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## Editorial comment on "Implicit and explicit associations with erotic stimuli in sexually functional and dysfunctional men"

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## EDITORIAL COMMENTARY

### Editorial Comment on “Implicit and Explicit Associations with Erotic Stimuli in Sexually Functional and Dysfunctional Men”

This study represents an interesting application of the dual process perspective on male sexuality. Following this perspective, sexual behavior is determined by both a reflexive/impulsive and a reflective/deliberate system that may each be differentially involved in sex and sexual dysfunctions. Upon confrontation with sexual stimuli, first the “reflexive” processing system is assumed to be triggered, and that directly activates associative memory networks. This system is responsible for impulsive, automatic responses. The critical feature of these responses is not so much that they are “unconscious”—people may well become aware of their automatic associations and responses—but that they are involuntary/nonintentional and difficult to control. Second, the “reflective” processing system can be triggered, which may or may not lead to an adjustment of the initial response. From such perspective, sexual problems may arise from both reflexively activated dysfunctional associations (e.g., sex–bad) and dysfunctional reflective cognitions (e.g., I am probably not able to keep my erection for a sufficient time).

This study represents the first attempt to also assess the more automatic affective associations with sexual stimuli in the context of male sexual dysfunction. As the major finding, the results suggest that men with sexual problems were characterized by relatively strong automatic sex-positive associations. This finding may be taken to question the relevance of automatic associations in male sexual dysfunction as it seems difficult to see how positive associations would interfere with the generation of sexual arousal. However, one may wonder whether (dis)liking associations are the most probable candidates for being involved in erectile dysfunction. Preoccupations with failure in sexual performance and sexual incompetence seem more relevant, and it would therefore be important to follow-up this research with examining other attributes (e.g., success–failure) that seem more at the heart of erectile dysfunctions.

To improve the sensitivity of such study, it would be important to use a stIAT in which the

required responses during test blocks are equally distributed across both response keys. The current unequal distribution results in a response bias that interferes with the influence of participants’ associations on task performance (e.g., the example in table 2 would promote fast responding for positive and erotic items during block 3. In addition, this learned response bias will initially promote relatively slow responding for negative and erotic items in block 5, whereas the unequal distribution of required responses will probably result in a gradual switch from a left to a right key preference, independent of participants’ sex associations) [1]. To further enhance the sensitivity of the stIAT as a measure of individual differences, it would be preferable to use a fixed block order. Block order has a major influence on the magnitude of (st)IAT effects [2]. If block order is not balanced across groups (as is probably the case in this study), the influence of group is confounded with the influence of block order, which can lead to both an under and overestimation of actual between-group differences.

If indeed future research with optimal designs would show that automatic sex–failure associations are involved in erectile dysfunction, a crucial next step would then be to test their causal status by directly modifying these automatic associations [3].

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#### Statement of Authorship

##### Category 1

##### (a) Conception and Design

Peter J. de Jong

##### (b) Acquisition of Data

NA

**(c) Analysis and Interpretation of Data**  
NA

**Category 2**

**(a) Drafting the Article**

Peter J. de Jong

**(b) Revising It for Intellectual Content**  
NA

**Category 3**

**(a) Final Approval of the Completed Article**

Peter J. de Jong

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