



PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF THOUGHT SUPPRESSION: A META-ANALYSIS OF CONTROLLED STUDIES

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ABSTRACT. *Research has shown that attempts to suppress a thought can cause an increase in the frequency of the thought. These paradoxical effects of thought suppression play a key role in cognitive-behavioral models of several emotional disorders. Laboratory studies of this phenomenon, however, have yielded mixed results; and narrative summaries of the literature have not been able to draw firm conclusions about the effects of thought suppression. We used meta-analysis to quantitatively examine the magnitude of thought suppression effects across controlled studies. Moreover, we explored whether the variability in effect sizes could be explained by methodological differences within and between studies. Results indicated a small to moderate rebound effect of thought suppression that varied in magnitude depending on the nature of the target thought and the method by which thought frequency was measured. Participants with clinical diagnoses did not show larger rebound effects than nonclinical or analogue participants, however, only a few studies included clinical samples. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for the ironic process theory of thought suppression, and avenues for future research on this phenomenon. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.*

KEY WORDS. Thought suppression, Meta-analysis, Psychopathology, Anxiety disorders.

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THE PURPOSE OF this meta-analysis is to examine the paradoxical effects of thought suppression. Below, we describe this phenomenon, a theory that has been proposed to account for the effect, and its relevance to clinical psychology. Given that results from studies on the effects of thought suppression are mixed, we identify several methodological factors that may account for the different findings.

The initial study on effects of thought suppression was Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White (1987) classic “white bear” experiment. In this study, participants who were instructed to suppress thoughts of a white bear had difficulty doing so; and subsequently reported more white bear thoughts than did participants who had not been instructed to suppress. To explain this finding, Wegner et al. (Wegner, 1994; Wegner & Erber, 1992) proposed an “ironic process” theory that posits that two mechanisms are involved in attempts to suppress thoughts. First, a conscious search for a thought to replace the to-be-suppressed (target) thought is undertaken. This “controlled distracter search” results in the choosing of a “replacement” or “distracter” thought (often a mood congruent thought), which is kept in consciousness. Simultaneously, a search for failures in suppression (the “automatic target search”) occurs. This involves an inspection of consciousness for traces of the target thought. As the controlled distracter search continues, more and more stimuli become associated with the target, and thus serve as cues for it. These cues, which are easily detected by the automatic target search, evoke more target thoughts. Ironically, the very operations used to suppress a thought work to elicit that thought.

The thought suppression phenomenon may have important implications for the understanding of psychological disorders. Indeed, paradoxical effects of thought suppression have been implicated in cognitive and cognitive-behavioral models of several disorders, including depression (Wegner, 1994), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD; Becker, Rink, Roth, & Margraf, 1998), specific phobias (Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1997), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD; Salkovskis, 1996), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Ehlers & Steil, 1995), and acute stress disorder (ASD; Harvey & Bryant, 1998a). Salkovskis’ (1996) cognitive-behavioral model of clinical obsessions is perhaps the most well-articulated theory of the role of thought suppression in psychopathology. Briefly, his account draws on observations that the content of clinical obsessions is indistinguishable from that of commonly occurring intrusive thoughts experienced by 90% of the population (Rachman & de Silva, 1978). Salkovskis (1996) proposed that unwanted thoughts develop into obsessions when they elicit suppression attempts, which, in turn result in a paradoxical increase in thought frequency.

Survey research has partially supported this notion. For example, Freeston and Ladouceur (1997) found that 76% of OCD patients reported repeated attempts to suppress their unwanted thoughts. Other studies have found that individuals with OCD (Amir, Cashman, & Foa, 1997) and ASD (Warda & Bryant, 1998) reported more attempts to suppress unwanted thoughts than did nonclinical control participants. However, the designs of these studies do not specify the direction of causality. Although the thought suppression paradox seems to be an intuitively compelling component of etiological models for a range of clinical conditions, a plausible alternative hypothesis is that thought suppression is a response to, rather than a cause of, the frequent, distressing thoughts seen in OCD, ASD, or other mental disorders.

An additional problem with the incorporation of the thought suppression paradox into models of psychopathology is the fact that studies of this phenomenon have

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