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

John F. Kihlstrom

Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720–1650.

jfkihlstrom@berkeley.edu **http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm**

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

Robert G. Kunzendorf

Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, MA 01854.

Robert_Kunzendorf@UML.edu

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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In opposition to the Cartesian conception of mind as a nonphysical homunculus that is "conscious of" both sensory material and itself, Fechner conceived the mind to be a bundle of conscious sensations – where particular sensations are subjective aspects of particular neural events, and where such events are not always above the *limen* or threshold for innervating the illusion of self-consciousness. Extending Fechner's framework to clinical theory, Prince (1910) articulated the conceptual basis for dissociation:

> If it is true that dissociated brain systems can functionate . . . and if it is true that they have psychical equivalents, then whether we are self-conscious of any given state of consciousness must depend . . . upon whether the brain process, correlated with it, is synthesized in a particular way with the larger system of brain processes which is correlated at a given moment with the self-conscious personality. And in so far as a brain process can occur detached from the main system of brain processes, so far can consciousness occur without self-consciousness. (p. 94)

Prince (1925) further extended this theoretical framework to the interpretation of clinical data:

> The introspective testimony of my dissociated subjects, who in [hypnosis] recalled vividly and precisely these subconscious experiences [of trauma], has been unanimous that these experiences were without self-consciousness. . . . The conscious events were just sensations. (p. 182)

Freud's early approach to hypnotically uncovered traumas, like Prince's approach, presumed them to be real traumas that had become *dissociated from self-consciousness*. But later, after incestuous trauma was uncovered in his own therapy, Freud reattributed such uncoverings to universal wishes which, not only in patients but also in "normal" people, are *repressed from consciousness* (Davis 1990). And in order to accommodate the repression of universal wishes, Freud (1916/1922) abandoned double-aspect materialism for a new version of Cartesion dualism:

> The unconscious system may therefore be compared to a large ante-room. . . . Adjoining this is a second, smaller apartment, a sort of reception-room, in which consciousness resides. But on the threshold between the two there stands a personage with the office of door-keeper, who examines the various mental excitations, censors them, and denies them admittance to the reception-room when he disapproves of them. . . . The excitations in the unconscious, in the ante-chamber, are not visible to consciousness, which is of course in the other room, so to begin with they remain unconscious. When they have pressed forward to the threshold and have been turned back by the door-keeper, they are "*incapable of becoming conscious*"; we call them then *repressed.* But even those excitations which are allowed over the threshold . . . only become [conscious] if they succeed in attracting the eye of consciousness. (pp. 305–306)

What is new about Freud's version of substance dualism is that it posits two homunculi: the "door-keeper" and the "eye of consciousness."

Freud's (1900/1913) *Interpretation of Dreams* supposedly provided symbolic evidence for the universality of incestuous wishes "in the ante-chamber." However, laboratory studies have demonstrated that the second level of meaning in a "symbolic" dream arises from lingering emotions that consciously accompany the dream, not from unconscious wishes (Hartmann et al. 2002–2003; Kunzendorf & Maurer 1988–1989; Kunzendorf & Paroskie 2000–2001; Kunzendorf et al. 1999–2000). Thus, Hartmann (1998) describes rape victims who have complete memories of their traumas, without any signs of repression – and who also have "symbolic" dreams of ocean waves that become overwhelming tidal waves, as their dream images begin to contextualize their consciously lingering feelings of being overwhelmed.

Recently, the non-Freudian notion of *dissociation from self-consciousness* has been clinically revived by Spiegel (1986; 1990) and Bliss (1986; 1988), and has been theoretically refined by Kihlstrom and Cantor (1984) and Kunzendorf (2000). According to Kunzendorf, one's illusory experience of a self-conscious subject "having" sensations is subjectively manifested as either the tacit knowledge that one is "imaging" sensations or the sensationless knowledge that one is "perceiving" them. Furthermore, the tacit knowledge that one is imaging is the subjective aspect of a neural mechanism monitoring the central innervation of imaged sensations, and the tacit knowledge that one is perceiving is the subjective quality of the same mechanism monitoring the peripheral excitation of perceived sensations.

On Kunzendorf's account, abnormal individuals attenuate self-conscious source-monitoring not only during sleep but also during trauma, thereby encoding the trauma as an imaginary or dreamlike experience, and ultimately remember the trauma not as a real happening but only as an unbidden image. In research confirming this source-monitoring account of dissociation, Kunzendorf and Karpen (1996–1997) demonstrated that the dissociative experience of amnesia is associated with attenuated source-monitoring and, employing Holmes' (1990) paradigm, Kunzendorf and Moran (1993–1994) further demonstrated that traumatic stress induces "dissociation from self-conscious source-monitoring" and *source amnesia*, rather than "repression from consciousness" and *content amnesia.* Moreover, the *return* of dissociated trauma – the unbidden image – is contingent on neither free association as posited by Freud nor hypermnesia as posited by Erdelyi, but on shifting one's recall criteria from "previously perceived" sensations to "familiar" (perceived or imaged) sensations (Kunzendorf 1989–1990; Kunzendorf & Boisvert 1996).

Finally, Erdelyi's distinction between "repression from consciousness" and "distortion of consciousness" misses the important source-monitoring relationship between dissociation and hallucination. In persons whose wakeful source-monitoring is unstable and unreliable, dissociative symptoms tend to emerge when the realities of abuse are defensively inferred to be nightmarish imaginings instead of traumatic percepts, and psychotic symptoms tend to emerge when mental images of the taboo are defensively inferred to be percepts beamed into the head by the devil or the C.I.A. instead of self-generated images. Indeed, among persons subjected to extreme childhood abuse and diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder (Kluft 1987a), Kluft observed first-rank symptoms of delusion and hallucination in 30 out of 30 cases (Kluft 1987b). However, neither dissociative inferences about traumatic percepts nor psychotic inferences about taboo images are likely to arise in persons whose wakeful source-monitoring is robust: Kunzendorf et al. (1997–1998) observed dissociative symptoms primarily in those abused patients who scored high on Tellegen and Atkinson's (1974) test for Absorption in Fantasy – a test which Rader et al. (1996) found to be predictive of unstable source-monitoring.

Repression and the unconscious

Robert Langnickel and Hans Markowitsch

Department of Physiological Psychology, University of Bielefeld, 33501 Bielefeld, Germany.

robert.langnickel@philosophie.uni-bielefeld.de

hjmarkowitsch@uni-bielefeld.de

http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/psychologie/ae/AE14/HOMEPAGE/Markowitsch_home.html

Abstract: We argue that repression is primarily an unconscious process and that the position of Erdelyi is not coherent with Freud's views on the matter. Repression of ideas is a process that takes place without the knowledge of the subject. In this respect, it is essentially different from suppression, where ideas are acted upon by a conscious will.

Erdelyi rightly emphasizes that there is a "Babel of misunderstandings" (target article, Abstract) in psychology about the

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