



Chronic thought suppression and obsessionality: the relationships between the White Bear Suppression Inventory and two inventories of obsessive-compulsive symptoms

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Abstract

The relationships between chronic thought suppression measured with the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI) [Wegner, D. M., & Zanakos, S. (1994). Chronic thought suppression. *Journal of Personality*, 62, 615–640] and different aspects of obsessive-compulsive symptoms measured with the Maudsley Obsessive-Compulsive Inventory and the Obsessive-Compulsive Thoughts Checklist were investigated in a student population. It was hypothesized that (1) chronic thought suppression was more strongly related to obsessive than compulsive symptoms and (2) chronic thought suppression was more strongly related to obsessive thoughts about responsibility than other kinds of obsessions. Partial support was found for the hypotheses. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Wegner and several others have shown that thought suppression may lead to an enhancement of suppressed thoughts during or after their suppression (Salkovskis & Campbell, 1994; Wegner, Schneider, Carter & White, 1987). This led to the hypothesis that thought suppression might be one of the mechanisms that maintain intrusive thoughts in obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (see Purdon, 1999 for a review). Subsequently, Wegner and Zanakos (1994) constructed a measure of chronic thought suppression, the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI). This inventory is

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claimed to reflect stable tendencies of thought suppression. It was found to be related to measures of psychopathological symptoms, such as obsessive-compulsive symptoms and depression (Muris, Merckelbach & Horselenberg, 1996; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994). The fact that it correlates with reports of suppression efforts in thought suppression experiments has provided further support for the convergent validity of the instrument (Muris et al., 1996).

Chronic thought suppression may be more particularly related to some obsessive-compulsive symptom domains than others. Wegner and Zanakos (1994) hypothesized that chronic thought suppression should be more strongly related to obsessive than to compulsive symptoms. This hypothesis is reasonable given the assumption that thought suppression increases the frequency of suppressed intrusive thoughts and that compulsions are in turn generated by obsessions. They found support for this hypothesis in people with a high level of obsessive-compulsive symptoms.

Another related question is whether any particular obsessive thoughts are more likely than others to be related to thought suppression. An aspect of obsessive-compulsive problems that may be particularly relevant to chronic thought suppression is inflated responsibility. Salkovskis (1996) described a model where appraisal of responsibility enhances thought suppression. Salkovskis et al. (in press) define responsibility in the following way: "The belief that one has power which is pivotal to bring about or prevent subjectively crucial negative outcomes. These outcomes are perceived as essential to prevent. They may be actual, that is having consequences in the real world or at the moral level."

It is important to distinguish between inflated responsibility as a vulnerability factor and as an obsessional symptom. Salkovskis et al. (in press) distinguished between (1) responsibility attitudes and, (2) responsibility appraisals. The first refers to relatively stable beliefs and attitudes concerning personal responsibility. The second refers to attributions of responsibility for specific intrusive thoughts. A third related aspect may be obsessive thoughts about responsibility. Such obsessive thoughts might be expected to be closely related to responsibility attitudes and appraisals, but would perhaps more properly be considered as a part of obsessive-compulsive symptomatology. It may, however, be difficult to distinguish between responsibility appraisals and obsessive thoughts about responsibility. Measures have been constructed to measure inflated responsibility as beliefs or appraisals (Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group, 1997; Salkovskis et al., in press). Also in a recent inventory, the Obsessive-Compulsive Thoughts Checklist (OCTC) (Bouvard et al., 1997), one of the three factors reflects obsessive thoughts about responsibility. The other factors are concerned with thoughts about contamination and verification/perfectionism, respectively.

If beliefs of inflated responsibility are a core vulnerability factor fuelling thought suppression, it might also be expected that chronic thought suppression is more strongly related to obsessive thoughts about responsibility than to obsessive thoughts about contamination or perfectionism/verification obsessions.

The first aim of the present study was to investigate the psychometric properties of WBSI and the second was to examine the relationship between chronic thought suppression and obsessive-compulsive symptomatology. The following hypotheses were tested: (1) chronic thought suppression is more closely related to obsessions than to compulsions, and (2) chronic thought suppression is more strongly related to obsessive thoughts about responsibility than to other kinds of obsessive thoughts.

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