

## Thought–action fusion: Review of the literature and future directions

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### Abstract

Thought–action fusion (TAF) is the tendency for individuals to assume that certain thoughts either imply the immorality of their character or increase the likelihood of catastrophic events. The burgeoning literature on TAF is reviewed. It is not clear whether TAF refers to a specific appraisal style, a more enduring belief, or a combination of both. Inconsistent definitions of magical thinking have hindered better understanding of the relationship between TAF and magical thinking. Much work remains to be done to improve assessment and measurement of TAF. TAF is associated with tendencies towards obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and may contribute to its symptoms. However, the literature investigating TAF and other variables implicated in OCD remains inconclusive. It is suggested that TAF is not specific to OCD, but also prevalent in other anxiety disorders. TAF appears to be moderately related to depressive symptoms and a similar bias may contribute to preoccupations in eating disorders. TAF is also associated with the presence of psychological disorders in children and adolescents. Educational and cognitive therapy approaches to reduce TAF and consequent symptoms are discussed, and suggestions for further research made.

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## 1. Introduction

Thought–action fusion (TAF) is one of a number of cognitive variables that have been extensively researched in relation to obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and other anxiety disorders in recent years. The impetus for the increasing attention paid to cognitive constructs in OCD has been a dissatisfaction with the traditional concept of OCD as a condition in which compulsions develop with the main purpose of alleviating anxiety. Clinical experience and research have repeatedly indicated that underlying beliefs and appraisals are often intervening factors between obsessions and compulsions and that they often play a role in maintaining OCD. It has been suggested that understanding the role of TAF may lead to more focused or effective psychological interventions for OCD and other disorders (Rachman, 1997).

TAF refers to the belief that thoughts and actions are inextricably linked. “Moral” TAF is the belief that unacceptable thoughts are morally equivalent to overt unacceptable actions. “Likelihood” TAF refers to the belief that certain thoughts cause particular events, or at least increase the likelihood of such events occurring. Two domains of likelihood TAF have been proposed: “likelihood self,” which refers to events occurring to oneself, and “likelihood others,” which refers to events occurring to others, as a consequence of one’s thoughts.

Although the term “thought–action fusion” is recent, it was preceded by related concepts of magic and magical thinking, which were used by anthropologists, classical psychoanalytic writers and authors such as Piaget. The contemporary TAF concept arose from Rachman’s (1993) and Salkovskis’ (1985) theories and clinical observations of patients with obsessional thinking, where it was noticed that OCD patients assume that a “thought is like an action” (Salkovskis, 1985, p. 574). Shafran, Thordarson, and Rachman (1996) first formally introduced and investigated the concept. They developed a measure of TAF that has been incorporated into most subsequent research.

This review aims to summarize the extant literature on TAF. Conceptual issues will be explored and measurement of the concept of TAF reviewed. Studies of TAF in relation to OCD, other psychopathology and special populations will be examined. The development of TAF beliefs will be reviewed, and this will be followed by the discussion of potential therapy interventions to reduce TAF-related symptoms.

## 2. Conceptual issues

### 2.1. *Unity of the TAF construct*

Although TAF moral and TAF likelihood appear to be relatively distinct constructs, Rachman and Shafran (1999) have outlined how they might be intertwined. For instance, individuals who believe their thoughts have increased the likelihood of a negative event occurring to someone else, will often also form conclusions about their own morality for having thought something that could be harmful to others. Shafran et al. (1996) reported that the TAF moral and TAF likelihood factors of their TAF scale were correlated ( $r=0.44$ ) and a similar strength of association has been reported by Rassin, Merckelbach, Muris, and Schmidt (2001;  $r=0.32$ ). Thus, TAF moral and TAF likelihood appear to be distinct but related constructs. Within TAF likelihood, there is preliminary evidence from non-clinical samples suggesting that likelihood self and likelihood others are distinct constructs (Rassin, Merckelbach et al., 2001). Their conceptual distinction may prove useful for future research.

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