



## Rumination's effect on suicide ideation through grit and gratitude: A path analysis study



Evan J. White\*, Morganne A. Kraines, Raymond P. Tucker, LaRicka R. Wingate, Tony T. Wells, DeMond M. Grant

Oklahoma State University, 116 North Murray Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA

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### ABSTRACT

The current study documents the relationship between suicide ideation, grit and gratitude, and rumination subtypes of brooding and reflection. The relationship between rumination and suicide ideation has been well documented and previous research has demonstrated that grit and gratitude are protective factors against suicide. We hypothesized that both subtypes of rumination would have an indirect effect on suicide ideation through levels of grit and gratitude. Results of a conditional indirect effects path analysis indicated that brooding was indirectly related to suicide ideation through gratitude. Brooding interacted with grit such that it only predicted suicide ideation at low levels of grit. Reflection interacted with gratitude to predict levels of grit. Results suggest that brooding may impact suicide risk and resilience through its effect on gratitude, indicating important cognitive-behavioral targets for suicide prevention strategies. These results extend the literature about the relationship between well known risk factors for suicide and protective factors.

### 1. Introduction

Each year, over 40,000 individuals die from suicide in the United States, making suicide a leading cause of death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Further, for individuals from 11 to 24 years-old, suicide remains the third leading cause of death in this age group (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Therefore, examining factors that contribute to suicide risk remains an imperative research area to examine. Specifically, O'Connor and Nock (2014) suggest that suicidal behavior likely develops from a combination of risk and resiliency factors. The current study examines how a particular risk factor for suicide (i.e., rumination) may contribute indirectly to the risk for suicide ideation through constructs that are supported as protective factors.

Research has implicated rumination as a transdiagnostic risk factor for the development of psychopathology (e.g., McLaughlin and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011) and posited that it is related to increased incidence of suicide ideation (Morrison and O'Connor, 2008). Nolen-Hoeksema (1991) defined rumination as repetitive thoughts about one's own suffering and reasons for their own suffering. Two components of rumination have been identified: brooding and reflection. Brooding consists of repeatedly dwelling on the consequences of one's suffering, whereas reflection involves seeking information to better understand one's own suffering (Treynor et al., 2003). Previous research has

implicated rumination and its subcomponents as cognitive risk factors for suicide ideation (e.g., Chan et al., 2009; Miranda and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2007; Morrison and O'Connor, 2008; O'Connor and Noyce, 2008; Surrence et al., 2009). Specifically, one study found that both brooding and reflection predicted suicide ideation longitudinally, although brooding demonstrated a stronger relationship with suicide ideation at baseline than did reflection (Miranda and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2007). Similarly, another investigation demonstrated a longitudinal relationship between the rumination subcomponents and suicide ideation that was also stronger for brooding than reflection (O'Connor and Noyce, 2008). In their review of the literature, Morrison and O'Connor (2008) provided clear evidence for brooding as a risk factor for suicidality, but there was less substantial evidence for reflection. However, later research suggested that reflection may interact with history of suicide attempts to predict future suicide ideation (Surrence et al., 2009). Therefore, it appears that there is substantial evidence for rumination and brooding as contributing to future risk for suicide; however, the evidence for reflection as a risk factor is less conclusive.

In contrast, recent research has identified that grit and gratitude may be two important protective factors for suicide (Blalock et al., 2015; Kleiman et al., 2013a; Kim, 2015; et al., 2015; Li et al., 2012; Pennings et al., 2015). Gratitude is classified as the recognition and appreciation of gifts or kindness from other people (McCullough et al.,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [whiteej@okstate.edu](mailto:whiteej@okstate.edu) (E.J. White).

2002). More recent work has further demonstrated that gratitude has a negative relationship with suicide ideation (Krysinska et al., 2015). Additionally, there is burgeoning evidence for the role of grit, defined as a type of psychological strength that involves long term work towards the betterment and advancement of oneself (Duckworth et al., 2007), in reducing suicide ideation (Blalock et al., 2015; Kim, 2015; Pennings et al., 2015). Specifically, researchers found that in a sample of military personnel, grit was supported as a protective factor against suicide ideation, such that higher levels of grit decreased suicide ideation (Pennings et al., 2015). Moreover, Kleiman et al. (2013a) found that high levels of grit and gratitude predicted lower rates of suicide ideation over a four-month period. Interestingly, their results suggested that while gratitude seemed to predict a greater reduction in suicide ideation over time, both grit and gratitude were needed to have this effect (Kleiman et al., 2013a). Thus, examining the influence of both grit and gratitude is important to further understanding how positive psychological constructs influence suicide ideation. Despite this finding, recent work has examined their individual influences (e.g. Krysinska et al., 2015, Pennings et al., 2015).

Interestingly, research has begun to conceptualize the function of various protective factors as guarding against the negative influence of known risk factors for suicide ideation (e.g., Kleiman et al., 2012; Tucker et al., 2013; Tucker et al., in press). Recent investigations have demonstrated that grit has a protective function in the relationship between suicide ideation and negative life events (Blalock et al., 2015), depression (Kim, 2015), and hopelessness (Pennings et al., 2015). Additionally, research has supported gratitude as a protective factor against the influence of depressive symptoms and hopelessness on suicide ideation (Kleiman et al., 2013b). Specifically, individuals high in gratitude displayed a decreased relationship between both depressive symptoms and hopelessness with suicide ideation (Kleiman et al., 2013b). It is plausible that both grit and gratitude also attenuate the relationship between suicide ideation and rumination, a common correlate of hopelessness and symptoms of depression (e.g., Smith, Alloy, and Abramson, 2006). Furthermore, although other protective factors have been supported in buffering the relationship between rumination and suicide ideation (Tucker et al., 2013), little work has been done investigating the relationship between rumination, a prominent risk factor for suicide ideation (e.g., Morrison and O'Connor, 2008) and the specific protective factors, grit and gratitude.

No studies to our knowledge have directly investigated the relationship between rumination and grit; however, rumination has been linked to lower levels of other goal-related, positive psychological constructs (Geiger and Kwon, 2010; Tucker et al., 2013; Tucker et al., in press). There also is a dearth of research that has directly investigated the association of rumination and gratitude. However, the available literature has demonstrated that both grit and gratitude are important in understanding risk for suicide ideation. Thus, it is timely to investigate the collective influence of grit, gratitude, and rumination on suicide ideation. This research provides important nuanced information regarding suicide risk and resilience that may improve conceptualization of client suicide risk. Additionally, these results may provide important information regarding the relationship between known risk and resilience factors of suicide that may be important for the construction and refinement of theoretical models of suicide (e.g., O'Connor, 2011).

It may be that brooding and reflection are related to suicidal thinking through their effect on protective factors of suicide ideation such as grit and gratitude. Previous research has established the relationship between rumination and suicide ideation (Chan et al., 2009; Miranda and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2007; Morrison and O'Connor, 2008; O'Connor and Noyce, 2008; Surrence et al., 2009) as well as supported the protective influence of grit (Blalock et al., 2015; Kim, 2015; Pennings et al., 2015) and gratitude (Krysinska et al., 2015) against suicide ideation. Rumination has been shown to be negatively related to positive psychological constructs including goal orientation

(Geiger and Kwon, 2010; Tucker et al., 2013; Tucker et al., in press), and studies have supported the moderating influence of positive psychological constructs (e.g., Tucker et al., 2013), including grit (e.g., Blalock et al., 2015), and gratitude (Kleiman et al., 2013b) on the relationship between suicide risk factors and suicide ideation.

Furthermore, the Integrated Motivational-Volitional (IMV) model of suicidal behavior (O'Connor, 2011) asserts that rumination may lead to increased feelings of defeat, and ultimately entrapment, which may interact with moderators including goal-related constructs (such as grit) and then lead to suicidal ideation. Thus, it is important to determine whether grit and gratitude moderate the influence of rumination on suicide ideation in an effort to extend and validate predictions from the IMV model. Specifically, empirical evidence has demonstrated that grit and gratitude moderate the relationship between suicide risk factors and suicide ideation (e.g., Blalock et al., 2015; Kleiman et al., 2013b). Whereas no studies to our knowledge have examined rumination as a risk factor in such a model, rumination is a supported risk factor for suicide (e.g., Morrison and O'Connor, 2008) and theoretical predictions from IMV suggest positive thinking and goal re-engagement may moderate processes that link rumination and suicidal behavior (O'Connor, 2011). Thus, it is important to determine whether grit and gratitude moderate the influence of rumination on suicide ideation in an effort to extend and validate predictions from the IMV model. A gritty personality style may moderate the relationship between rumination and suicide ideation as a gritty individual may be more apt to engage in active coping strategies despite the tendency to ruminate in comparison to those who are lower in grit. Gratitude also may reduce the impact rumination has on the vulnerability to suicide ideation as an individual may be grateful for people and events in their lives despite ruminating on a negative mood state which may reduce propensity for suicide ideation. Additionally, research has demonstrated differential relationships between subcomponents of rumination and suicide ideation (e.g., O'Connor and Noyce, 2008); thus, it is prudent to examine the model using the relationships between the subcomponents of rumination (i.e., brooding and reflection) and suicide ideation.

The current study has multiple aims to address gaps in the literature regarding risk for suicide ideation. The first aim is to directly assess the relationship between rumination (i.e., brooding and reflection) and both grit and gratitude. Additionally, the second aim of the current work is to evaluate the collective, multivariate influence of these risk and resiliency factors on suicide ideation. It was hypothesized that brooding and reflection would be negatively correlated to both grit and gratitude, and positively correlated with suicide ideation. It also was expected that grit and gratitude would demonstrate a negative association with suicide ideation. Lastly, it was hypothesized that rumination would demonstrate an indirect effect on increased suicidal thinking through decreased levels of grit and gratitude. Specifically, the proposed model suggests that rumination, as indexed by the subscales of brooding and reflection, influence suicide ideation indirectly through two potential protective factors: grit and gratitude. In line with previous research we examined whether grit and gratitude moderated the proposed direct and respective indirect influences of brooding and reflection on suicide ideation.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

For the current study 552 undergraduate students were recruited from a large Midwestern university via an online research participation pool. All procedures for the current study were approved by the university's institutional review board. Participants completed online versions of measures for the current study and received course credit as compensation. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 50 with a mean of 19.86 and a standard deviation of 2.69. Of the total sample,

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