Repression: A unified theory of a will-o'-the-wisp

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Abstract: By conflating Freudian repression with thought suppression and memory reconstruction, Erdelyi defines repression so broadly that the concept loses its meaning. Worse, perhaps, he fails to provide any evidence that repression actually happens, and ignores evidence that it does not.

Erdelyi's "unified theory of repression" is his latest attempt to resuscitate this most central concept within Freud's theory of psychoanalysis (Erdelyi 1985; 1990; 1993; 1996; Erdelyi & Goldberg 1979). Unfortunately, the present effort is no more successful than the earlier ones.

Erdelyi gets off to a poor start by attempting to show that Freud defined repression broadly to include the conscious suppression of memories, meaning that the act of repression can itself be performed consciously, so long as the repressed mental contents themselves are denied access to consciousness. While it is true that "Freud used repression and suppression interchangeably" (target article, sect. 2, para. 5), Erdelyi's own tabulation (Erdelyi 1990, pp. 9–10) shows that this equation occurs primarily in Freud's earliest writings (see also Esterson 2003). It may well have been Anna Freud (1936/1937) who ultimately dictated that repression must always be unconscious. But apparently by the time psychoanalytic theory had matured, Sigmund Freud himself (Freud 1915a/1957; 1915b/1957) appears to have understood that repression must be unconscious – not just if the process is to have any chance of working, but also if the concept is to make any sense at all (for a thorough analysis of the vagaries of Freud's concept of repression, see Macmillan 1991/1997).

Erdelyi fixates on Freud's earliest, and least coherent, concept of repression because his argument fails without it. As he states, "If repression = suppression, then everybody believes in repression" (sect. 2, para. 7). Maybe, but not so fast. For example, Anderson and his colleagues (Anderson 2001; Anderson & Green 2001; Levy & Anderson 2002), among others (Conway 2001; Gleaves et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2003), have argued that deliberate retrieval inhibition, a variant on directed forgetting (Bjork 1978; Epstein 1972; Kihlstrom & Barnhardt 1993), is a viable laboratory model for the clinical repression of traumatic memories. Erdelyi cites this work favorably, even though its relevance to repression has been vigorously disputed (Kihlstrom 2002; 2004; 2006; Schacter 2001; for a reply, see Anderson & Levy 2002). Setting aside the issue of whether repression can indeed be conscious, the to-be-forgotten material in the retrieval inhibition experiments is not traumatic, conflict-laden, or anxiety-evoking. Even extensive practice with retrieval inhibition fails to produce anything even remotely resembling amnesia. And there is no evidence of the return of the repressed material in the form of implicit memories and other "symptoms." Put bluntly, the analogy is baseless – even more so, if repression *does not* equal suppression, and repression must be unconscious after all.

Erdelyi similarly overreaches when he offers his and others' own research on reminiscence effects and hypermnesia (e.g., Erdelyi 1996) as corroboration for "Freud's claim" (sect. 4, para. 7) that unconscious memories may be recovered with concentration and repeated effort. But we did not need Freud to tell us that people remember better when they try harder. In any event, none of the stimulus materials in the hypermnesia experiments even approached traumatic significance; and none of the forgetting from which the subjects recovered was motivated, either consciously or unconsciously, by considerations of defense. Like retrieval inhibition, hypermnesia as studied in the laboratory is simply irrelevant to the Freudian concept of repression.

For that matter, so is Bartlett's (1932) work on reconstructive processes in memory. While it is true that some of Freud's supplementary defense mechanisms, like rationalization and symbolization, have their cognates in Bartlett's list of memory distortions (target article, Table 1), any equation between the two strips both Bartlett's and Freud's concepts of all their meaning. Erdelyi writes, "The constructions and reconstructions of Freud and Bartlett are the same but for motive" (sect. 5, para. 2). But since motive is *everything* in Freud – whether the sexual and aggressive motives of the id or the anxiety-reducing motives of repression and the other defense mechanisms of the ego – they are not the same at all. From "The War of the Ghosts" to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is a "chancy leap" (sect. 5, para. 3) indeed; let's just not go there.

Retrieval inhibition, elaborative reconstruction, and hypermnesia might serve as mechanisms for repression and the recovery of lost memories, but the target article ignores the most important question of all – which is, whether there is any empirical evidence for repression in the first place. On that score, all we get is the reassurance, in the Abstract, that repression is an "obvious" "empirical fact," plus two "clinical fragments" – B.'s conscious suppression (sect. 3.2.1) and N.'s paranoid delusion (sect. 3.3). Erdelyi does refer to "the contentious area of memory for trauma" (sect. 3.2.1.1, para. 2) – but without ever confronting the fact that dozens of formal studies have yielded not a single convincing case of repression in the entire literature on trauma (see, e.g., Kihlstrom 2006; McNally 2003; Pope et al. 1999). Apparently, most traumatized individuals remember their traumas all too well; and where trauma is forgotten, it appears to be by virtue of processes other than repression.

Erdelyi's first mistake, and it is a big one, is that he defines repression so broadly as to strip the concept of all the features that might make it interesting. As a result, the unification he achieves is entirely Procrustean: the only way the elements can all be fit together is to so severely distort each one of them that they become unrecognizable. His second mistake, and it is equally big, is to ignore the actual empirical evidence about trauma and memory. The result is a unified theory of nothing at all.

Universal repression from consciousness versus abnormal dissociation from self-consciousness

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Abstract: Freud attributed uncovered incest, initially, to *real abuse dissociated from self-consciousness*, and later, to *wishes repressed from consciousness*. Dissociation is preferred on theoretical and empirical grounds. Whereas *dissociation* emerges from double-aspect materialism, *repression* implicates Cartesian dualism. Several studies suggest that abnormal individuals dissociate trauma from self-conscious source-monitoring, thereby convincing themselves that the trauma is imaginary rather than real, and re-experience the trauma as an unbidden image.

It is unfortunate that Erdelyi's effort to unify clinical and laboratory data ignores the century-old dispute between Freudian theorists who attribute clinical data to a universal dynamic of *repression from consciousness* and other psychodynamic theorists who attribute clinical data to a pathological process of *dissociation from self-consciousness.* The dissociative approach was originally developed by Freud's contemporaries – Janet (1907; 1910) and Prince (1910; 1925) – and was philosophically grounded on Fechner's (1860/1966) double-aspect materialism.

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