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# The roles of thought suppression and metacognitive beliefs in proneness to auditory verbal hallucinations in a non-clinical sample

Simon R. Jones <sup>\*</sup>, Charles Fernyhough

*Department of Psychology, Science Laboratories, University of Durham, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK*

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## Abstract

In a non-clinical sample ( $N = 751$ ), we investigated relations among two subscales (self-reported intrusiveness of unwanted thoughts and thought suppression) of the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI), metacognitive beliefs, and proneness to auditory verbal hallucinations (AVHs). Both subscales of the WBSI were found to be related to AVH-proneness and strongly positively related to metacognitive beliefs about the uncontrollability and danger of thoughts. Regression analyses were used to test models of the relations among AVH-proneness and a range of metacognitive beliefs. When the WBSI subscale relating to the self-reported intrusiveness of unwanted thoughts was controlled for, the metacognitive style that was the strongest predictor of AVH-proneness was cognitive self-consciousness. Cognitive confidence and beliefs about the uncontrollability of thoughts were also significant predictors of AVH-proneness. These findings are used to revise existing models of the relations between metacognitive beliefs and AVHs. Implications for the management of AVHs are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Auditory verbal hallucinations; Intrusiveness of unwanted thoughts; Metacognitive beliefs; Thought suppression

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1913 343240; fax: +44 1913 343241.  
E-mail address: [s.r.jones@durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.r.jones@durham.ac.uk) (S.R. Jones).

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Thought suppression and AVHs

Despite the long documented history of auditory verbal hallucinations (AVHs), the cognitive mechanisms underlying why individuals report hearing speech in the absence of any external stimulation remain poorly understood. One prominent model of AVHs proposed by Hoffman (1986) suggested that it was the “experiential unintendedness” (p. 503) of a thought that led it to be experienced with “hallucinatory otherness” (p. 503). Notwithstanding problems with this model (e.g., Akins & Dennett, 1986), it seems uncontroversial that these experiences are somehow intrusive, arising unbidden with no conscious volition on the part of the AVH-hearer.

Some recent research offers a potentially fruitful new way of characterizing this aspect of AVHs. Wegner (2002) has investigated the relation between conscious volition and the experience of ownership of mental phenomena, noting that the tendency to attribute unintended thoughts to other agents is not limited to conditions such as schizophrenia. The plausibility of this suggestion is strengthened by recent findings that hallucinations are relatively prevalent in the normal population (e.g., Tien, 1991). Posey and Losch (1983) found that 71% of college students reported some experience with brief, auditory hallucinations of the voice type in wakeful situations. It is hence possible that research into individual differences in proneness to AVHs in non-clinical populations will help us understand the cognitive mechanisms behind AVHs in pathological conditions.

Morris and Wegner (2000), in an unpublished study, tested the hypothesis that healthy individuals’ thoughts that are inconsistent with their current stream of consciousness may be experienced as words spoken by another. This was done through encouraging participants to suppress thoughts, defined by Wegner (1992) as “the intentional conscious removal of a thought from subsequent conscious attention” (p. 194). This process of attempting to suppress a thought has been shown to, paradoxically, cause the thought to intrude into consciousness in a manner that is unexpected and inconsistent with the current task (Salkovkis & Campbell, 1994; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987). As Dostoyevsky noted, if one sets oneself the task of not thinking of a white bear, “the cursed thing will come to mind every minute” (cited in Wegner, 1992, p. 193). Thus it would appear that the thought suppression paradigm is an ideal tool to induce intrusive, unintended thoughts of the sort Hoffman (1986) postulated to be at the root of AVHs.

In Morris and Wegner’s (2000) experiment, participants were asked to listen to ‘subliminal messages’ over headphones. In fact, they only heard the sounds of unintelligible voices recorded from a cafeteria. Participants were then asked to try not to think about a certain topic (such as a car or a mountain) whilst they wrote their thoughts down. A control group was told to think of one of the same topics on purpose. The participants were then asked to judge the degree to which the ‘subliminal messages’ had influenced their thoughts. Those who had been instructed to suppress certain words were more likely to say the thoughts came from the messages. Wegner (2002) concluded from this that suppression of a thought can create the experience that the thought is coming from “somewhere outside oneself” (p. 88).

Although Morris and Wegner’s (2000) experiment remains unpublished, its theoretical thrust and preliminary findings can be used to generate a number of testable hypotheses. Firstly, it can be hypothesized that the thoughts that intrusively rebound into consciousness as a conse-

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