

Why did the white bear return? Obsessive–compulsive symptoms and attributions for unsuccessful thought suppression

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Abstract

The current study examined the nature and consequences of attributions about unsuccessful thought suppression. Undergraduate students with either high ($n = 67$) or low ($n = 59$) levels of obsessive–compulsive symptoms rated attributions to explain their unsuccessful thought suppression attempts. We expected that self-blaming attributions and attributions ascribing importance to unwanted thoughts would predict more distress and greater recurrence of thoughts during time spent monitoring or suppressing unwanted thoughts. Further, we expected that these attributions would mediate the relationship between obsessive–compulsive symptom levels and the negative thought suppression outcomes (distress and thought recurrence). Structural equation models largely confirmed the hypotheses, suggesting that attributions may be an important factor in explaining the consequences of thought suppression. Implications are discussed for cognitive theories of obsessive–compulsive disorder and thought suppression.

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Introduction

Current cognitive–behavioral theories of obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) suggest that obsessions arise from misinterpretations of the importance and personal significance of unwanted thoughts (Rachman, 1997; Salkovskis, 1998). The majority of the population experiences unwanted thoughts and images occasionally (i.e., thoughts of driving a car off the road or dropping one’s baby), but dismisses these thoughts as being harmless anomalies (Rachman & de Silva, 1978). However, individuals at risk for developing OCD are believed to resist unwanted thoughts strongly, yet paradoxically find getting rid of these thoughts nearly impossible (Rachman & de Silva, 1978). Understandably, this experience can be distressing, and people make different attributions to explain why the thought returned. Some people may make benign attributions (“I’m just tired today”), while others make more negative attributions (“This thought must have special significance since it keeps returning!”). The current study investigated attributions that individuals at risk for

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OCD make about their unsuccessful attempts to resist unwanted thoughts, based on the hypothesis that certain negative attributions would predict distress and the recurrence of intrusive thoughts.

Among the strategies people employ to resist unwanted thoughts, ‘thought suppression’ has received substantial attention in the literature (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). During thought suppression, persons attempting to suppress thoughts sometimes ironically end up thinking more about those thoughts, particularly when encountering other simultaneous cognitive demands (for a review, see Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Notably, individuals with OCD attempt thought suppression more frequently than non-anxious individuals do (Amir, Cashman, & Foa, 1997) and as a result may be more vulnerable to the unintended increases in frequency of unwanted thoughts and accompanying distress. Consistent with these suggestions, cognitive-behavioral theories of OCD have hypothesized that thought suppression is likely to be a frequently used—but maladaptive—approach, which contributes to the etiology and maintenance of the disorder (Rachman, 1997, 1998; Salkovskis, 1985, 1989, 1998).

Recently, several researchers have explored how thought suppression might have maladaptive effects in OCD (Purdon, 2004; Tolin, Abramowitz, Hamlin, Foa, & Synodi, 2002). They have proposed that the recurrence of unwanted thoughts despite suppression efforts could serve to enhance negative attributions (i.e., “This thought kept returning despite my suppression attempts; therefore, it must have been important.”) This approach contends that the return of a thought is not necessarily a problem by itself, but can become harmful due to the attributions individuals make. Therefore, certain attributions for unsuccessful suppression attempts are believed to enhance distress, obsessive beliefs and suppression effort. This proposal offers a plausible mechanism to explain why the findings for recurrence of thoughts after suppression are so divergent across studies and across suppression attempts by the same individual.

In an innovative series of studies, Purdon and her colleagues examined interpretations¹ of thought recurrences after suppression attempts (Markowitz & Purdon, 2004, as cited in Purdon, 2004, 2001; Purdon, Rowa, & Antony, 2005). They found that for both non-clinical participants (Purdon, 2001) and participants with OCD (Purdon et al., 2005) interpretations were important predictors of distress. Specifically, participants who endorsed interpretations that thought recurrences demonstrated undesirable personal characteristics or predicted future negative events reported more discomfort than those who did not report such interpretations. Moreover, Belloch, Morillo, and Gimenez (2004) and Markowitz and Purdon (2004, as cited in Purdon, 2004) have also found higher discomfort following negative interpretations of thought recurrences after suppression attempts. Taken together, these findings suggest that interpretations about suppression attempts can have serious consequences for distress after thought recurrences.

The current study built on this exciting earlier work by focusing on attributions for unsuccessful thought suppression. Attributions are important to study because the perceived reason *why* a thought recurred (i.e., the attribution) may have additional consequences beyond those of the *meaning* given to a recurring thought (i.e., the interpretation). For example, a thought interpreted as signifying personal immorality may be downplayed if a person attributes its return as being due to an external factor (e.g., “My friend was just talking about that topic, no wonder the thought returned.”). We investigated three factors that we believe are important for understanding the attributions individuals make for unsuccessful thought suppression, and the emotional and cognitive consequences that follow these attributions. First, we examined whether the type of attributions made for unsuccessful thought suppression explains differences between individuals high versus low in OCD symptoms in their reactions to unwanted thoughts. Second, we evaluated whether the type of thought that is the target of suppression influences the type of attributions that are made. Finally, we tested whether the thought suppression instructions individuals receive (i.e., either to suppress or to monitor their thoughts) affect the attributions they make.

Attributions may help explain why people with high levels of OCD symptoms have difficulties with the return of unwanted thoughts (Purdon, 2004). Purdon and Clark (1999) suggest that people with OCD symptoms may attribute unsuccessful control attempts to undesirable personality characteristics or threatening qualities of the thought, and Tolin et al. (2002) found that individuals with OCD endorsed relatively more internal (but not external) attributions after suppression when compared with non-anxious

¹We use “interpretation” to refer to the meaning or significance of a recurring thought, whereas “attribution” is used to ascribe a causal explanation for why the thought recurred.

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