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# The white bear suppression inventory: revisiting its factor structure

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## Abstract

The white bear suppression inventory [Wegner, D. M., & Zanakos, S. (1994). Chronic thought suppression. *Journal of Personality*, 62, 615–640] was designed as a self-report measure of people's chronic tendency to suppress thoughts. In the present study, maximum likelihood factor analyses ( $n = 456$  and  $459$ ) revealed three correlated factors: unwanted intrusive thoughts, thought suppression, and self-distraction (to avoid thoughts). Gender differences were found for the second and third factors, with women more likely to endorse these cognitive avoidance strategies. The implications of these three factors for interpretation of the full scale are considered. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Suppression; Defense mechanisms; Emotionality; Personality; Factor structure; Self-report questionnaire; Sex differences

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## 1. Introduction

In response to anxiety-producing thoughts, some people may be more prone than others to cope with these thoughts by attempting to push them out of consciousness. The process of thought avoidance is difficult at best, and suppressing a thought may cause this thought to be deeply activated and highly accessible (Wegner & Smart, 1997). Because of this accessibility, attempting to suppress an exciting thought can often backfire, leaving one with an enduring

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preoccupation with that thought. For example, following a period of instructed suppression in a laboratory (e.g., “don’t think about a white bear”), experimental participants reported a “rebound” of this previously unwanted thought (Wegner, Schneider, Carter & White, 1987). This rebound can be so intense that it resembles an obsession. People who chronically use thought suppression as a coping strategy should experience the intrusive recurrence of, and a preoccupation with, some unwanted thoughts.

To develop a context-free scale that would enable researchers to identify people more prone to suppress thoughts in their daily lives, Wegner and Zanakos (1994) used successive factor-analytic procedures to generate 15 self-report items measuring obsession, thought intrusion, and attempts to remove thoughts from consciousness (see Table 1). Responses to each of these 15 statements range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and are summed to yield a total combined suppression score between 15 and 75. This scale (the white bear suppression inventory; WBSI) had very good internal consistency and test–retest stability. Furthermore, the scale was shown to have good predictive and convergent validity, correlating with measures of obsessional thinking, anxiety, depression, and sensitization. Muris, Merckelbach and Horselenberg (1996) demonstrated that experimental participants with high WBSI scores reported a greater rebound effect (i.e., more unwanted intrusive thoughts) following a thought suppression task than did participants with low WBSI scores.

The two studies on the reliability and validity of the WBSI (Muris et al., 1996; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994) are also the only two studies published to date that have analyzed the underlying structure of the WBSI. Both of these analyses have concluded that only one underlying factor was present. However, Muris and his colleagues analyzed principal

Table 1

Standardized regression coefficients for three-factor solution (maximum likelihood exploratory analysis, PROMAX rotation)

| White bear suppression inventory items                                     | Factor I | Factor II | Factor III |
|--|----------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Factor 1: “Unwanted intrusive thoughts”</i>                             |          |           |            |
| 3. I have thoughts that I cannot stop.                                     | 0.80     | −0.13     | 0.05       |
| 4. There are images that come to mind that I cannot erase.                 | 0.77     | −0.06     | −0.04      |
| 9. There are thoughts that keep jumping into my head.                      | 0.70     | 0.01      | −0.02      |
| 5. My thoughts frequently return to one idea.                              | 0.60     | 0.04      | −0.07      |
| 6. I wish I could stop thinking of certain things.                         | 0.53     | 0.27      | 0.05       |
| 7. Sometimes my mind races so fast I wish I could stop it.                 | 0.51     | −0.09     | 0.17       |
| 2. Sometimes I wonder why I have the thoughts I do.                        | 0.42     | 0.21      | 0.06       |
| 15. There are many thoughts that I have that I don’t tell anyone.          | 0.41     | 0.11      | 0.06       |
| <i>Factor 2: “Thought suppression”</i>                                     |          |           |            |
| 11. There are things that I try not to think about.                        | −0.02    | 0.91      | −0.02      |
| 1. There are things I prefer not to think about.                           | −0.04    | 0.61      | −0.04      |
| 14. I often have thoughts that I try to avoid.                             | 0.20     | 0.55      | 0.12       |
| 8. I always try to put problems out of mind.                               | −0.07    | 0.30      | 0.15       |
| <i>Factor 3: “Self-distraction”</i>  |          |           |            |
| 13. I often do things to distract myself from my thoughts.                 | −0.03    | 0.02      | 0.94       |
| 10. Sometimes I stay busy just to keep thoughts from intruding on my mind. | 0.07     | 0.04      | 0.67       |
| 12. Sometimes I really wish I could stop thinking.                         | 0.29     | 0.06      | 0.33       |

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