



INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THOUGHT SUPPRESSION. THE WHITE BEAR SUPPRESSION INVENTORY: FACTOR STRUCTURE, RELIABILITY, VALIDITY AND CORRELATES

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Summary—The White Bear Suppression Inventory [WBSI; Wegner, D. M. & Zanakos, S. (1994), *Journal of Personality*, 62, 615–640] is a self-report questionnaire measuring people's general tendency to suppress unwanted negative thoughts. The current article describes two studies investigating the reliability, factor structure, validity, and correlates of the WBSI. Study 1 ($n = 172$) showed that the WBSI is a reliable instrument in terms of internal consistency and test–retest stability. Factor analyses of the WBSI revealed a 1-factor solution. Furthermore, the WBSI was found to correlate positively with measures of emotional vulnerability and psychopathological symptoms. In Study 2 ($n = 40$), the relationship between WBSI and levels of intrusive thinking was examined in more detail, using a thought suppression task. In general, results of this thought suppression experiment provided evidence for the validity of the WBSI. That is, subjects with high WBSI scores exhibited higher frequencies of unwanted intrusive thoughts than subjects with low WBSI scores. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Research in the past two decades has shown that intrusive thoughts are relatively common among normal and clinical subjects (Freeston, Ladouceur, Thibodeau & Gagnon, 1991; Purdon & Clark, 1993; Rachman & de Silva, 1978; Salkovskis & Harrison, 1984; Wells & Morrison, 1994). Given the unwanted nature of intrusive thoughts, people often attempt to suppress them. However, trying to suppress thoughts may actually make these thoughts more intrusive (e.g. Salkovskis, 1989; Wegner, 1989).

The experimental analysis of the effects of thought suppression started in 1987 when Wegner, Schneider, Carter and White (1987) published their 'white bear' experiment. The general outline of this experiment was as follows: normal subjects were assigned to one of two groups. The first group was an initial suppression group that was instructed to suppress the thought of a 'white bear' for a 5 min period. Following this, subjects were given expression instructions, i.e. they were invited to think about a white bear during a 5 min period. In the second group, termed the initial expression group, the order of instructions was reversed. That is to say, initial expression subjects first engaged in expression and later in suppression. All subjects were asked to ring a bell whenever the thought of a white bear occurred to them. Wegner and associates (1987; see also Wegner, Schneider, Knutson & McMahon, 1991; Wenzlaff, Wegner & Klein, 1991) found that subjects reported a heightened frequency of white bear thoughts when they had previously engaged in suppression. Accordingly, Wegner and co-workers concluded that suppression of unwanted thoughts leads to a rebound effect, i.e. an exacerbation of such thoughts later on.

The rebound effect has been replicated in several analogue studies. For example, using a similar design as Wegner *et al.* (1987), Clark and colleagues (Clark, Ball & Pape, 1991; Clark, Winton & Thynn, 1993) showed that suppression of a neutral thought item (i.e. 'green rabbit'), indeed, resulted in a heightened level of subsequent intrusions. In a further study by Davies and Clark

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(1992), subjects were shown a distressing movie. Again, it was found that subjects who had previously suppressed thoughts about the movie were more plagued by intrusions during a subsequent period than subjects who had not previously suppressed. Muris and Merckelbach (1991) found data to suggest that thought suppression produces rebound effects over longer time periods. Subjects were asked to read a transcription of Freud's Ratman obsession. Half of the subjects were then instructed to avoid all thoughts about this transcription during a 10 min period, while the other half were free to think about anything. After 1 week, subjects were interviewed about the frequency of thoughts concerning the transcription that they had experienced in the past week. It was found that subjects who had engaged in suppression reported more thoughts related to the Ratman transcription than control subjects. Interestingly, Cioffi and Holloway (1993) demonstrated that the rebound effect of thought suppression has an analogue in the experience of somatic discomfort. During a cold-pressor pain induction, subjects were instructed either to seek distraction from pain sensations, to monitor these sensations, or to suppress such sensations. Results revealed that suppression produced the slowest recovery from the pain. Moreover, suppression had a negative influence on the interpretation of a later somatic experience. That is, subjects who had previously suppressed their cold pressor pain rated an innocuous vibration as more unpleasant than the other subjects.

Several authors stressed the immediate counterproductive effect of thought suppression rather than its delayed rebound effect. This initial enhancement effect was observed in several laboratory studies. In an experiment by Lavy and van den Hout (1990), subjects were assigned to one of two conditions. Subjects in the suppression condition were instructed 'not to think of vehicles', whereas subjects in the control condition were free to think of anything. Results showed that subjects in the thought suppression condition had more thoughts about vehicles than subjects in the control condition. More relevant to psychopathology, Wenzlaff, Wegner and Roper (1988) found that depressed subjects exhibited a deficit in the ability to suppress unwanted negative thoughts. More specifically, results showed that the success of depressed subjects' suppression efforts was short-lived, in that even while they tried to suppress they experienced a resurgence of unwanted thoughts about a negative item (see for similar findings Conway, Howell & Giannopoulos, 1991). In another study, Wegner, Shortt, Blake and Page (1990) found that suppression of an exciting thought, i.e. the thought of sex, promotes excitement, as indexed by an elevation in skin conductance levels. Further evidence for the initial enhancement effect was provided by Salkovskis and colleagues. In a series of experiments (Salkovskis & Reynolds, 1994; Salkovskis & Campbell, 1994; Trinder & Salkovskis, 1994), they demonstrated that suppression of personally-relevant thoughts (i.e. thoughts of smoking; naturally occurring negative thoughts) was associated with increased intrusions.

Interestingly, Becker, Roth and Margraf (1994) investigated the immediate enhancement effect in patients with a generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). In that study, a group of GAD patients and a control group were asked to verbalise their stream of consciousness for two 5 min periods. During the first period, subjects of both groups received instructions 'not to think of a white bear'. During the second period, subjects of both groups were asked 'not to think of their main worry'. Results indicated that GAD patients were able to suppress thoughts of white bears just as well as control group subjects. However, GAD patients appeared to be worse at controlling thoughts of their main worry.

To sum up then, analogue as well as clinical studies provide evidence for the paradoxical effects of thought suppression. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that a number of studies have failed to obtain such effects (Kelly & Kahn, 1994; Mathews & Milroy, 1994; Merckelbach, Muris, van den Hout & de Jong, 1991; Muris, Merckelbach, van den Hout & de Jong, 1992; Roemer & Borkovec, 1994; Rutledge, Hollenberg & Hancock, 1993; Smári, Sigurjónsdóttir & Sæmundsdóttir, 1994). Nevertheless, several authors have emphasized that thought suppression is relevant to the understanding of emotional disorders. For instance, Wegner (1988, 1989, 1992) has argued that thought suppression plays a role in the etiology of obsessions. According to Wegner (1989; p.167), "an obsession can grow from nothing but the desire to suppress a thought". In other words, thought suppression may cause obsessive thinking. Likewise, other authors have proposed that thought suppression may be responsible for the development and maintenance of unwanted intrusive thinking that accompanies

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