

## A Scoping Review on Thought Control: Measures, Strategies, Treatment and Gaps in the Literature

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**Received:** November 26, 2022; **Published:** December 20, 2022

### Abstract

It is crucial to understand how individuals respond to unwanted thoughts so that proper treatment plans could be put into practice. The TCQ is used to measure the strategies individuals use when facing negative thoughts. Previous research shows that (worry and punishment) as thought control strategies are correlated with psychopathology and aggression. The purpose of this scoping review was to provide a comprehensive overview of relevant literature regarding the process of thought control in terms of the strategies used and its correlation with measures of psychopathology and aggression as well as identifying any gaps in the literature which could inform future research. The current scoping review followed Arksey and O'Malley (2005) 5-stage framework. The results reveal that there are correlations between different thought control strategies and measures of psychopathology and aggression. The review also reveals gaps in the literature in terms of failing to use violent offenders as a sample of interest when studying the correlation of thought control strategies and aggression. Another possibility for future research is to examine if there is a relationship between thought control strategies and different types of cognitive distortions.

**Keywords:** *Thought Control; Measures; Strategies; Treatment*

### Introduction

#### Background

The majority of people do experience unwanted thoughts (negative and intrusive thoughts) from time to time and how they respond to these thoughts may vary from individual to individual. Several researchers have addressed the strategies people tend to use when they experience these thoughts. [1] devised a 30-item questionnaire, which identifies different strategies used by people concerning unwanted thoughts. These strategies include distraction, social control, worry, punishment, and reappraisal. In addition to that, there is extensive literature on the relationship between these strategies and psychopathology in general. [2] claims that healthy individuals as well as clinical subjects (patients) both experience unwanted thoughts about past events or future events but they differ in terms of intensity, frequency, and level of disturbance. [3] claim that as a result of experiencing intrusive thoughts, nearly 99% of non-clinical individuals engage in an active process psychologically, which is referred to as "thought suppression". [4] defined thought suppression as a deliberate attempt to stop thinking about something.

Moreover, several studies have researched and addressed the issue of the psychometric properties of the TCQ and raised concern over the use of a translated version of the original questionnaire [5,6]. For this reason, [7] devised the TCAQ which measures individuals' ability to control unwanted thoughts in order to address some of the original questionnaire's limitations in terms of its psychometric properties. [8] then devised the revised version (English) of [7] questionnaire which has 25-items about individuals' ability to control unwanted thoughts.

### The purpose of the scoping review

[9] defines Scoping studies/reviews as "preliminary assessment of the potential size and scope of available research literature". However, according to [10] review, [11] identified four essential reasons for the purpose of conducting a scoping review, which are to examine the extent and nature of research, to identify whether a systematic review is necessary, to summarise the research findings, and to identify potential research gaps within the existing literature. Besides, [12] also added a few reasons like identifying the things we know and the things we do not know and more importantly, identifying the potential contribution to the knowledge. By adopting these broad aims to my research interest, I personally aim, through conducting this scoping review, to achieve the following:

- Identify what is known about the individuals' ability to control their unwanted thoughts and what strategies they usually use in response to facing intrusive unwanted thoughts.
- Identify and understand how unwanted, negative thoughts are measured.
- Identify data type in terms of collection, design and analysis.
- Summarising the key findings from previous research.
- Identify the gaps in the literature and the possible contributions of my proposed research to the knowledge.

### Methods

The research methodology of this scoping review will follow the 5-stage framework proposed by [11]. This framework was exclusively chosen because, as [10] claim, it allows replication of the research strategy which in return increases the reliability of the research findings. The five stages [11] framework are:

1. Identifying the research question.
2. Identifying relevant studies.
3. Study selection.
4. Data charting.
5. Summarizing and reporting the findings.

### Identifying the research question

This stage involves identifying the research questions which will define and determine the rest of the stages. [13] proposes using clearly defined questions which are broad, to provide a breadth of knowledge and to guide the whole review. The focus of this scoping review as identified earlier was to understand what is known about thought control in terms of strategies used and individuals' abilities as well as understanding of how the process of 'thought control' is measured through the exploration of the relevant literature. To achieve these aims, the following research questions were posed to guide the search:

- What is unwanted/intrusive thought? What is thought control?
- What strategies do people use to control unwanted thoughts?

- How is thought control (ability/strategy) measured?
- What is known about the relationship between thought control and psychopathology?
- What is known about the relationship between thought control and other psychological construct such as aggression?
- Is there a relationship between thought control and treatment?

**Identifying relevant studies**

This involves planning of where to search (database), what terms or keywords will be used and decisions about time span and language. To get a broad coverage of the relevant literature, this review adopted specific keywords as search terms. These terms included ‘managing unwanted thoughts’, ‘measuring unwanted thoughts’, ‘thought control\* strategies’, ‘thought control\* psychopathology’, ‘aggression\* thought control’ and ‘thought suppression’. The search terms reflected our initial research questions which provided a road map. The techniques used for this search were using Primo, which is the University of Aberystwyth search engine and Google Scholar as searching tools. Eligibility (Inclusion and exclusion) criteria were developed because of the huge number of articles identified as well as time constraints. Many identified articles were written in different languages (non-English) and were excluded due to time and comprehension constraints. A full list of inclusion and exclusion criteria is outlined in table 1.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Relevance	Relevant	Irrelevant
Language	English	Non-English
Study focus	Thought control, strategies, measures	Other aspects such as depression, treatment
Recency	1990s onward	Before 1990s
Peer reviewed	Yes	No

*Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria.*

**Study selection**

Using the identified search engines, a total of 814 articles were identified, which made the adaptation of the eligibility (inclusion and exclusion) criteria a must. By reviewing the articles’ titles and abstracts, it was found that there was a large number of articles that were not relevant. Many articles were even duplicated and had to be removed because we used more than one search engine. Nonetheless, the existence of these duplicates sometimes means that the article is of great significance and relevance if the right search terms were used. After removing the duplicated articles, only 186 articles remained. Yet, a significant number of these articles were also excluded guided by the inclusion and exclusion criteria in table 1. Lastly, 18 articles met the eligibility criteria for this scoping review. For these articles, full text versions were obtained for an in-depth analysis for the preparation of the review findings. The process of study selection is presented in figure 1.

**Data charting**

This is the fourth stage of [11] scoping review framework. According to [13], this stage involves developing a data charting to extract the data from the selected studies. It also involves summarising each study following a narrative review to extract data and information from each of the included studies. Data charting is presented in table 2, where for each of the selected article, a summary containing the author(s), year of publication, location of study, the study design, the study methods, sample size and a brief about the limitations and recommendations is included.

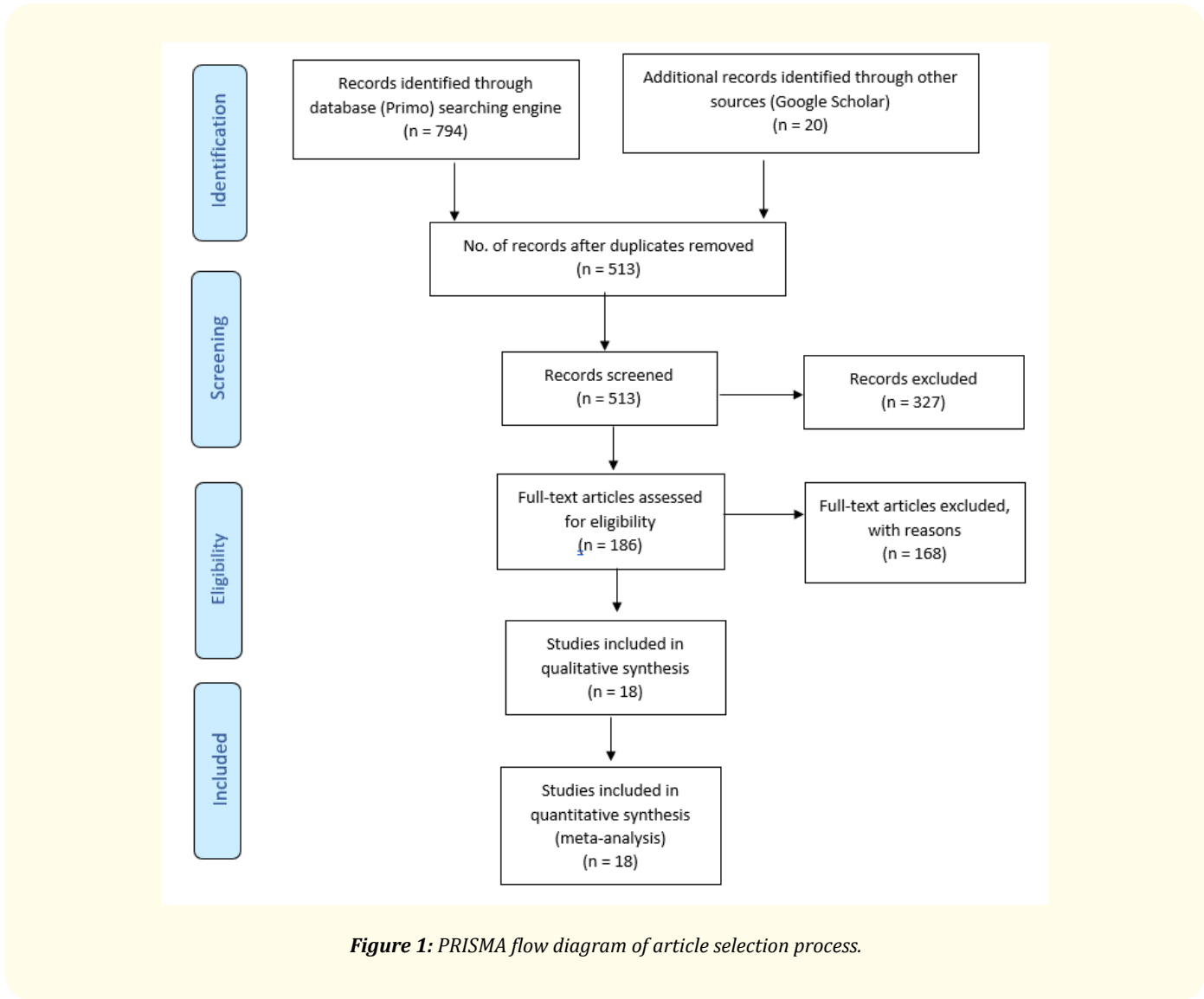


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of article selection process.

Author(s)	Year	Location	Design/sample/measures	Outcomes
(1)	1994	UK	Generation of TCQ with 10 Clinical and 10 normal subjects using semi-structured interview.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 5 strategies to control unwanted thoughts.</li> <li>- Relationship between these strategies (worry and punishment and psychopathology.</li> <li>- Correlation of TCQ and big 5 personality.</li> </ul>
(3)	1997	UK	Literature review	The use of thought suppression techniques alone as a treatment plan is not sufficient to prevent sexual deviant behaviour

(5)	1999	UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 124 psychiatric inpatients.</li> <li>- TCQ and the DSM-IV were administered.</li> </ul>	<p>There is a correlation between Thought control strategies (Worry and punishment) and psychopathology (depression and PTSD).</p>
(6)	2004	Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 108 non-clinical participants.</li> <li>- 208 clinical sample.</li> <li>- TCQ and BDI were administered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Correlations between thought control strategies and depression.</li> <li>- difficulty with unwanted thoughts term.</li> <li>- suggest some may not use a specific strategy.</li> </ul>
(14)	2004	Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 90 participants. (Students)</li> <li>- TCQ, the white bear suppression inventory, MMPI-2, Eysenck personality inventory and aggression measures were administered.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intrusive thoughts and suppression were correlated with aggression but not compulsivity.</li> <li>- Intrusive thoughts are correlated with punishment and psychopathology.</li> </ul>
(15)	2005	UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 385 participants (normal + clinical).</li> <li>- TCB, BDI and IDI were administered.</li> </ul>	<p>Worry and punishment correlated with psychopathology (anxiety and depression) while social control is an adoptive method.</p>
(16)	2006	Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 72 undergraduates (female psychology students)</li> <li>- TCQ, SIV, The white bear suppression inventory and The Aggression questionnaire were administered.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Correlation between thought control strategies, aggressive fantasies and aggressive behaviour.</li> <li>- For future research use of (violent offenders) as research participants.</li> </ul>
(17)	2009	UK	<p>Literature Review on the effectiveness of using thought suppression in managing (risky thoughts).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sexual offenders face intrusive thoughts such as obsessional sexual thoughts (past, present or future.</li> <li>- Research is not supportive of thought suppression as strategy used to manage negative thoughts.</li> </ul>
(8)	2010	Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Study 1- reliability of TCAQ: 720 university students.</li> <li>- Study 2 – TCAQ and successful suppression: 71 students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TCAQ has high internal consistency and test re-test reliability.</li> <li>- TCAQ is a reliable index of successful suppression (cognitive control)</li> </ul>
(18)	2010	Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 176 psychiatric inpatients.</li> <li>- TCQ and BDI were administered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Correlations between thought control strategies and depression.</li> <li>- Worry and punishment positively correlated with depression.</li> <li>- Use of TCQ in Treatment.</li> </ul>

(19)	2012	US	- 402 participants. - TCA and TCAQ were administered.	- Weak thought control ability is correlated with the use of punishment, worry, reappraisal and suppression but not with distraction and social control
(4)	2013	UK	- 589 participants aged (13-17). - TCQ-A (Adolescence), anxiety and depression measures were administered.	- Thought control strategies employed in treatment and interventions. - Worry and punishment positively correlated with emotional symptoms (anxiety and depression).
(20)	2013	UK	- 22 patients with (GAD) and 22 healthy individuals.	- Cognitive-behavioural therapy reduces unwanted thought intrusions (Worry) in generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).
(21)	2016	US	- 87 patients. - M.I.N.I. for OCD diagnosis, QIDS for depression and the TCQ were administered.	- OCD patients use maladaptive strategies to control unwanted thoughts. - Treatment is associated with the use of advantageous strategies.
(22)	2017	US	- 135 university students - The (STCQ) Suicide Thought Control Questionnaire, Hopelessness Depression Symptoms Questionnaire and Suicide behaviour questionnaire.	- Suicide thought control strategies (distraction, punishment and worry) are correlated with suicide ideation. - Suicide ideation was negatively predicted by distraction, but positively predicted by punishment and worry.
(23)	2018	Turkey	- 45 patients and 63 normal subjects. - The TCQI-R (Thought Control Insomnia Revised) questionnaire was used.	Thought control strategies correlate with sleep disturbance as well as anxiety, stress and depression.
(24)	2018	Iran	- 30 clinical sample and 30 normal subjects. - TCQ and Perfectionism questionnaire were administered.	There was a significant difference between patients and normal subjects in terms of the strategies used and perfectionism.
(2)	2019	Australia	Systematic review of 17 studies and their measures of thought control. (TCQ, TCAB, thought suppression inventory and white bear suppression inventory)	Systematic review of 17 studies on the usefulness of using TCQ and the TCAQ.

**Table 2:** Data charting for the included studies.

### Summarising and reporting findings

This is the fifth and the last stage of [11] framework for scoping review as it involves summarising and reporting the findings using both numerical analysis and a thematic analysis. The next section (findings) will present the fifth stage of [11].

### Findings

This scoping review considered 18 articles from 7 countries with 7 articles from the UK, 3 from the US, 3 from Australia, 2 from Netherlands, 1 from Germany, 1 from Turkey and 1 from Iran. The focus of this section will be on those selected articles and their relation to the research questions. To summarise, these 18 articles discussed and examined the following questions: What does the process of thought control mean and how is it measured? What are the strategies individuals employ when faced with unwanted thoughts and their correlation with other measures related to psychopathology such as depression and stress? What are the implications of the research on thought control strategies on treatment?

### What is thought control? What is thought suppression?

[3] defined intrusive thoughts as those thoughts that are associated with a negative state of mind or lead to negative or inappropriate behavior; [2] claims that healthy individuals as well as clinical subjects (patients) both experience unwanted thoughts about past events or future events but they differ in terms of intensity, frequency, and level of disturbance. [17] argues that intrusive thoughts are experienced not only by clinical patients or healthy subjects, but also by offenders. For example, violent offenders might experience persistent hostile, angry and aggressive thoughts and sexual offenders might face obsessional sexual thoughts about past or future victims. However, in terms of defining thought suppression, [4] states that thought suppression is a deliberate attempt to stop thinking about something.

### Measuring thought control

The process of thought control is measured through the use of either the thought control questionnaire (TCQ) or the thought control ability questionnaire (TCAQ). The TCQ was devised by [1] and it is a 30-item (self-report) questionnaire. By devising this instrument, [1] were able to identify 5 different strategies people often use when they experience unwanted thoughts. These strategies include distraction, social control, worry, punishment and reappraisal. The TCQ is a widely used instrument to measure how individuals (clinical or non-clinical) respond to unwanted thoughts and it has been used with other measures to test the correlation between some of the strategies and psychopathology.

On the other hand, [7] devised the TCAQ which measures individuals' ability to control unwanted thoughts in order to address some of the original questionnaire's (TCQ) limitations in terms of its psychometric properties. There have been many attempts by researchers to address the psychometric properties of the TCQ such as (articles NO. 2, 4, 5, 18, and 23) in table 2. Subsequently, Williams, *et al.* (2010) devised the revised version of that of [7] questionnaire which has 25 items, and it is a self-report measure as well. In recent years, many researchers adopted different forms of the original TCQ such as the (TCQ-A) for adolescence devised by [4] and the (TCQI-R) for insomnia proposed by [23].

### Thought control strategies and psychopathology

This scoping review also reveals that some of the strategies people use to control such thoughts are maladaptive and usually associated with psychopathology (5, 6, 23, and 24). [18] claims that the TCQ was first developed for non-clinical individuals and later adapted for a clinical sample. He examined intercorrelations and regression analysis and found intercorrelations between thought control strategies and other measures such as depression which was measured by (BDI). He also found a strong correlation between punishment and worry. Previous studies reveal that worry and punishment are correlated with psychopathological symptoms such as depression, anxiety and stress, as these strategies were positively correlated with the measures of psychopathology revealed in (article NO. 1, 4, 5, 6, 15, 18, 21 and 23) in table 2.

### Thought control strategies and other psychological measures

This review also shows that there is a correlation between thought control strategies and other measures such as aggression, suicide ideation and behavior and sleep disturbance. For example, [22] and [21] applied TCQ to a sample of people with a suicide history or ide-

ation to test whether their sample would use the thought control strategies when experiencing thoughts related to suicide. Their findings suggest that using TCQ and the strategies driven from it could predict the intervention and treatment plans. Besides, [16] explored the relationship between TCS and aggressive fantasies on one hand, and the relationship between these fantasies and aggressive and violent behavior on the other hand. They claim that few studies have addressed the association between aggressive thoughts as unwanted thoughts and aggressive behavior.

### Thought control and treatment

The device of TCQ propounded by [1] has advanced the scholarly literature about how unwanted thoughts are experienced, controlled and made enthusiastically possible to design interventions and rehabilitation plans, driven from the thought control strategies' knowledge and their relationship with psychopathology, aggression, and depression. [20] conducted a study to examine the role of CBT as a treatment plan in reducing unwanted thoughts. Their findings suggest that CBT positively influences the response of worry as a strategy to control unwanted thoughts. [4] studied the inclusion of thought suppression in treatment plans and interventions and their effectiveness when blended with CBT.

Another example of using TCQ and CBT in reducing unwanted thoughts and designing interventions is the research of [21] and [22]. Both studies investigated the usefulness of using TCQ to determine the strategy mostly related to thoughts of suicide and suicide ideation and designing an intervention program driven from these findings.

## Discussion

### Re-visiting the main findings

#### Unwanted, intrusive, negative thoughts

Coherent research around the relevant literature reveals no conclusive definition of unwanted, intrusive thoughts. However, as mentioned above, [3] defined intrusive thoughts as the thoughts that are associated with a negative state of mind or that lead to negative or inappropriate behavior. Many argue that these intrusive thoughts are common in patients suffering from OCD, depression and sleep problems. This assumption justifies the focus of the literature on the relationship between the thought control strategies to control intrusive thoughts, and psychopathology in general. Negative thoughts are usually associated with thought suppression. [16] see thought suppression as an obvious and easily accessible (mentally and cognitively) strategy to be used when faced with negative thoughts and hence, the majority of people use it. Interestingly, a failure to suppress thoughts ultimately leads to an increase in unwanted thoughts, a mechanism called the rebound effect, [3] which is why thought suppression is a counter-productive mechanism [2,8].

Nevertheless, a more conclusive definition of unwanted, intrusive thoughts must be adopted by researchers especially when asking participants to think about these thoughts when conducting research using the TCQ or the TCAQ.

### Measuring thought control

[15] the literature on the use of the TCQ and the strategies identified from it to control unwanted thoughts is not conclusive. In contrast, some scholars view certain strategies as good and constructive, while others view the same strategies as negative and deconstructive [5,6,18,23,24]. Many researchers suggest that some people do not use a certain strategy or use no strategy at all. However, [18] defends the use of the TCQ and the strategies driven from it, asserting that the TCQ was first developed for non-clinical individuals and later adopted to a clinical sample.

As mentioned earlier [7] devised the TCAQ which measures individuals' ability to control unwanted thoughts to address some of the original questionnaire's limitations. Research on TCS and the use of TCQ is advancing in comparison to the research on the thought control ability (TCA) as it is still in its infancy as [19] assert. [19] found that weak thought control ability is associated with a greater use of punish-



ment, worry and suppression and reappraisal as a thought Control Strategy. By doing this, they propose a link between a weak ability to control unwanted thoughts and the strategies associated with psychopathology such as worry and punishment.

### Thought control strategies and psychopathology

As noted earlier, [15] claims that the literature on the use of the different strategies to control unwanted thoughts is not conclusive. Some scholars view certain strategies as good and constructive, while others view the same strategies as negative and deconstructive [5,6,18,23,24]. The strategies that are deemed as negative or maladaptive are associated with psychopathology as the research revealed in (article NO. 1, 4, 5, 6, 18, 21 and 23) in table 2. This association has implications for treatment design and implementation.

### Thought control strategies and other psychological measures

Previous studies suggest that there is a correlation between the strategies individuals use in response to unwanted thoughts and other measures such as aggression, just as [21] and [22] claimed. However, their studies offered few limitations, such as not using aggressive offenders as a sample of interest, as it will be related to measures of aggression and also failing to acknowledge the implications of their findings on treatment and interventions. These limitations provide a gap in knowledge and are a possible contribution of my proposed research to the literature.

### Thought control and treatment

Most of the literature on the relationship between thought control strategies and treatment focused on changing the maladaptive strategies (worry and punishment) already identified to be correlated with psychopathology. For example, a study by [20] showed how cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) could change (worry) as a strategy used in response to unwanted thoughts to a positive adaptive one. [4] also worked on using CBT in an attempt to remove 'thought suppression' as a reaction to unwanted thoughts.

### Limitations of the Study

For practical reasons and due to time constraints, this scoping review considered only 2 sources of information (databases), these were Primo and Google scholar. Other databases such as Web of knowledge and the Web of Science were not considered due to the time constraint. However, keeping in mind the large number of articles retrieved from those two databases identified for our scoping review, we believe that this review covered most of the related articles and the results are indicative of the purpose of this study. In subjective terms, the researcher's professional experience and knowledge played a key role in the determination of articles. This was combined with the adaptation of the eligibility criteria addressed in the method section which provide a justification of the articles selected for the scoping review.

### Implications for Future Research

It is evident from this scoping review that most of the attention of measuring thought control has been on the correlation of the thought control strategies and psychopathology. There have been some studies conducted on the relationship between thought control and aggressive behaviour and suicide ideation. However, this review did not find any study that used 'aggressive' offenders as a sample of interest and tested their coping strategies when facing unwanted thoughts in comparison with non-offenders or examined if there was a correlation between thought control strategies and cognitive distortions. These proposed research areas might seem closely related with law enforcement agencies, yet it is important to understand if there is a correlation between aggression in offenders with thought control strategies in comparison with non-offenders and it is equally crucial to examine if there is a relationship between thought control and cognitive distortions so that more appropriate interventions and rehabilitation programs are designed and implemented.

This scoping review identified number of gaps in the literature that need to be adequately addressed. One gap of particular interest to my proposed research is the issue of using the TCQ on offenders to inform intervention plans. Doing research in this area will add further

insights regarding the difference between offenders and non-offenders in terms of (i) identifying their responses to the TCQ; (ii) testing the correlation between thought control strategies and other measures such as aggression, and cognitive distortions and (iii) examining the implications of the expected differences on interventions and treatment plans. In other words, the proposed research will aim at providing a research-based practice on the effectiveness of designing an intervention and treatment plan driven from the use of TCQ and sample responses to unwanted thoughts for the offenders' sample.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the current scoping review in controlling unwanted thoughts has identified a wide range of research articles. This review provided answers to the questions raised early in the introduction by summarising what is known so far by consulting different articles related to the matter. This review also highlighted the key concepts that should be considered for future research by identifying the gaps in the literature and proposing the possible contribution of the proposed research to the knowledge.

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**Volume 12 Issue 1 January 2023**

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