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THOUGHT SUPPRESSION AND DISTRACTION: SAME OR DIFFERENT CONCEPTS?

Abstract. Thought suppression and distraction are related concepts, with intentional changes in the content of consciousness at their core. However, research on these strategies has not been sufficiently integrated. The separation of research contexts and the neglect of clear definitions have led to divergent evaluations and biased measurement of the effectiveness and adaptiveness of these similar constructs. In this paper, thought suppression and distraction are characterized and defined. Although the two concepts can be differentiated, they overlap substantially. The differences between distraction and thought suppression are subtle and do not account for the contrasting evaluations of their effects. To reduce bias and facilitate clearer communication and better integration of findings, it is recommended that studies provide working definitions of suppression and distraction, accompanied by descriptions of their specific mechanisms.

Keywords: thought suppression, distraction, memory control, thought avoidance, emotion regulation.

The symbolic birth of psychology is dated to the late 19th century, when Wilhelm Wundt opened the first laboratory for experimental psychological research. From that time, psychology began to exist as a separate science, distinct from philosophy. While philosophy reflects on issues related to mental processes and states, the domain of psychology became their empirical investigation. The emphasis on empiricism has a direct impact on the field of applications; however, it can result in theoretical imprecision regarding the phenomena under study. This is particularly likely when the subject of research is as ephemeral and inaccessible to direct observation as the psyche.

Research areas in psychology marked by the challenge of defining concepts certainly include studies on thinking. Perhaps the difficulty in determining what a thought itself is has led to a reluctance to precisely define subsequent, less fundamental issues. While striving for perfection in defining these constructs could paralyze empirical research, neglecting this aspect

may, in turn, lead to misunderstandings and hinder the development of research on thinking. This is exactly what happened with studies on thought suppression and distraction, two strategies for regulating the content of one's consciousness.

In essence, suppression involves not thinking about X, whereas distraction entails thinking about something other than X. Although these terms are related, they are used in different contexts and carry distinct connotations. While thought suppression is often perceived as ineffective or even detrimental to mental health (e.g., Conklin et al., 2015; Hiller et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2023; Wenzel, 2021; but see also: Engen & Anderson, 2018), distraction is attributed with a positive or at least ambiguous effect (e.g., Kraaij & Garnefski, 2019; Tamir et al., 2024; Wante et al., 2018). Moreover, studies starting from such assumptions tend to confirm them, creating a vicious circle. In this text, I will attempt to show that the disparity in how thought suppression and distraction are approached is not justified either by research or theory.

The article is organized into several sections. The first section outlines the features and proposed mechanisms of thought suppression, followed by a section on distraction. Next, I examine how both constructs are operationalized in questionnaire research, illustrating the problem of adopting divergent a priori assumptions about their effects. I then turn to a conceptual differentiation of the two terms. The article concludes that, while it is possible to distinguish distraction from thought suppression, the two are highly similar and their conceptual domains substantially overlap.

Thought Suppression

Thought suppression occupies a particular place in the context of mental disorders characterized by recurrent intrusions. Perhaps because of the urgent need to develop effective ways of managing intrusive thoughts, studies on suppression often omit a clear definition of the concept, implicitly assuming that how suppression operates is more important than what it precisely is. Nevertheless, clarifying the terms used in research remains essential to avoid conceptual confusion. Accordingly, to describe the constructs in question, I will identify their key characteristics and outline their possible forms and mechanisms.

As far as the features of thought suppression are concerned, they include intentionality, awareness, and responsiveness to heightened risk of intrusions.

The first feature is likely the least disputable. Intentionality is noted in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*, where thought suppression is defined as *any deliberate attempt to get rid of a thought* (Purdon, 2020, p. 1; see also Rassin, 2005). Although this is not stated explicitly in the definition, the literature consistently implies that the aim of eliminating a thought rests with the individual experiencing it (e.g., Anderson et al., 2025; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Therefore, thought suppression refers to situations in which a person attempts to influence their own consciousness, not that of others.

Intentionality is often accompanied by awareness, which constitutes the next feature of suppression. This characteristic has been discussed more broadly in the context of comparisons between suppression and repression (e.g., Boag, 2010; Erdelyi, 2006). The two terms were widespread in psychology by the time of Freud, which affects their contemporary understanding. Roughly speaking, suppression is generally regarded as a conscious act, while repression is considered unconscious (Boag, 2010). This interpretation was reinforced by Anna Freud, however, it was later challenged, notably by Erdelyi (2006), who demonstrated that this differentiation cannot be fully derived from her father's works.

Nevertheless, setting Freud aside, it may be useful to distinguish between conscious and unconscious blocking of unwanted thoughts. Awareness of preventing a thought from reaching consciousness may allow greater control over this process, such as deciding when to start or stop it, and potentially reduce cognitive distortions that could arise from complete disconnection from the avoided content. At the same time, the transition from conscious to unconscious is fluid and gradual (Erdelyi, 2006; Moors & De Houwer, 2006). Therefore, I propose treating suppression and repression as labels for the ends of a single dimension, with suppression characterized by awareness and repression by its absence. This approach aligns with the common view of repression as unconscious and suppression as conscious, preserves the distinction between conscious and unconscious ways of dispelling unwanted thoughts, and acknowledges the gradual continuum between conscious and unconscious mental processes.[1]

The last characteristic feature of thought suppression is responsiveness to increased risk of intrusions. Without this specification, some proactive processes aimed at avoiding particular thoughts might be counted as thought suppression, such as avoiding stimuli reminding one of unwanted content or even attending psychotherapy. To prevent the concept from becoming diluted and to capture its prototypical meaning, the term should refer to the ongoing management of unwanted thoughts. Consequently, a definition of thought suppression that incorporates the discussed features would be:

an intentional and largely conscious process in which the individual aims to block unwanted thoughts from entering their own awareness during moments of heightened likelihood of their occurrence, or immediately thereafter.

Beyond the general definition, thought suppression can be further characterized by its underlying mechanisms. There are two main research traditions on thought suppression proposing alternative mechanisms, the first of which was introduced by Wegner to account for the *white bear* studies (Wegner et al., 1987). This line of research involves participants trying not to think about something, e.g., a white bear, and is known for demonstrating paradoxical increases in the frequency of the forbidden thought following the suppression period (for meta-analyses, see Abramowitz et al., 2001; Magee et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2020). The paradoxical consequences of thought suppression are explained by the theory of ironic processes of mental control (Wegner, 1994), according to which suppression involves two processes: (1) a controlled operating process of searching for distractors on which the individual focuses to divert attention from the unwanted content, and (2) an automatic monitoring process that tracks the potential appearance of the unwanted thought among contents that may enter consciousness. As long as the operating process is active, the unwanted thought is avoided; however, after it ceases or is disturbed, the thought is likely to reappear. This occurs because the monitoring process, by being sensitive to the unwanted content, increases its accessibility.

The second line of research on thought suppression was initiated by Anderson, the originator of the *think/no-think* paradigm (Anderson & Green, 2001). In this framework, the term *thought suppression* is used interchangeably with *memory control*. In studies using *think/no-think* paradigm, participants are presented with specific cue items and instructed to suppress the associated targets they had previously learned. Typically, they receive one of two types of instructions: (1) *thought avoidance*, in which the unwanted thought must be blocked by focusing attention solely on the presented item, or (2) *thought substitution*, in which the participant focuses on another item to suppress thinking about the target item (Fawcett et al., 2023). Both strategies have proven effective, leading to forgetting of suppressed items (Clark et al., 2025; Stramaccia et al., 2021). They are, however, attributed different mechanisms: while in thought substitution, unwanted thoughts are mostly suppressed passively by occupying working memory with other content, in the case of thought avoidance, the suppression involves more active inhibition. Therefore, as can be seen, the general concept of thought suppression may manifest differently depending on the mechanism employed.

Distraction

The concept of distraction has already appeared in the context of thought suppression, indicating links between these constructs. Nevertheless, it is needed to characterize distraction more precisely. In cognitive psychology, distraction refers to interference or a loss of focus, and distractors are stimuli that divert attention from the efficient and accurate performance of a task. In the context of thought suppression, however, the central understanding of distraction is that of an emotion regulation strategy, most closely related to the regulation of thought content.

Gross (1998, 2015) classifies distraction as one of the attentional deployment strategies, that is, strategies that influence emotions by altering attentional focus. Specifically, distraction involves shifting attention away from content that elicits unwanted feelings by concentrating on something else (Gross, 2015; Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). Because distraction redirects the current focus of attention, it constitutes a form of moment-to-moment emotion regulation.

Like all emotion regulation strategies, distraction is intentional, arising in response to the activation of a goal to modify one's emotional state (Gross, 2024). Thus, distraction shares with thought suppression the feature of intentionality. However, unlike thought suppression, the goal of influencing a person's emotions does not necessarily originate within the person's own mind. A distinction is made between self-focused and other-focused emotion regulation, depending on whether the aim is to regulate one's own emotions or another person's (Gross, 2024). Consequently, distraction applies to situations in which a person redirects either their own attention or another person's attention to influence their own or the other person's emotional state.

The possibility that the intention to distract may reside in someone else's mind implies that distraction does not have to be conscious. A person being distracted by someone else may be unaware of the process. Moreover, such awareness may also be absent even when one distracts oneself, because emotion regulation strategies may be selected either consciously or unconsciously (Gross, 2024). Thus, in contrast to thought suppression, distraction does not necessarily require conscious awareness.

Considering the above, distraction may be defined as an emotion regulation strategy aimed at shifting the current focus of attention away from content that evokes unwanted feelings toward alternative content.

Some authors, however, when describing distraction, focus specifically on redirecting attention only to external stimuli (e.g., Boelens et al., 2021;

Smith et al., 2023; Volkaert et al., 2020; Wante et al., 2018) or neutral stimuli (e.g., Smith et al., 2023), or on diverting attention exclusively from negative thoughts and emotions (e.g., Boelens et al., 2021; Volkaert et al., 2020, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there are also examples where people might want to shift attention away from positive feelings (e.g., to prevent an inappropriate outburst of laughter) and cases where attention is redirected to positive internal stimuli (e.g., when planning a vacation to distract from an unpleasant meeting, Gross, 2015). It seems that, without a clear reason, there is no need to narrow the concept of distraction.

At the same time, the descriptions presented above illustrate several distinct forms of distraction. The range of possible distraction types is even broader. For example, in their meta-analysis, Webb and colleagues (Webb et al., 2012) examined how distraction had been operationalized in experimental research and identified four characteristics: active versus passive and positive versus neutral. These four types of distraction differed in their effectiveness. The theory of ironic processes of mental control, in turn, distinguishes focused distraction – concentrating on a single topic to divert attention from an unwanted thought – from unstructured searching for distractors. Both theoretical accounts and empirical findings indicate that the former is more effective (Lin & Wicker, 2007; Wegner et al., 1987). Additional factors that may influence the effectiveness of distraction include meta-awareness of the process, the availability of distractors (Koole, 2009; Kreddig et al., 2022) and their level of engagement (cf. studies on suppression combined with focusing on a multi-digit number, e.g., Wegner & Erber, 1992).

Gross's (1998) seminal work outlines additional forms of distraction. According to this account, distraction may involve: 1) focusing attention on aspects of the current situation that do not elicit emotions; 2) diverting attention away from the current situation; 3) redirecting internal attention from unwanted content to other content; 4) stopping unwanted associative sequences by telling oneself "stop!"; 5) recalling thoughts or memories that are unrelated to the unwanted emotions. Importantly, comparing these forms of distraction to thought suppression in Wegner's theory, the second, third, and fifth points may be considered manifestations of suppression. In the context of the *think/no-think* paradigm, the third and fifth points correspond to what is expected from participants given the *thought substitution* instruction, while the fourth point aligns with the *thought avoidance* instruction. With the exception of the first type of distraction, all other forms directly fit into the main frameworks of thought suppression. Focusing on what does not evoke emotions in on-

going situation can also be interpreted as a specific example of thought suppression, where emotional thoughts are avoided and replaced with neutral ones.

As can be seen, distraction is a construct closely related to thought suppression. Before directly comparing the two, let us examine how these concepts appear in empirical research. To this end, I will analyze how questionnaires measuring the use of distraction and thought suppression are constructed. Interestingly, despite their proximity, the two concepts are often considered separately. Moreover, while distraction is generally attributed positive or ambiguous effects, thought suppression is much more often believed to be harmful.

Thought Suppression and Distraction in Questionnaire Research

Distraction is widely recognized as an effective emotion regulation technique. Its efficacy in reducing negative affect and/or enhancing positive feelings is supported by numerous studies (e.g., Brans et al., 2013; Cairns et al., 2022; Efinger et al., 2019; Ferri et al., 2013; James et al., 2018; Morrow, 1990; Sheppes et al., 2011; Srisopa et al., 2021; Volkaert et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023; for meta-analysis see: Webb et al., 2012). It is also viewed as a potentially adaptive strategy (e.g., Bender et al., 2021; Kökönyei et al., 2024; Kraaij & Garnefski, 2019; Tamir et al., 2024; Wante et al., 2018). For instance, the capacity for distraction is developed in the well-known for its effectiveness Dialectical Behavior Therapy (McKay et al., 2019; Neacsiu et al., 2014), aimed at individuals suffering from emotional reactivity combined with difficulties in emotion regulation. Distraction is also used in medical contexts to alleviate anxiety or improve pain and discomfort tolerance (e.g., Bender et al., 2021; Chirico et al., 2020; Diette et al., 2003; Srisopa et al., 2021). However, the adaptiveness of emotion regulation strategies depends on the context (e.g., Boelens et al., 2021; Cairns et al., 2022; Petrova et al., 2023; Tamir et al., 2024; Zarowsky & Rashid, 2023) and how it is employed. For instance, Wolgast and Lundh (2017) suggest that distraction is likely to be more adaptive when accompanied by an acceptance of the current reality rather than when used as an escape from it. The habitual and rigid use of distraction to cut off from all unwanted experiences would be potentially harmful (e.g., Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017; Wolgast & Lundh, 2017), as it may block deeper processing of a situation, which may lead to the persistence of the problem.

Thus, there is a prevailing belief that distraction is a potentially adaptive strategy, relative to the context. Meanwhile, the adaptiveness of thought suppression is a much more controversial issue. Initiated by Wegner *white bear* research (Wegner et al., 1987) seemed to indicate that thought suppression is not only ineffective but even has paradoxical consequences. Riding the wave of belief in the paradoxical effects of thought suppression, correlational studies began to emerge, examining the relationships between the tendency to suppress thoughts and psychopathology symptoms. The most commonly used tool to measure the thought suppression propensity has been the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994), and the most frequent result has been the positive correlation between symptoms of mental disorders and scores on this questionnaire (e.g., Amstadter & Vernon, 2008; Murray et al., 2021; Pegram et al., 2017). As a result, the clinical literature predominantly holds the view that thought suppression is harmful.

However, this conclusion is unwarranted. It turns out that the paradoxical consequences of suppression in the *white bear* paradigm replicate poorly (for the last meta-analysis see: Wang et al., 2020), and the WBSI confuses thought suppression propensity with susceptibility for intrusive thoughts (Rassin, 2003). At the same time, research in the *think/no-think* paradigm quite systematically indicates the potential effectiveness of suppression (Engen & Anderson, 2018), and the first study on the adaptiveness of thought suppression training shows its positive effects on mental health (Mamat & Anderson, 2023). Nevertheless, further research is needed to clarify and nuance the conditions under which thought suppression may be adaptive.

Distraction and thought suppression are primarily studied within different research traditions. The separation of these areas and the lack of widely agreed-upon definitions have led to different approaches to studying these constructs and drawing divergent conclusions. In research, there is a noticeable bias in the questionnaires measuring the use of thought suppression and distraction.

Questions concerning distraction generally have a neutral or positive connotation (e.g., Connor-Smith et al., 2000; Hasenbring et al., 2009; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991; Tamir et al., 2023; Throuvala et al., 2021; Wells & Davies, 1994; Wolgast et al., 2013; Wolgast & Lundh, 2017). For instance, Tamir and colleagues (2024) measure distraction using neutral items such as *I distracted myself from the situation*, or *I tried not to think about the things that make me feel bad*. In turn, Wolgast and coworkers (2013) developed a factor named *distractive focusing* based on six questions, five of which

pertain to replacing unwanted thoughts with positive ones (e.g., *I think of nicer things than what I have experienced*; *I think about pleasant experiences*; *I think of what I can do best*).

Meanwhile, questions about thought suppression often appear in negative context (Hasenbring et al., 2009; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994; but see also: van Schie et al., 2016[2]). The most frequently used tool for measuring thought suppression – the aforementioned WBSI – includes not only neutral questions (e.g., *I often do things to distract myself from my thoughts; There are things I prefer not to think about*) but also questions suggesting the occurrence of persistent intrusions (*I wish I could stop thinking of certain things, There are images that come to mind that I cannot erase*). In Wolgast and colleagues' study (2013), the *thought avoidance* factor is loaded by most items from the WBSI as well as by an additional item: *Anxiety is bad.*

This design of questionnaires makes it challenging to compare the adaptiveness of thought suppression and distraction strategies because questions about redirecting attention and avoiding thoughts appear in both groups of questionnaires. What distinguishes these tools is the presence of questions concerning problems with experiencing intrusions or items describing the ability to control attention and evoke positive content (e.g., Wolgast et al., 2013; Wolgast & Lundh, 2017). In this situation, the bad fame of thought suppression and the adaptiveness attributed to distraction may not stem from the utility of these strategies but rather from the specificity or even flaws of the measurement tools.[3]

Distraction and Thought Suppression: Differentiating the Concepts

Differentiating distraction and thought suppression based on their adaptiveness or maladaptiveness reveals little about the actual differences between these terms; it merely reflects preconceived assumptions about the effectiveness of these strategies. To bring more clarity to research on suppression and distraction, it is essential to refine and develop their definitions.

Although distraction and thought suppression are closely related concepts, it is possible to distinguish them conceptually. The differentiating features include the aforementioned aspects of intentionality and awareness, as well as the timing of attention shifting, the focus on cognitive versus emotional aspects of the experience, and the accent on cognitive versus both cognitive and behavioral acts.

As previously noted, in the case of distraction, the intention to influence emotions does not necessarily originate from the individual experiencing those emotions. In contrast, in thought suppression, the intention is always present within the mind of the person suppressing the thoughts. Furthermore, thought suppression is typically associated with conscious awareness, whereas distraction can occur either consciously or unconsciously. As a result, externally initiated or unconscious distraction should not be considered thought suppression.

Another, more subtle aspect differentiating distraction from thought suppression is the timing of attentional shift from current thoughts to something else. While distraction occurs at the moment this shift happens, thought suppression can – but does not necessarily – begin earlier. Thought suppression may take place through prototypical distraction, where the initiation of suppression and distraction coincide. However, it is also possible that a person suppressing their thoughts first tries to inhibit unwanted content by clearing their mind (e.g., Nardo & Anderson, 2024), and only later redirects attention to a different mental activity. Assuming that distraction refers to shifting attention from one thought to another (and not from a thought to the absence of thought), the latter scenario should be considered thought suppression rather than distraction.

The next aspect distinguishing the concepts of distraction and thought suppression is the emphasis on emotion regulation versus thought regulation. The primary goal of thought suppression is to disconnect from certain mental content, not necessarily to change one's mood. In contrast, with distraction, the priority is emotional regulation through redirecting attention away from specific thoughts. However, the mutual influence of thoughts and emotions is well documented, meaning the desire to regulate both can often overlap. Distraction by definition inherently involves a shift in consciousness and thus a change in thoughts, as it relies on attention redirection. In the case of thought suppression, however, there are instances where it occurs without affecting emotions. This is evident, for example, in the *white bear* task, where participants are typically asked not to think about neutral content, the white bear. In such situations, it would be more appropriate to refer to thought suppression rather than distraction.

Finally, distraction and thought suppression can be distinguished based on the nature of the self-regulatory act. Thought suppression, as framed in theory and research, typically takes the form of a cognitive act (e.g., Purdon, 2020; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). In contrast, examples of distraction often involve both cognitive and behavioral acts. In fact, the literature some-

times references *behavioral distraction* (e.g., Compas et al., 2017), which describes situations where an individual, seeking to avoid certain emotions, engages in a different activity, thereby redirecting their attention to the new task. Once again, cognition and behavior are intertwined. As a result, while distraction is more fitting within the context of behavior than thought suppression, this distinction should be seen as an intuitive guideline rather than a rigid criterion separating the two concepts.

In summary, thought suppression and distraction can be conceptually distinguished, although they substantially overlap. Moreover, the criteria used to differentiate these two constructs, while useful for clarifying their meaning, do not suggest major distinctions between them.

Conclusions

Thought suppression, which concerns not thinking about X, and distraction, which involves thinking about something other than X, may, to a large extent, be regarded as two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, the two concepts are often examined within different research traditions. Furthermore, while distraction is generally viewed in the literature as a potentially adaptive strategy, thought suppression is often seen as harmful. Such differential treatment is unwarranted, given that suppression and distraction (most) often overlap.

In this text, I have referred to existing conceptualizations of suppression and distraction in the literature. However, psychological concepts may be fluid, and the meanings of terms may evolve. This does not imply that we should refrain from clarifying the phenomena under study, as doing so would likely create confusion in research. A good practice would be to include at least working definitions of these concepts in studies related to thought suppression and distraction.

At the same time, research reports should not only provide definitions of these broad terms but also describe the specific mechanisms through which individuals attempt to keep unwanted content out of consciousness. It is likely that the detailed characteristics of how thought suppression or distraction is implemented in a given context largely determine their effectiveness and adaptiveness. Therefore, defining thought suppression and distraction in conjunction with describing their particular forms and underlying mechanisms seems a promising direction. Doing so would likely improve communication within the field and facilitate more effective integration of research findings.

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NOTES

[1] One could, and indeed should, further explore what aspects of thought suppression the awareness pertains to – whether it is the awareness of initiating suppression, the awareness of the decision to suppress, the awareness of the process itself, etc. However, to stay focused on the main topic of the text, I will not delve into this issue here.

[2] A notable exception is the van Schie and colleagues (2016) questionnaire, which distinguishes three scales: the intrusion scale, suppression attempts scale, and effective suppression scale. However, it is significantly less popular than the WBSI. According to Google Scholar statistics, as of the last quarter of 2025, van Schie and coworkers (2016) has been cited only 25 times, whereas the article introducing the WBSI (Wegner & Zanakos, 1994) has been cited over 900 times in the same period.

[3] This illustrates a broader issue in measuring emotion regulation strategies. Naragon-Gainey and coworkers (2017), who conducted a meta-analysis of research on emotion regulation strategies to examine which strategies co-occur and potentially identify redundant concepts, found that the strongest moderator of the effects studied was the measure used in the research. The choice of a particular tool significantly influenced whether or not correlations between the measured constructs were observed. This dependence of overall conclusions on specific methodological choices is a significant problem in emotion regulation research, especially considering the vast number of tools developed to measure these strategies. For example, Adrian and colleagues (Adrian et al., 2011) reviewed tools used in the field of emotion regulation research specifically for children and identified over 100 such tools developed since the 1970s.

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