



## Development of a Relational Rumination Questionnaire



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### ABSTRACT

Rumination about romantic relationships has been implicated in interpersonal problems generally, and intimate partner violence and stalking of former romantic partners specifically. While various scales exist to measure depressive, angry, or general rumination, no existing scale comprehensively assesses rumination on romantic relationships. This paper describes the development and validation of the Relational Rumination Questionnaire (RelRQ). The RelRQ was developed and tested across two studies involving university students and members of the general population. Study 1 ( $n = 578$ ) used exploratory factor analyses to develop an 18-item RelRQ from a larger item pool. The derived three-factor structure: 1) romantic preoccupation rumination; 2) relationship uncertainty rumination; and 3) break-up rumination was confirmed in Study 2 ( $n = 525$ ), and the scale was revised to a 16-item version. Total RelRQ and subscale scores showed high internal consistency, good test–retest reliability, and expected correlations with related constructs such as insecure attachment, anger rumination, and negative affect. Results indicate that the RelRQ can be used in future studies to test if relational rumination is associated with maladaptive relational outcomes such as intimate partner violence and stalking.

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### 1. Introduction

Success in romantic relationships is thought to be a culturally prescribed life goal (DePaulo & Morris, 2006) and a salient developmental task in emerging adulthood (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004). Accordingly, unrequited love, conflict in romantic relationships, relational uncertainty, and relationship dissolution and reconciliation are major concerns for many people (e.g., Afifi & Reichert, 1996; Aron, Aron, & Allen, 1998; Boelen & van den Hout, 2010). Various authors have highlighted that ruminative thinking about such issues can influence adjustment when relationship goals are frustrated (e.g., Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009; Cupach, Spitzberg, Bolingbroke, & Tellitocci, 2011; Cupach, Spitzberg, & Carson, 2000; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007; Sotelo & Babcock, 2013).

Rumination is characterised as a form of negative self-focused attention that is observed across various types of psychopathology and problematic behaviour (Ehring et al., 2011; Ingram, 1990). Although the content of ruminative thinking may differ greatly, it tends to focus on issues that are self-relevant (Ingram, 1990) in internal domains (i.e., self, mood), external domains (i.e., events related to the self), or both (Kirkegaard Thomsen, 2006). For example, depressive rumination is internal and self-degrading (Ingram, 1990; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), whereas angry rumination typically focuses on external events of

interpersonal transgressions and what these mean for the self (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001; Wade, Vogel, Liao, & Goldman, 2008). Another commonly recognised feature of ruminative thinking is its repetitive nature; it is also experienced as difficult to control, and difficult to disengage from (Ehring et al., 2011; Ingram, 1990). Rumination is perceived as unproductive and non-instrumental, while nevertheless occupying significant mental capacity (Ehring et al., 2011; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991).

While ruminative thinking can occur in response to a particular negative life event or relational transgression and so can be state-like (Kirkegaard Thomsen, 2006; Wade et al., 2008), research has demonstrated that ruminative thinking can also be characterised as a trait-like response style (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). A ruminative response style is thought to be a characteristic way of thinking that involves focussing on a problem (including negative emotional states), while inhibiting actions or thoughts that may either distract from the problem or contribute to a solution (Ehring et al., 2011; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). The evidence to date suggests that rumination has a negative feedback relationship with affect, meaning that rumination may be caused by negative emotional states, maintain such states, or both (for a review see Kirkegaard Thomsen, 2006). This is one reason why rumination has been implicated in a wide variety of negative psychological outcomes, including depression, anger, jealousy, and anxiety (e.g., Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Carson & Cupach, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Sukhodolsky et al., 2001).

Some authors have pointed to the need to further investigate rumination on different themes (e.g., Kirkegaard Thomsen, 2006). In the

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specific area of romantic relationships, there has been some interest in how rumination may be involved in emotional maladjustment in different relational contexts (e.g., Reynolds, Searight, & Ratwik, 2014; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007; Tran & Joormann, 2015). More specifically, ruminative thinking is thought to be associated with maladjustment at all three stages of a relationship: during unsuccessful relationship pursuit, during romantic relationships, and after relationship dissolution.

Unrequited love is a concern for many (Aron et al., 1998; Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993), but the way individuals think about unreciprocated love and/or sexual attraction is thought to influence adjustment to frustration of relationship goals. For instance, some individuals may ruminate about why the other person was not interested and the implications this has for their sense of self. This is thought to lead to romantic goal preoccupation associated with negative affect, relationship-focused ruminative thoughts, and behaviours intended to attain relational goals (Yanowitz, 2006). This may be particularly true for those who link the goal of attaining a romantic relationship to higher-order goals such as life happiness (Cupach et al., 2000; Martin, Tesser, & McIntosh, 1993). Very little research has investigated these theoretical ideas empirically.

Research has also suggested that thinking about established relationships in a ruminative way can have negative implications for relationship functioning. For example, in a series of longitudinal studies, McCullough et al. (2007) found that rumination was negatively associated with forgiveness of relationship transgressions. Recent couple-based research has identified a vicious cycle of passive dyadic coping, of which rumination by one partner and withdrawal by the other are interdependent components (D. B. King & DeLongis, 2014). Rumination may also be associated with aggressive behaviours in a romantic relationship context. The few studies that have investigated rumination in intimate partner violence (IPV) found that increased levels of ruminative thinking were positively associated with IPV perpetration (Sotelo & Babcock, 2013; Watkins, DiLillo, & Maldonado, 2015).

Attachment theorists have also highlighted the link between ruminative thinking and interpersonal problems. Rumination is one of a number of self-defeating strategies thought to maintain a “self-amplifying cycle of distress”, which renders threats to the attachment system cognitively accessible long after they have dissipated (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008, p. 520). From this perspective, relational rumination is one aspect of anxious attachment. There is also some preliminary evidence that rumination may mediate the link between insecure attachment and a number of poor interpersonal outcomes (e.g., Burnette, Davis, Green, Worthington, & Bradfield, 2009; Chung, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2014), although no studies have specifically examined the link between rumination about relationships and anxious attachment.

In addition to contributing to maladjustment during relationship pursuit and dissatisfaction during relationships, rumination has been linked to maladjustment after relationship dissolution (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007; Tran & Joormann, 2015), including post-separation stalking. Cupach et al. (2000) suggested that rumination on relational goals and preoccupation with the ex-partner may be a central contributing factor in ex-partner stalking and relational intrusion (see also: Cupach et al., 2011). Many studies have indicated that general rumination, anger rumination, and partner preoccupation are all associated with engaging in post-relationship relational intrusion (Cupach et al., 2011; De Smet, Uziebilo, Loeyes, Buysse, & Onraedt, 2015; Marquez, 2013; Spitzberg, Cupach, Hannawa, & Crowley, 2014).

Most of the research conducted on rumination seems to suggest that it is most commonly conceptualised as a trait variable (with the exception of Wade et al., 2008). It can be assumed that rumination on relationship attainment would be most salient while single, while rumination about an ongoing relationship or a breakup would be most salient while in a relationship or after a breakup, respectively. However, people who have a trait-like tendency to ruminate on relationships may do so irrespective of their relationship status, meaning that different types of relationship rumination would be highly correlated. For

example, a person who ruminates about their current relationship may also ruminate about an ex-partner, while someone who recently experienced a breakup may ruminate about this but also about acquiring a new relationship. This is consistent with the attachment literature, which suggests that a pervasive concern surrounding all types of relationship problems is an important cognitive aspect of anxious attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

While relationship rumination would appear to be a useful topic for further research, at present there are no measures of the construct that have been carefully validated. Existing scales are either highly specific (e.g., Facebook rumination after a breakup; Tran & Joormann, 2015) and/or were not subjected to comprehensive validity and reliability analyses (e.g., Cupach et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2003; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007; Spitzberg et al., 2014; Tran & Joormann, 2015). Only Spitzberg et al. (2014) reported the internal structure of their rumination measure using exploratory principle component analysis, however their measure only included rumination about breakups. While a validated scale exists to measure romantic preoccupation, it is lengthy and also includes emotional (e.g., “I do not feel depressed when I think about my lack of romantic relationships”) and behavioural (e.g., “I tend to scan my social environment for potential romantic relationships”) components of romantic goal preoccupation (Yanowitz, 2006). No existing scale specifically measures rumination about ongoing relationships. It could be argued that a measure of anxious attachment may suffice to capture relationship rumination, however; attachment research and theories often conflate cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains of attachment (Holmes, 2000), and can therefore not measure the construct of relationship rumination as relevant to different relationship contexts.

Given the shortcomings in existing measures, the aim of the current research was to develop and validate a brief, multi-faceted, self-report measure of romantic relationship rumination. The aim of Study 1 was to establish the factor structure of the newly developed measure using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The aim of Study 2 was to replicate the measure's factor structure using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and to evaluate test-retest reliability and convergent validity.

## 2. Study 1 – exploratory factor analysis

The aims of Study 1 were a) to explore the factor structure of the newly developed ReIRQ; b) evaluate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) and preliminary convergent validity; and c) revise and shorten the ReIRQ. This study was approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### 2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 578 participants including volunteers who answered advertisements on an Australian university news website ( $n = 258$ ) and participants recruited by a market research company ( $n = 320$ ). The former group received no compensation for completing the online survey while those recruited by the market research company were compensated according to the company's policies with an amount unknown to the researchers. Participants were between 18 and 80 years old ( $M = 38.44$ ,  $SD = 15.82$ ). Two-hundred and twelve participants were male (36.7%), 363 female (62.8), and three (0.5%) did not specify their gender. Most identified as Australian (64.7%,  $n = 368$ ) including 1% ( $n = 6$ ) who were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; 13.9% ( $n = 81$ ) identified as Asian; 13.6% ( $n = 79$ ) European; 1.4% ( $n = 8$ ) New Zealand; 0.7% ( $n = 4$ ) Middle Eastern/North African; 0.5% ( $n = 3$ ) South or East African; and 0.2% ( $n = 1$ ) North American. Region of origin was unspecified for 4.8% ( $n = 28$ ). Eighty-five percent ( $n = 492$ ) reported English as their first language.

Thirty-five percent ( $n = 202$ ) were single at the time of participation; the remaining 65% ( $n = 376$ ) had partners (dating, in a relationship,

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