: a target, >><<, and a distractor, /\ or \/. The distractor was used to reduce the
164 ability of detecting targets regardless of the direction of attention. Which of the locations
165 the target was presented at was randomized per trial. Participants were instructed to press
166 the response key corresponding to the target's location whenever it appeared. The keys
167 were R for top-left, F for bottom-left, J for bottom-right, and I for top-right; these were to be

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168 pressed with the index (bottom positions) and middle (top positions) finger of the left and
169 right hands, resulting in a simple stimulus-response mapping. Note that in this task design,
170 due to the diagonalization and target detection type of probes, responses, stimulus
171 locations and probe locations never repeated from one trial to the next, removing potential
172 sources of noise. Incorrect responses were followed by the text “Incorrect!” in red for 200
173 ms. Late responses were followed by the text “Too late!”.

174 2.3. Procedure

175 The experiment was performed online as part of a set of studies performed in the same
176 session for practical purposes. Participants first completed demographic and other
177 questionnaires not of interest to the current study, followed by two training runs of the
178 cVPT (each two blocks of 48 trials) and then the assessment run of the cVPT (16 blocks of 48
179 trials). Following each run, participants were given awareness checks in which they were
180 asked which of the cues was followed by the angry face.

181 2.4. Analyses

182 During preprocessing, the following trials were removed: The first four trials of the run, the
183 first trial per block, error trials, trials following an error, and trials with an RT more than 3 SD
184 away from the mean of the experimental condition the trial was in. Of the remaining probe
185 trials, the median RT per condition was used for further analyses. These preprocessing steps
186 were the same as those used in a recent set of similar studies on the cVPT (Gladwin, Banic,
187 Figner, et al., 2019).

188 The anticipatory attentional bias was defined per participant as the difference in RT to
189 targets at the predicted location of angry faces minus neutral faces. Split-half reliability was
190 calculated using the Spearman correlation between the bias on even and on odd blocks,

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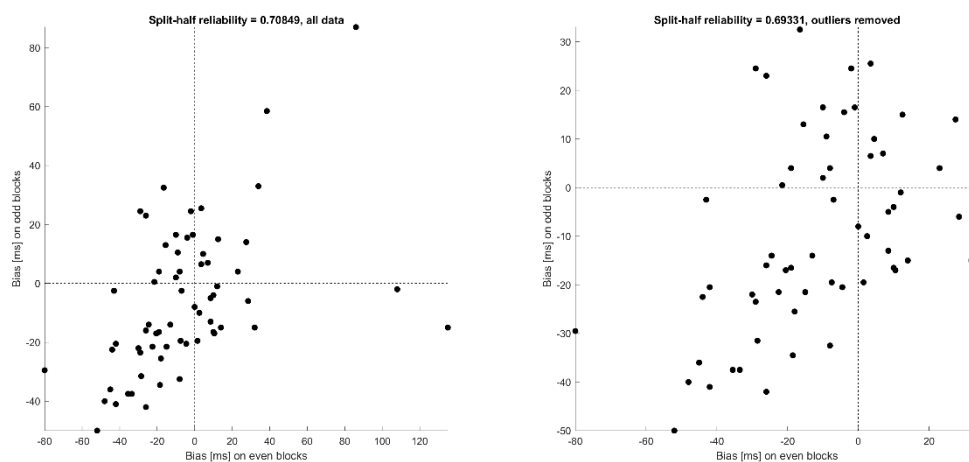
191 with Spearman-Brown correction. Further, we tested via a one-sided paired-sample t-test
192 whether there was an overall within-subject bias towards threat.

193 3. Results

194 The accuracy on the three awareness checks was .65, .89 and .92. There was an overall bias
195 towards threat, $t(62) = -2.13$, $p = .038$, $d = -0.27$. The mean RT over participants was 531 ms
196 when the target was on the threat location and 536 ms when the target was on the neutral
197 location.

198 The split-half reliability of the bias was .71 (Figure 2). To assess sensitivity of this to extreme
199 cases, data points were removed with an absolute z-score of the bias over 2 on either even
200 or odd blocks. The reliability for this restricted dataset was .69.

201



202

203 Figure 2. Split-half bias scores. The figure shows the scatterplots for the bias scores found
204 for even and odd blocks, used for the split-half correlations. The left figure shows all data
205 points. In the right figure, data points with an absolute z-score above two for either the

206 even or odd bias have been removed, to explore whether the reliability was dependent on
207 extreme cases driving a high correlation. This did not appear to be the case.

208 4. Discussion

209 The aim of the current study was to determine whether the anticipatory attentional bias for
210 threat could achieve similarly high split-half reliability as the bias for alcohol. A single cue-
211 probe interval and a relatively high number of trials were used for this. Reliability was
212 confirmed to be high for this type of task, around .7. This would be in the acceptable range
213 for individual difference studies. Further, there was an overall bias towards threat as
214 expected, although the size of this effect was small.

215 The results thus confirm that a behavioural measure of attentional bias, involving task-
216 irrelevant salient stimuli, can achieve high reliability; furthermore, this was found with
217 online data collection. This approach to measurement did involve some changes to the usual
218 task design. Perhaps most fundamentally, predictive cues were used. The use of these cues
219 was originally based on the R³ model, in which asymmetries in outcome-focused response-
220 selection processes could induce anticipatory biases (Gladwin et al., 2011). We acknowledge
221 that there may of course be alternative views and frameworks that could be used to
222 understand attentional bias evoked by predictive cues. Importantly, however, the bias does
223 seem to involve processes related to the predicted outcomes of attentional shifts rather
224 than merely the conditioned cues (Gladwin, Möbius, & Becker, 2019). Further, reliability
225 does not appear to be due to systematic attentional preferences involving the cues
226 themselves, as reversing the cue-outcome mapping did not strongly diminish the expected
227 reliability in previous work (Gladwin, Figner, & Vink, 2019) and cues with a randomized
228 relationship to subsequent stimuli did not result in high reliability in the context of alcohol

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229 (Gladwin, Banic, Figner, et al., 2019). Further, from the perspective of task features, the use
230 of predictive cues may also increase reliability due to the removal of trial-to-trial noise
231 present in usual spatial attentional bias tasks due to the particular combination of stimulus
232 exemplars used as cues on each trial. We reiterate that the reliability of the bias is a
233 separate issue from whether the average bias is large or small; in the current study, the
234 average bias was small but in the direction of threat, in line with previous studies (Gladwin,
235 Figner, & Vink, 2019; Gladwin, Möbius, Mcloughlin, et al., 2019).

236 Limitations include the use of a student sample. Given the findings of high reliability for both
237 alcohol and threat, it would seem appropriate to apply the cVPT to studying attentional bias
238 in other samples, e.g., clinical samples. This may reveal between-group relationships with
239 mental health, which have thus far not been found correlationally within unselected
240 samples of healthy participants for the threat-related bias. Further, although we would
241 argue that online collection plays a valid and important role in research, the methods used
242 in the current study are yet to be tested in a laboratory setting. Finally, the threatening
243 stimuli consisted of photographs of angry and neutral faces. There are many other forms of
244 threatening stimuli and other kinds of salient stimuli that could be tested; the current
245 results of course provide information only on stimulus categories sufficiently similar to the
246 images used.

247 In conclusion, satisfactory reliability for an online behavioural measure of spatial attentional
248 bias for threat can be achieved. This bias was related to cued future outcomes of attentional
249 shifting rather than actually presented stimuli. The current results may thus be of use in
250 further development of theories on automatic processes and attentional biases and may

251 help design future studies aimed at testing relationships between the bias and individual
252 differences.

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