

NOVEL INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS: WHAT MAKES THEM UPSETTING?

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Introduction

- ❖ Obsessions = unwanted, intrusive thoughts, images, or impulses.
 - ❖ e.g., urges to hurt someone; unwanted sexual or religious thoughts; thoughts of being contaminated by germs.
- ❖ Cognitive theories of obsessions suggest that obsessions develop from commonly occurring intrusive thoughts, which have the same content as obsessions but are less frequent and upsetting (Rachman, 1997, 1998; Salkovskis, 1985).
 - ❖ Intrusive thoughts may develop into obsessions if their meaning is *overinterpreted* (e.g., “Having this unwanted thought must mean I’m a terrible person”).
- ❖ Less is known about why only *certain* intrusive thoughts become obsessions (i.e., why don’t all intrusive thoughts develop into highly distressing obsessions?).
 - ❖ Theory and preliminary research have provided some ideas.
 - ❖ Rachman (1998) suggested that intrusive thoughts that have more significance for the individual’s value system are more likely to become obsessions for vulnerable individuals.
 - ❖ Purdon and Clark (1999) further suggested that a thought that contradicts any important or valued aspect of self would be particularly upsetting.
 - ❖ Preliminary research supports these ideas – individuals asked to report on the most upsetting intrusive thought they had experienced also reported that this thought contradicted important and valued self-attributes to a greater degree than individuals asked to report on their least upsetting intrusive thought (Rowa & Purdon, 2001; Rowa & Purdon, in press).
 - ❖ Thus, thoughts that contradict important aspects of self seem more likely to become the focus of misinterpretations.

- ❖ However, it is possible that the experience of having repetitive intrusive thoughts (especially over long periods of time) could cause a person to focus on certain aspects of self.
- ❖ For example, if a person had repetitive aggressive urges, this might cause them to focus on their kindness or morality *as a result* of experiencing these thoughts.
- ❖ The direction of the relationship between contradiction of self and distress associated with thoughts was the focus of the current study.

Aims

- ❖ To examine whether the degree to which a thought contradicts a valued aspect of self is a contributing factor to its distress level, rather than the reverse explanation (i.e., that having an upsetting intrusive thought makes people focus on certain aspects of self).
- ❖ To examine this question, participants were asked to select and report on intrusive thoughts that they have *never* had before.
- ❖ **Hypothesis:** Individuals reporting on novel, upsetting intrusive thoughts will find occurrences of these thoughts in a monitoring task more anxiety provoking, and they will rate these thoughts as contradicting valued aspects of self to a greater degree than individuals asked to report on novel, less upsetting intrusive thoughts.

Method

Participants:

- ❖ 29 individuals asked to select and report on an intrusive thought they had never experienced, but would find *very upsetting* if it came into their mind (mean age = 20; 76% female).
- ❖ 29 individuals asked to select and report on an intrusive thought they had never experienced, but would find *minimally upsetting* if it came into their mind (mean age = 20; 72% female).

- ❖ These groups were not significantly different in age or gender distribution.

Procedure:

- ❖ Participants completed the Padua Inventory (see below), then read a list of intrusive thoughts from the Revised Obsessional Intrusions Inventory (Purdon & Clark, 1994).
- ❖ After reading this list, participants were randomly assigned to select a thought from the list that they had *never* had before, but if they were to have it out of the blue, they would find it either *very upsetting* or *not that upsetting*.

- ❖ Participants rated the perceived distress associated with the thought they selected.
- ❖ Participants completed a mood measure, visualized their target thought for 30 seconds, and then monitored occurrences of their target thought over a 4-minute interval while seated at a computer.

- ❖ After the monitoring interval, participants rated:
 - ❖ Anxiety caused by thought occurrences.
 - ❖ Natural, active suppression of their target thought.
 - ❖ Motivation to suppress their target thought.
 - ❖ Their mood again.
- ❖ Finally, participants completed the Dimensions of Self questionnaire (see Measures for a description).

Measures

- ❖ Dimensions of Self (Rowa & Purdon, 2001)
 - ❖ This questionnaire asks participants to rate various self-attributes in terms of how important they are to the person’s sense of self.
 - ❖ Participants are also asked to rank order their top three most important self-attributes.
 - ❖ After rating self-attributes, participants are then asked to provide contradiction ratings of how much the target thought goes against the self-attributes listed. These ratings are made on a 0 to 4 likert scale (0 = not at all, 4 = extremely).
 - ❖ Preliminary analyses suggest that this measure is temporally stable, with importance ratings remaining quite consistent over time (correlations from .34 to .91 with all but one correlation significant at the $p < .01$ level).

- ❖ Padua Inventory – Washington State University Revision (PI – WSUR; Burns, Keortge, Formea, &

Sternberger, 1996).

- ❖ This is a 39-item self-report inventory of obsessive and compulsive symptoms with good psychometric properties (Burns, Keortge, Formea, & Sternberger, 1996).

- ❖ Thought monitoring questions

- ❖ Participants rated anxiety, degree of suppression, and motivation to suppress on a 0 to 100 visual analog scale.

Results

Contradiction of Self

- ❖ Groups did not differ in their total importance ratings across all attributes ($t = .19, p = .85$), or in the relative importance of the attribute rated as most important ($t = -.87, p = .39$).
- ❖ However, groups did differ on total contradiction ratings ($t = 4.28, p < .001$), contradiction ratings of the top three most important attributes ($t = 3.88, p < .001$), and contradiction ratings of attributes rated as important ($t = 3.87, p < .001$) (see Table 1).

Thought Monitoring Experiment

- ❖ Groups did not differ in the frequency of target thought occurrences during the monitoring experiment (7.0 vs. 8.1; $t = -.71, p = .48$).
- ❖ Individuals asked to monitor an upsetting intrusive thought reported that the thought yielded greater anxiety during the task than those monitoring their least upsetting thought ($t = 3.00, p < .01$).
- ❖ The most upsetting thought group also reported greater motivation to suppress these unwanted thoughts during the monitoring task ($t = 2.90, p < .01$), and a trend towards putting forth more suppression effort ($t = 1.72, p = .09$).
- ❖ A 2 (group) by 2 (mood change) repeated measures ANOVA with mood change as a within subjects variable revealed that groups did not differ in mood scores before or after the thought monitoring experiment, but the interaction of group and mood change was significant ($F(1, 56) = 4.35, p < .05$).
- ❖ Individuals reporting on an *upsetting* thought had a slight decrease in mood across the task, while individuals reporting on a *minimally upsetting* thought showed a slight increase in mood across the task.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for dependent measures.

	Upsetting Thought Group (<i>N</i> = 29)		Less Upsetting Thought Group (<i>N</i> = 29)	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Total importance ratings (DIM)	26.03	11.22	14.38	9.47
Contradiction ratings (attributes rated as important)	2.52	1.06	1.41	1.04
Anxiety during task	51.45	26.16	29.57	28.83
Suppression	52.79	30.48	40.00	26.12
Motivation to suppress	57.97	27.03	37.41	27.01

Note. Contradiction = degree to which the thought contradicted important self-attributes.

DIM = Dimensions of Self

Discussion

- ❖ Results from this study suggest that there is a relationship between the degree to which the thought contradicts valued aspects of self and the distress caused by a thought, consistent with the ideas of Rachman (1998) and Purdon and Clark (1999) as well as previous research (Rowa & Purdon, 2001).
 - ❖ This relationship was true even for thoughts people had never experienced before.
 - ❖ Therefore, it seems more likely that the degree to which a thought contradicts valued aspects of self contributes to the distress associated with the thought, rather than upsetting thoughts causing people to focus on various aspects of self.
 - ❖ With repetitive obsessions found in OCD, a reciprocal relationship between these variables may exist, with contradiction of self initially causing a person to focus on certain intrusive thoughts, and then the experience of the unwanted thought reinforcing one’s self-view.

- ❖ This study also provides evidence for other aspects of the cognitive theory of obsessions.
 - ❖ Theory suggests that an individual who experiences an upsetting intrusive thought and appraises this thought negatively will then be motivated to suppress this unwanted thought (Salkovskis, 1985).
 - ❖ Unfortunately, failed suppression efforts are often linked with a decline in mood (Purdon & Clark, 2001), which in turn is thought to be associated with an increase in obsessions (Rachman, 1997).
 - ❖ In the current study, more upsetting novel thoughts were the focus of more urges to suppress and more suppression effort, and individuals monitoring these thoughts also experienced more anxiety during the monitoring task and a decline in mood through the task.
 - ❖ This pattern occurred even though this experiment was the first time they had experienced this particular thought.

- ❖ Limitations of the current study:

- ❖ There was an unbalanced distribution of thought content across groups, with more individuals in the most upsetting thought group selecting an aggressive thought, while the least upsetting thought group selected a variety of intrusive thoughts.
 - ❖ However, when analyses were rerun simple examining aggressive thoughts across groups, results remained consistent with results from the total group.

Conclusions

- ❖ Novel, never experienced intrusive thoughts that participants felt would be upsetting to have in real life were rated as contradicting important aspects of self to a greater degree than less upsetting novel intrusive thoughts.
- ❖ This provides support for the proposition that the degree the thought contradicts self contributes to the distress associated with the thought, rather than the reverse explanation.
- ❖ In other words, thought that contradict one’s sense of self may be more likely to become the focus of biased appraisals for people vulnerable to OCD.