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# Testing causal relationships between self-perceived attractiveness and self-esteem

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# Sociometer Theory

- Leary & Baumeister (2000)
- Functional, evolutionary explanation of self-esteem.
- Self-esteem functions as an interpersonal monitor of:
  - the quality and quantity of existing relationships,
  - perceived eligibility for relationships,
- and motivates us to act accordingly.

# Attractiveness and Self-Esteem

- Self-perceived attractiveness (SPA) positively correlates with self-esteem in both sexes. (e.g. Nell & Ashton, 1996)
- Especially strong relationship in women.

# Direction of causation?

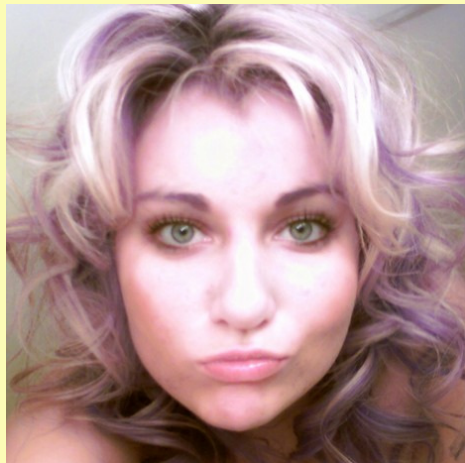
- Correlational data is consistent with Sociometer theory (“bottom-up”).
- However data can also be explained by “top-down” theories (e.g. Brown et al. 2001)
- Studies showing that there is little relationship between self and other rated attractiveness (e.g. Diener et al, 1995) suggest against Sociometer theory.
- Need for experimental studies to examine direction of causation.

# Manipulating self-perceived attractiveness

- Studies 1 & 2 attempted to manipulate SPA in women to examine whether this has a knock-on effect on SE.
- Attractiveness contrast effect: Women who are exposed to pictures of highly attractive others report lower levels of self perceived attractiveness than those exposed to unattractive others (Want, 2009).

# Studies 1 & 2: Methods

- Female participants asked to rate attractiveness of (study 1;  $n = 128$ ) or compare own attractiveness to (study 2;  $n = 137$ ) “hot” or “not” pictures.



“Hot”



“Not”

- Completed a variety of subsequent measures of SPA and SE.

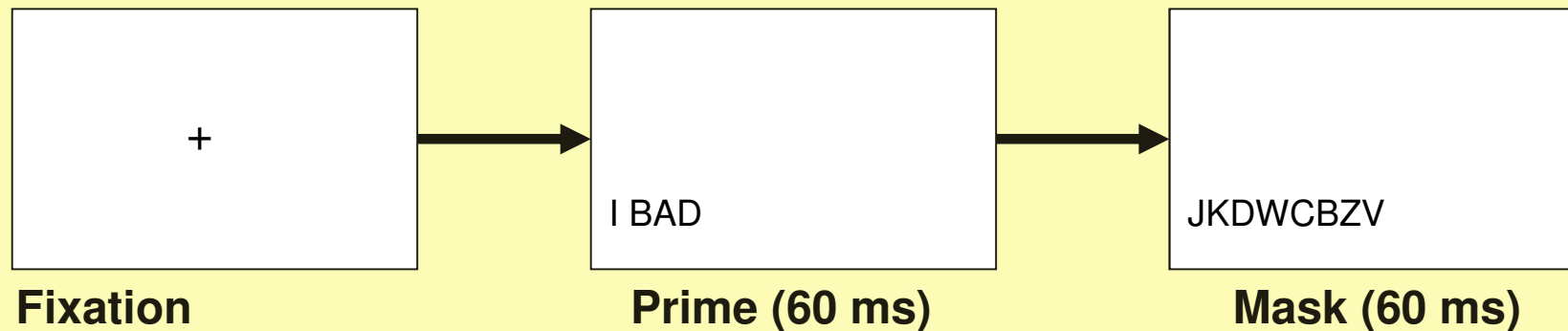
# Summary of Results

- No initial differences in SPA between groups.
- After the comparison task, participants in the “Not” condition rated themselves as significantly more attractive than those in the “Hot” group.
- **No group differences on any self-esteem scales or subscales.**
- Does SE affect SPA? (Study 3)



# Study 3: Method

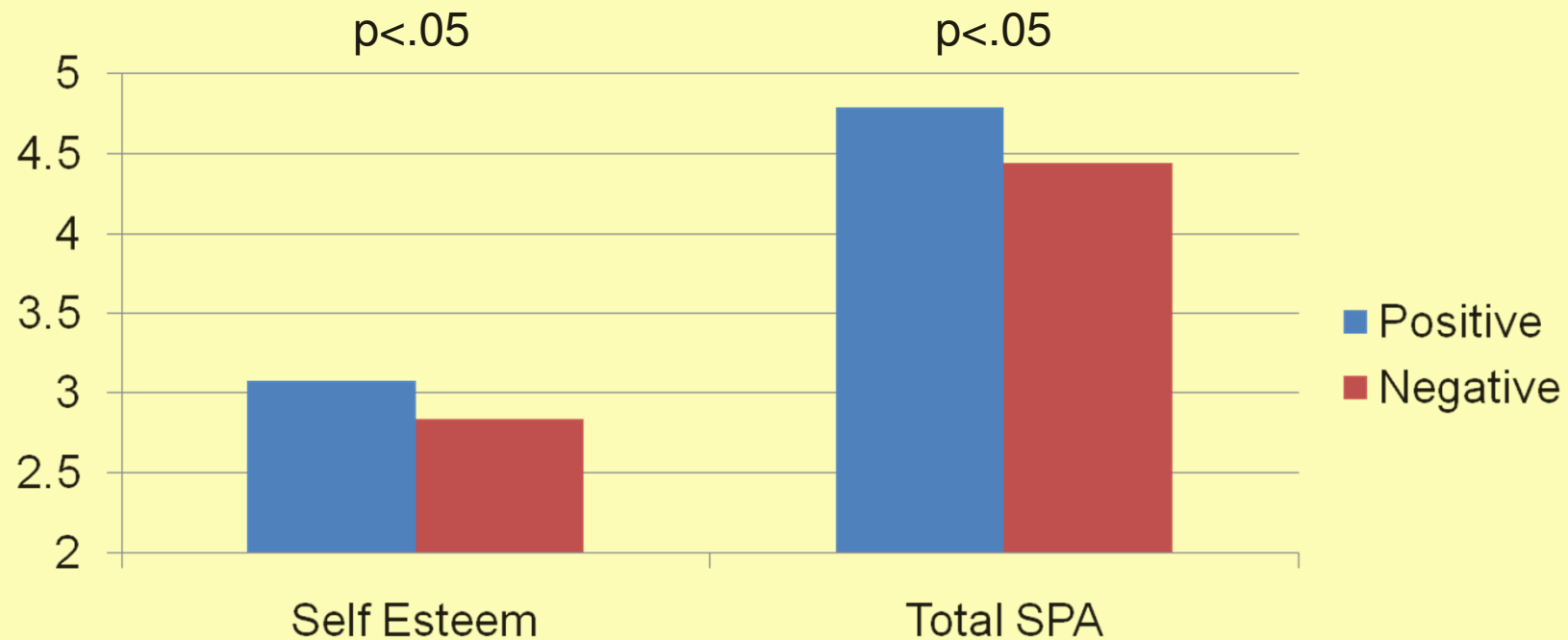
- 2 groups: +ve / -ve manipulation (Ricketta & Dauenheimer, 2003) .
- 76 female participants asked to complete a “reaction time” test.



**Respond: Left / Right**

- Then complete SE manipulation check and a measure of SPA.

# Results



- Participants in +ve condition reported significantly higher subsequent levels of both SE ( $d = .50$ ) and SPA ( $d = .39$ ).

# Conclusions and Future Research

- Results support a “top-down” perspective on the relationship between self-perceptions and self-esteem (Brown et al, 2001).
- Future studies on implicit manipulations of SPA and implicit measures of self-esteem.

# Implications and Applications

- Effects of media images on self-perceptions and self-esteem.
- Controversy over relationships between self-esteem, academic and job performance, antisocial and criminal behaviour (Baumeister et al. 2003).
- Clear relationship between self-esteem and happiness and life satisfaction.
- Prospects for self-esteem interventions.

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