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The usefulness of the thought suppression paradigm in explaining impulsivity and aggression

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Abstract

This study investigated (1) the usefulness of the thought suppression paradigm in understanding impulsivity and aggression and (2) the relation between intrusions, suppression and other control strategies on the one hand, and psychopathology on the other. Ninety undergraduate students filled in the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI), the Thought Control Questionnaire (TCQ), the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2), five traits from the Eysenck Personality Profiler (EPP), and the Barratt Impulsivity Scale (BIS). No relationship between intrusion and suppression, and impulsivity was found. However, significant correlations between intrusion and aggression were found. Intrusion, suppression, self-punishment, and psychopathology were all correlated positively. Implications of these findings for the dynamics between intrusion, thought control, and aggression are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The young Tolstoy, or so the story goes, was standing in the corner of a room, after his brother had challenged him to stand there until he could stop thinking of white bears (Wegner, 1989). This left him standing there, puzzled, for a considerable amount of time. From this we may conclude that we do not seem to have much control over our minds, especially when it

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comes to controlling thoughts that are unwanted. The experience of unwanted, so-called intrusive thoughts is a phenomenon found in both clinical and normal populations (e.g. Rachman & De Silva, 1978; Wells & Morrison, 1994). Over 80% of the individuals in the general population experience intrusions. ‘Normal’ intrusions include thinking of cigarettes when one just quit smoking, the death of a loved one, an upcoming medical appointment, and so on. Examples of pathological intrusions are obsessions, addictions, and thought patterns characteristic of depression and panic-states (see Wegner, 1989). Pathological intrusive thoughts have been described as being more frequent, more intense, longer lasting, to produce more discomfort and to invoke more resistance (Rachman & De Silva, 1978; Salkovskis & Harrison, 1984).

What causes the transformation of normal unwanted thoughts into pathological ones? Wegner (1989) argued that trying not to think about an unwanted thought, that is thought suppression, is exactly the mechanism underlying the thought becoming more intrusive (also, for a competing psycho-biological model on the transformation of normal into pathological intrusions involving serotonin, see Katz, 1991). Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White’s (1987) ‘white-bear’ experiment sought to investigate this hypothesis. In this experiment, participants in the initial suppression condition were instructed to suppress thoughts of white bears for 5 min and express these thoughts in a second period of 5 min. For participants in the initial expression condition, this order was reversed. All participants were unable to suppress thoughts of white bears when instructed to do so, which was indicated by a mean frequency of almost seven white bear thoughts during the suppression period. Moreover, white bear thoughts were more frequent after initial suppression instructions compared to initial expression instructions. This effect was named the rebound effect: an increase in thoughts (about a white bear) after first having suppressed this thought (Wegner et al., 1987).

This research became known as the thought suppression paradigm and was originally proposed as an explanatory model of the persistent nature of obsessions found in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Hence, most contemporary experimental psychologists know the thought suppression paradigm as a model of intrusions in OCD. Since then, research on intrusive thoughts has expanded and has involved many different independent variables, included some clinical samples, has included variables such as emotional valence and personal relevance of the target thought and so on (for a meta-analysis, see Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2001). However, intrusions and thought suppression may be even broader concepts than already anticipated and may be worth investigating further. For instance, Abramowitz et al. (2001) suggest that individual differences in psychopathology, which was not included in their meta-analysis, might be a factor contributing significantly to suppression effects. Also, intrusive thoughts may have legal consequences: when intrusive thoughts become violent in nature, these thoughts might lead to aggression and dangerous situations. Thinking about smoking a cigarette can be harmful to one’s health, however, repeatedly thinking about killing your neighbour is an intrusive thought of a completely different level. One might think that violent intrusive thoughts or intrusive thoughts leading to violence would have been given much attention in psychological research. However, this is not the case. A literature search (using PsycInfo) into violence and intrusive thoughts led to a very small body of literature. The literature that was found mostly dealt with intrusive thoughts as a symptom of the *victim’s* trauma, not with intrusions as characteristics of the offender

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