



Differentiating unwanted intrusive thoughts from thought suppression: what does the White Bear Suppression Inventory measure?

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Abstract

The factor structure and correlational validity of a German version of the White Bear Suppression Inventory (Wegner, & Zanakos, 1994). Chronic thought suppression. *Journal of Personality*, 62, 615–640 was analysed in a sample of 276 non-clinical participants. Using orthogonal rotation, a two factor solution best represented the underlying structure. One factor was interpreted as “Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts”, the other as “Thought suppression”. The full scale’s correlation with measures of depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive behaviour was largely due to the Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts factor rather than the Thought Suppression factor. The Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts factor correlated negatively with avoidant coping. Neither factor correlated with self-disclosure. The theoretical meaning of separating thought intrusions from thought suppression is discussed, leading to the recommendation of differential assessment of these constructs. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Since Wegner’s first white bear experiments (Wegner, 1989), thought suppression has become a major research area. These and later experiments suggested that, although thought suppression might initially be instigated as an attempt to clear one’s mind from unwanted thoughts, it might lead to a subsequent intrusion rebound under certain circumstances, thus making the strategy ineffective. Thought suppression has been linked to various psychological disorders, particularly

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depression and anxiety disorders like obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder (for reviews see Purdon, 1999; Rassin, Merckelbach, & Muris, 2000; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000).

Individual differences in thought suppression might account for some variation in vulnerability to psychological disorders. Wegner and Zanakos (1994) developed a 15-item self-report questionnaire, the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI), to measure a dispositional tendency to suppress unwanted thoughts. Although the WBSI was designed as a unidimensional measure, Muris, Merckelbach, and Horselenberg (1996) identified five items within the WBSI that appear to assess intrusive thinking rather than thought suppression. However, in spite of these five intrusion items, Muris et al. (1996) found the WBSI to be unidimensional.

Blumberg (2000) identified three highly intercorrelated factors underlying the WBSI, namely Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts, Thought Suppression, and Self-Distraction. Although this three-factor solution was supported by confirmatory factor analysis, the diagnostic value of differentiating self-distraction from thought suppression is questionable from a theoretical point of view, since distracting oneself from unwanted thoughts is a key strategy that is inherent in thought suppression (Wegner, 1989, pp. 58–76). Unwanted intrusive thoughts, however, can be differentiated from thought suppression. They may be a result of failed thought suppression, but they might also occur without prior efforts to suppress certain thoughts. It is also likely that unwanted intrusive thoughts are more closely connected to psychological distress than thought suppression.

In the present study, a German version of the WBSI (Fehm, Höping, & Hoyer, 2000) was used to identify any components within the WBSI. For correlational validation, additionally to those measures of psychopathology that Wegner and Zanakos (1994) used, we included measures of avoidant coping and self-disclosure in the test battery. Thought suppression should be positively related to avoidant coping and negatively related to self-disclosure (e.g. Pennebaker, 1990; Smart & Wegner, 2000).

1. Method

1.1. Sample

A sample of 202 female and 74 male participants took part in the data assessment. One hundred and seventy-three were undergraduate psychology students, and the remaining 103 participants were recruited by psychology students who attended a seminar that was conducted by one of the authors (W.H.). The average age was 25.46 years ($SD = 8.36$). Ninety-three of the participating students took part in a retest 3–6 weeks after the first testing.

1.2. Materials

Negative affect was measured with the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961) and the trait version of the State-Trait-Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, 1983). The Maudsley Obsessive-Compulsive Inventory (MOCI; Hodgson & Rachman, 1977) was used to assess obsessive-compulsive behaviour.

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