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## Thought suppression in obsessive-compulsive disorder<sup>☆</sup>

David F. Tolin<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jonathon S. Abramowitz<sup>b</sup>, Amy Przeworski<sup>c</sup>, Edna B. Foa<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Anxiety Disorders Center, The Institute of Living, 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford, CT 06106, USA*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Psychiatry and Psychology, Mayo Clinic, 200 First Street, SW, Rochester, MN 55905, USA*

<sup>c</sup> *Department of Psychology, The Pennsylvania State University, 226A Moore Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA*

<sup>d</sup> *Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety, University of Pennsylvania, 3535 Market Street Suite 600, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA*

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### Abstract

Social cognition research has indicated that attempts to suppress thoughts can lead to a paradoxical increase in the frequency of that thought. This phenomenon has been a central component of cognitive-behavioural models of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD); however, research has yet to demonstrate deficient thought suppression ability in OCD patients. We examined whether individuals with OCD (OCs) exhibit a deficit in the ability to suppress thoughts. In Experiment 1, attempted thought suppression led to a paradoxical increase in self-reported thoughts for OCs, but not for nonanxious controls (NACs) or anxious controls (ACs). In order to rule out self-report biases, in Experiment 2 we utilized a lexical decision paradigm that measured priming strength of a target word under thought suppression conditions. Results paralleled those of Experiment 1: OCs showed decreased lexical decision latency of the ‘suppressed’ thought (thought to reflect either increased priming strength or disrupted processing of nonsuppressed thoughts), thus exhibiting a paradoxical effect of thought suppression. This effect was not seen in NACs or ACs. These findings suggest that deficits in cognitive inhibitory processes may underlie the intrusive, repetitive nature of clinical obsessions. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Obsessive-compulsive disorder; Thought suppression; Cognitive processes

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-860-545-7685; fax: +1-860-545-7156.

*E-mail address:* dtolin@harthosp.org (D.F. Tolin).

## 1. Introduction

A critical feature of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is that sufferers attempt to ignore, neutralize, or suppress their intrusive thoughts (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). However, the use of such strategies is rarely successful and may even lead to increases in the frequency of intrusive thoughts. Indeed, the cognitive-behavioral model of OCD (e.g. Rachman, 1998; Salkovskis, 1996) posits that failures to control or suppress intrusive thoughts underlie the frequent and intense nature of obsessions. Specifically, this model suggests that whereas unwanted, upsetting thoughts are a universal experience, individuals with OCD (OCs) attribute irrational, negative meaning to these kinds of cognitions, and are thus motivated to suppress them. These suppression attempts lead to the paradoxical effect of increasing, rather than decreasing, the frequency of the unwanted thought.

In an early investigation of the thought suppression paradox, Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White (1987) observed that participants who were instructed to suppress thoughts of a white bear subsequently reported more white bear thoughts than did participants who had not been instructed to suppress. Increased thought frequency *during* attempts to suppress was termed the ‘immediate enhancement effect’, and increased thought frequency *after* suppression attempts had been relaxed was termed the ‘rebound effect’. Wegner’s (Wegner, 1994a; Wegner, Erber, & Zanakos, 1993) ‘ironic process’ theory suggests that attempts to suppress thoughts involve two cognitive processes: an intentional search for a distracter thought, and an automatic search for the target (suppressed) thought. Because the automatic monitoring process searches for occurrences of the target thought, it paradoxically *increases* the accessibility of that thought to consciousness. Thus, in consciously trying to suppress thoughts of a white bear, the monitoring process searches *for* white bear thoughts, thus undermining suppression attempts.

Subsequent studies of the thought suppression paradox have yielded mixed results. A comprehensive review of the thought suppression literature is beyond the scope of this paper; more information can be found in published reviews (e.g. Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2000; Purdon & Clark, 2000; Wegner, 1994a,b). In a meta-analytic review, we (Abramowitz et al., 2000) found little evidence of an immediate enhancement effect across studies (mean weighted effect size = -0.35). Contrary to Wegner’s model, across studies, participants were generally successful in suppressing thoughts. Despite the absence of an initial enhancement effect, a significant rebound effect was found (mean weighted effect size = 0.30). That is, across studies, participants who had previously suppressed a thought subsequently reported *more* occurrences of the thought after suppression instructions were withdrawn, compared to participants who had not suppressed.

Despite its mixed results, the thought suppression paradox remains a mainstay of cognitive-behavioral theories of OCD (Rachman, 1998; Salkovskis, 1996). However, thought suppression among OCs has received little empirical attention to date. Typically, experimental investigations of thought suppression have utilized samples of healthy (or unselected) undergraduate volunteers. Less frequently, clinical analogue participants selected from larger nonclinical samples have been studied (e.g. Salkovskis & Campbell, 1994). These analogue participants may be selected for high scores on measures of psychopathology, but differ from clinical samples in that they do not necessarily meet diagnostic criteria for psychiatric disorders and are not seeking treatment.

Questionnaire-based studies have shown that OCD patients and student volunteers with sub-clinical OCD symptoms report attempting to suppress their thoughts (Freeston & Ladouceur, 1997;

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