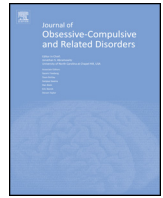




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jocrd](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jocrd)

## Contextual determinants of intrusions and obsessions: The role of ego-dystonicity and the reality of obsessional thoughts

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 17 November 2015

Received in revised form

29 January 2016

Accepted 4 April 2016

Available online 4 April 2016

## Keywords:

Obsessions

OCD

Ego-dystonicity

Cognitive models

## ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to investigate whether lack of evidence for the potential reality of the intrusion and ego-dystonicity are contextual determinants of unwanted intrusive thoughts and clinical obsessions. To this end, a total 248 non-clinical participants were asked to report an intrusion they had experienced as well as the context in which the intrusion arose. Utilizing this information, three independent clinicians rated these intrusions on ego-dystonicity and whether the intrusion had occurred with or without any evidence for its potential reality. Results showed that ego-dystonicity and lack of evidence for the intrusions were related, but distinct constructs. In particular, intrusions that occurred without evidence were significantly associated with higher levels of self-reported OC symptoms and related cognitive domains, whereas ego-dystonicity was not related to OC symptoms. Overall, the results are consistent with the notion that abnormal intrusions occur without evidence in the here-and-now, whereas normal intrusions do not. Intrusions that have no evidence to back them up, yet occur without any apparent cause, may be particularly likely to invite further negative cognitive processing, over-interpretation and control attempts. Implications for further research and treatment are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is characterized by recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate, and that cause marked anxiety and distress (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). However, cognitive models do not consider intrusions to be specific to OCD, because they are universal experiences across populations and cultures (Radomsky et al., 2014). Indeed, early research by Rachman and de Silva (1978) and several subsequent replication studies (Salkovskis & Harrison, 1984; Purdon & Clark, 1993) have shown that the vast majority of people in non-clinical populations experience intrusions, which are so similar in content to obsessions that clinicians are unable to distinguish between them. Some have challenged the similarities between intrusive cognitions and obsessions (O'Connor, 2002; Rassin, Cougle, & Muris, 2007; Rassin & Muris, 2007), but the general consensus remains that intrusive cognitions are universally experienced and nearly identical to those reported by individuals with OCD

(Radomsky et al., 2014). Consequently, beyond recognized differences in frequency and distress, most cognitive models have emphasized other factors that might distinguish between intrusions in non-clinical populations versus the abnormal intrusive thoughts (i.e. obsessions) that are experienced by OCD patients.

The most well-known cognitive models emphasize the manner in which intrusive thoughts are negatively appraised and misinterpreted as the primary factor distinguishing between intrusions and obsessions (e.g., Salkovskis, 1985; Rachman, 1997, 1998). That is, rather than the content of the intrusion, these models hold that intrusions become problematic depending how an individual reacts to them. Such appraisals are suggested to be guided by dysfunctional beliefs revolving around threat overestimation, responsibility, perfectionism, the intolerance of uncertainty, the need for control of thoughts and the overimportance given to thoughts (Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group [OCCWG], 1997, 2001, 2003, 2005). In other words, given enough misinterpretation and maladaptive reactions fuelled by obsessive beliefs, the intrusion will increase in frequency and provoke a significant amount of distress, up until the point that it will take the form of an obsessive intrusion as seen in OCD (e.g., Moulding et al., 2014).

Despite the emphasis on the presence of dysfunctional beliefs and appraisals as a determinant of the difference between

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intrusions and obsessions, other cognitive dimensions continue to be of interest, including ego-dystonicity and contextual determinants of unwanted intrusive thoughts and clinical obsessions (Clark & Inozu, 2014). Ego-dystonicity is often considered to represent a key distinction between obsessions and worries, and may play a crucial role in the development of obsessions (Borkovec, 1994; Clark, 2004; Langlois, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 2000; Purdon & Clark, 1999). Specifically, Rachman (1997, 1998, 2006) suggests that repugnant thoughts recognized by the person as ego-dystonic may result in attempts by the individual to understand their meaning and lead to over-interpretation of the thought, subsequently giving rise to distress and attempts to neutralize the thought. Likewise, others have suggested that since ego-dystonic thoughts often run contrary to the person's self-view, they are more likely to be interpreted as significant and threatening (Clark, 2004, Garcia-Soriano, Belloch, Morillo, & Clark, 2011; Purdon, 2001; Purdon, Cripps, Faull, Joseph, & Rowa, 2007; Purdon & Clark, 1999). Yet others have suggested that ego-dystonicity is linked to an overinvestment in a feared, possible self (Aardema & O'Connor, 2007; Ferrier & Brewin, 2005) – a construct based on Higgins' (1987) theory of self-discrepancy proposing different domains of the self, including the actual self vs. ought and ideal self guides, as well as the work of Oyserman and Markus (1990) who suggested “the feared self” as another possible domain of self. The feared self contains a set of attributes the individual fears they might portray or embody (the fear of whom one might be, or might become), which has been postulated to give rise to ego-dystonic obsessional doubts and intrusions, which stand in sharp opposition to the person's actual self (Aardema & O'Connor, 2007). Indeed, feared-self concerns and other related sensitive self domains relate strongly to measures of OCD symptoms and have been found to increase an individual's vulnerability to experience symptoms of OCD (Aardema et al., 2013, Doron, Kyrios, & Moulding, 2007; Doron, Moulding, Kyrios, & Nedeljkovic, 2008; Jaeger, Moulding, Anglim, Aardema, & Nedeljkovic, 2015; Melli, Aardema, & Moulding, in press; Nikodijevic, Moulding, Anglim, Aardema, & Nedeljkovic, 2015).

The potential role of ego-dystonicity and fear-of-self concerns in the development of OCD highlights the potential importance of the context in which intrusions occur, whether in relation to an internal context, like a person's self-view, or the external environment. For example, Purdon et al. (2007) proposed that an ego-dystonic thought “...is one that is perceived as having little or no context within one's own sense of self or personality. That is, the thought is perceived, at least initially, as occurring outside the context of one's morals, attitudes, beliefs, preferences, past behavior and/or one's expectations about the kinds of thoughts one would or should experience...” (p. 200). Interestingly, even though context is clearly implicated in this definition of ego-dystonicity, it is also simultaneously construed as a subjective phenomenon dependent on the person's evaluation or perception. Indeed, for a thought to be *experienced* as ego-dystonic, it seems reasonable to assume that the thought needs to be recognized as ego-dystonic, which automatically implies an appraisal (e.g. “this thought goes against my morals, beliefs, etc.”). At the same time, a definition of ego-dystonicity on the basis of subjective evaluation alone does not fully capture the lack of realism and irrationality often contained in the content of obsessions – its factual opposition or incongruence with the person's actual or valued self. That is, as noted by Aardema and O'Connor (2007), obsessions that have little or no context within one's own self is ego-dystonic, whether or not they are recognized or subjectively evaluated as such – a form of ego-dystonicity that has also been referred to as an objective discordance between the obsession and the self (as opposed to subjective discordance). According to these authors, while level of subjective discordance may differ from person to person, and may

at times be completely absent, such as in the case of ego-syntonic obsessions, objective discordance is a central feature of all obsessions. They are always false representations of reality exactly because of the (inappropriate) context in which they occur, whether this is an external context (e.g. “I washed my hands twenty times, but I still have the thought there might be dirt on it”), or an internal context like the person's self-view, preferences, intentions, morals and motivations (e.g. “I'm not the sort of person to ever hurt anyone, but still have the thought that I might”).

Objective discordance between the obsession and reality, and its close link to ego-dystonicity, was recognized early on by Rachman and Hodgson (1980) who stated in their seminal work: “...obsessions are irrational, ego-dystonic, unrealistic and repugnant in content” (p. 255). Since then, however, there has been little research on the lack of realism contained in obsessions, nor has its link with ego-dystonicity ever been explored. This seems surprising because most cognitive-behavioral models of OCD would probably recognize that obsessions are at the very least exaggerated or inadequate representations of reality (i.e., “I might be a pedophile” or “I might be a murderer”). One explanation might be that intrusions have traditionally been viewed as not requiring an explanation based on internal or external precipitants (e.g. Rachman, 1981). Also, the advent of the appraisal model in the 1980s, and its focus on the subjective evaluation of intrusions, did little to encourage further investigation into their relation with the objective world. However, these conceptualizations have been challenged in recent years. For example, Lee, Lee, Kim, Kwon, and Telch (2005) found that that only a small proportion of cognitive intrusions (23–44%) spontaneously arise. These authors distinguish between autogenous and reactive obsessions with the former often intruding more rapidly into consciousness, while reactive obsessions are viewed as more directly linked to triggers in the environment (Lee & Kwon, 2003). In particular, the autogenous dimension is considered to be more ego-dystonic and irrational, because the content of these obsessions contradict the person's self-view to a greater extent than those that occur in reactive obsessions (cf. Moulding, Kyrios, Doron, & Nedeljkovic, 2007).

Aardema and O'Connor (2007) reject the notion that intrusions arise spontaneously all-together, including those that are typically referred to as repugnant and/or autogenous obsessions (see Moulding, Aardema and O'Connor (2014)). When autogenous obsessions appear to occur without identifiable triggers in the environmental context, the thought may still occur as a reflection upon an exclusively internal event. For example, thoughts of ‘God’, or one's sexual preference, or regarding ‘violence’ may be internal events reflective of a current (countervailing) religious, sexual or violent attitude, equivalent to the environmental trigger of seeing a door on leaving the house (O'Connor, 2002). Triggers can also be temporally dislodged from the occurrence of the intrusion, such as in the case of a client diagnosed with OCD who at one time during his treatment experienced feelings of inadequacy and sadness about his life-accomplishments as a musician at a concert. A few hours later in the middle of the night he awoke with the intrusive thought “I am not worth enough to exist”, which albeit depressive in content, triggered a prolonged obsessional episode trying to get rid of the thought, trying to control the thought and understand its meaning, because he had forgotten about events the night before and could not understand why such a haphazard and senseless thought had arisen. Only days later, during a session with his therapist, he became aware of the initial trigger of sadness and feelings of inadequacy, which also relieved him of his obsessional efforts because he understood the origin of the thought. Not only was the obsession no longer experienced as threatening to his sense of self, it was considered trivial given an understanding of the context surrounding its onset.

Further emphasizing the importance of context is that both

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