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## Appraisal and control of sexual and non-sexual intrusive thoughts in university students

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### Abstract

This study examined differences in the appraisal and thought control strategies associated with the perceived control of unwanted sexual and non-sexual intrusive thoughts. Eleven appraisal dimensions, subjective physiological arousal and 10 thought control strategies were measured in 171 university students who were administered the Revised Obsessive Intrusions Inventory-Sex Version, a self-report measure of unwanted intrusive thoughts. Thought-action fusion (TAF) likelihood was a significant unique predictor of the perceived controllability of respondents' most upsetting sexual and non-sexual intrusive thought. Moreover greater subjective physiological arousal was a significant predictor of reduced control over sexual intrusions, whereas worry that one might act on an intrusive thought and greater effort to control the intrusion were significant unique predictors of the control of non-sexual intrusive thoughts. Various thought control strategies were more often used in response to non-sexual than sexual cognitions. The results are discussed in terms of the differential role of various appraisal processes in the control of unwanted sexual and non-sexual thoughts. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Obsessive–compulsive disorder; Intrusive thoughts; Cognitive theory; Thought control; Thought-action fusion

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## 1. Introduction

Unwanted intrusive thoughts were first defined by Rachman (1981) as repetitive thoughts, images or impulses that are unacceptable, uncontrollable, have an internal origin and interrupt ongoing activity. Although they occur naturally in the general population (Rachman & de Silva, 1978; Parkinson & Rachman, 1981; Salkovskis & Harrison, 1984; Clark & de Silva, 1985; Freeston, Ladouceur, Thibodeau & Gagnon, 1991; Freeston & Ladouceur, 1993; Purdon & Clark, 1993), cognitive intrusions with ego-dystonic content, such as thoughts of situations or actions that involve personally revolting acts of sex, aggression, harm, dirt, disease and contamination, have been of particular interest to researchers of obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD) because of their similarity to the content of clinical obsessions. Two recent cognitive theories of obsessions, one proposed by Salkovskis (1985, 1989, 1996) and Salkovskis, Richards and Forrester (1995) and the other by Rachman (1997, 1998), assert that clinical obsessions have their origin in the normal unwanted intrusive thoughts found in the general population. What distinguishes the unwanted cognitive intrusions of the non-clinical person from the clinical obsessions of the individual suffering from OCD is the meaning or appraisal associated with the intrusion. However the cognitive theories of Salkovskis, Rachman and others differ in which appraisal processes they consider central to the pathogenesis of obsessions (Clark & Purdon, 1993; Salkovskis, 1996; Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group, 1997; Rachman, 1993, 1997).

Salkovskis (1996), for example, considers two processes to be critical in the escalation of normal intrusions into clinical obsessions; (a) the interpretation of intrusive thoughts as an indication of responsibility for harm or its prevention toward self or others and (b) the subsequent effort to neutralize this inflated sense of responsibility through direct thought control strategies. Rachman (1997, 1998) views the catastrophic misinterpretation of the personal significance of unwanted intrusive thoughts as the appraisal process most likely to cause an increase in the range and threatening nature of the intrusion. A specific process that can inflate the significance of an intrusion, referred to as thought-action fusion (TAF), is a cognitive bias involving an interpretation of the unwanted thought as morally or realistically equivalent to its behavioral manifestation (Rachman, 1993; Shafran, Thordarson & Rachman, 1996). Previously we have argued that appraisals about the importance of controlling an unwanted intrusion and the perceived consequences of failing to exercise complete thought control are critical in the development of persistent intrusive thoughts and obsessions (Clark, 1989; Clark & Purdon, 1993). The Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group (1997) have described a number of other beliefs and appraisals that may be important in distinguishing obsessions including overimportance, overestimation of threat, intolerance of uncertainty, perfectionism and fixity of beliefs.

A number of empirical studies have examined the relationship between the appraisal of unwanted intrusive thoughts and their frequency. One of the most consistent findings to emerge from this literature is that the less control individuals believe they have over an intrusive thought, the more frequent it intrudes into consciousness (Parkinson & Rachman, 1981; Salkovskis & Harrison, 1984; Clark & de Silva, 1985; Niler & Beck, 1989; Purdon & Clark, 1994a). Other appraisal dimensions found to be associated with an increased frequency and/or uncontrollability of unwanted intrusions include emotional intensity, unpleasantness,

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