



## Voluntary involuntariness: Thought suppression and the regulation of the experience of will

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### Abstract

Participants were asked to carry out a series of simple tasks while following mental control instructions. In advance of each task, they either suppressed thoughts of their intention to perform the task, concentrated on such thoughts, or monitored their thoughts without trying to change them. Suppression resulted in reduced reports of intentionality as compared to monitoring, and as compared to concentration. There was a weak trend for suppression to enhance reported intentionality for a repetition of the action carried out after suppression instructions had been discontinued.

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### 1. Introduction

Can we intend not to intend? Try not to try? Voluntarily behave involuntarily? At first blush, these possibilities sound paradoxical if not absurd, more like philosophers' puzzles than questions of relevance to scientific psychology. However, it is possible to frame these questions in a way that does make sense, and further, in a way that promises to explain some previously puzzling phenomena. The capacity of the will to *cancel itself* may underlie phenomena in which people experience involuntariness for actions despite external indications that the action has arisen voluntarily. To test this possibility, the present study examined whether trying not to think about one's intention can induce an experience of involuntariness for the intended action.

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### 1.1. Experienced involuntariness

The feeling that an action is “happening” rather than that one is “doing it” can occur under a variety of conditions. People can experience such involuntariness when they are performing complicated, lengthy, goal-directed actions, and even when they are fully able to report the conscious goal of the action. Experiences of involuntariness occur regularly in hypnosis (Gorassini & Perlini, 1988; Kihlstrom, 1985; Kirsch & Lynn, 1999), for example, and have been considered a signal characteristic of the hypnotic state (Lynn, Rhue, & Weekes, 1990). Hypnosis may not always prompt the occurrence of a suggested behavior (e.g., the person’s arm rising), but it regularly yields experiences of involuntariness when such behavior occurs (i.e., the person feels the arm rising without conscious will).

Involuntariness is also characteristic of several unusual phenomena classed as *automatisms*. People report reduced or absent experiences of conscious will in trance channeling (Brown, 1997), spirit possession (Boddy, 1994), automatic writing (Koutstaal, 1992; Zusne & Jones, 1989), table-turning (Carpenter, 1875), water dowsing (Vogt & Hyman, 1959), and other automatisms such as Ouija-board spelling and pendulum divining (Ansfield & Wegner, 1996; Spitz, 1997). There are also circumstances leading people to experience enhanced conscious will for events or actions over which they have no demonstrable control (Langer, 1975; Thompson, Armstrong, & Thomas, 1998; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999). Such circumstantial variation in experienced voluntariness, both its reduction and its enhancement, suggests that the experience of conscious will is not an infallible indicator of the conscious causation of the action. Rather, experiences of involuntariness or voluntariness may be better understood as the outputs of a mental process that estimates degrees of *apparent* mental causation.

What then drives these estimates? The early insight of Hume in *A Treatise on Human Nature* (Hume, 1888) was that the “constant union” and “inference of the mind” that underlies the perception of causality between physical events must also give rise to perceived causality in “actions of the mind.” Drawing on this idea, the theory of *apparent mental causation* (Wegner, 2002; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999) suggests that the experience we have of causing our own actions arises whenever we draw a causal inference linking our thought to our action. When thought seems to cause action, we experience will. Principles guiding such inferences can be drawn from principles of attribution and inference that govern cause perception more generally (Gilbert, 1995; Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1972; Michotte, 1963).

According to this theory, when a thought appears in consciousness just prior to an action, is consistent with the action, and is not accompanied by salient alternative causes of the action, we experience conscious will and ascribe authorship to ourselves for the action. In contrast, when thoughts do not arise with such *priority*, *consistency*, and *exclusivity*, we experience the ensuing actions as less willed or voluntary. In essence, this theory suggests that voluntariness is experienced primarily when thought about action is the primary candidate for having caused the action that is observed.

In commonplace actions, we often do have thoughts of action that are consistent, prior, and exclusive. We may think of going into the bedroom before we do so, for example, so when we indeed go, we quickly conclude that we did it. If we were not thinking of going into that room but nonetheless found ourselves standing there looking at the bed, the lack of consistency between our thought and action would undermine our feeling of conscious will for the action. If we thought of

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