From repression and attention to culture and automaticity

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Abstract: Erdelyi grants "repression" emotional and cognitive qualities that can modulate consciousness and probably overlap with what is typically attributed to "attention." Such a broad appellation of repression explains virtually all behavior and lacks specificity. Repression and attention elucidate behavior in different clinical, cognitive, and cultural contexts. Refining these influences, we identify a few lacunae in Erdelyi's account.

Erdelyi competently threads through the clinical and experimental literature, expanding and redefining "repression" so as to uphold Freud and question post-Freudian psychoanalysis. Repression is placed on and straddles the conscious–nonconscious continuum; all "defense mechanisms" are subsumed as "elaborative" mechanisms. Erdelyi's repression presupposes several mental faculties (e.g., self awareness, reasoning, language, and memory) and engulfs too many behaviors; that is, it lacks specificity.

It is unclear why repression should be defined as consciousness-lowering; even Erdelyi's own analysis construes it as consciousness-feeding or consciousness-regulating. Similar to the operationalization of attention, repression implies that significant information (e.g., stimuli and memories) is selected and deployed to reach a goal in the context of motivational, emotional imperatives. Indeed, both attention – especially when construed as an organ system (Posner & Fan, in press) – and repression subserve overlapping functions. And yet, they appear to differ in a specific context: Whereas repression is an ulterior psychopathological notion, researchers have unraveled a great deal about theories, mechanisms, and typologies of attention in healthy as well as pathological populations (Raz & Buhle 2006).

Attention is a strong regulator of cognition, emotion, and action. In the present context, we speak of executive attention, which goes by many names including supervisory, selective, conflict resolution, and focused attention. This form of attention relates to self-regulation (i.e., the ability to manipulate one's own emotions, thoughts, or actions upon direction from the self or another person), emotional-regulation (i.e., the reduction, increase, or sustaining of an emotional response such as fear, anger, or pleasure based upon the actions of the self or others),[1] effortful control (i.e., the ability to inhibit, activate, or sustain a response, which includes the capacity to inhibit a dominant response in order to perform a subdominant response), and inhibitory control (i.e., the reduction in the probability, speed, or vigor of the normal response to a stimulus based upon instruction from the self or others). Both repression and attention help explain similar cognitive phenomena. However, one caveat of Erdelyi's model is that it fails to address cognitive influences such as automaticity and culture. A unified theory of repression and attention should help explain not only psychopathology (e.g., defense against unconscious) but also phenomena such as trance, "dissociated" behavior, hypnosis, and other culture-bound syndromes of psychiatric interest. Indeed, clinical psychiatry, medical anthropology, and the social history of medicine document that such phenomena represent human universals (Fabrega 1975; 1997). These accounts describe observable syndromes of behavior that are culturally constructed and appear standardized, if not largely automated, yet subject to different externally viewed interpretation (Simons & Hughes 1985).

Cognitive psychologists generally agree that mental processes come in two forms, automatic and controlled, and that automatic processes are either innately automatic, or become automatized through extensive practice (Shiffrin & Schneider 1977; Spelke et al. 1976). Erdelyi's variant of repression seems automatic in this sense. However, some individuals (e.g., highly suggestible people) can "un-ring the bell" and regain control over something that's been automatized (Raz et al. 2006). The literature offers little or no discussion of this issue, leaving the question unanswered and mostly unasked, although certain meditative disciplines describe achieving the "de-automatization" of thought and at least a few reports support such accounts (Alexander et al. 1989; Dillbeck 1982; Wenk-Sormaz 2005). Erdelyi provides but a glimpse into the relationship of repression to automaticity and stops short of contextualizing how gaining control over an automatic process may relate to repression. Such treatment is sorely missing from his account.

Culture is expectation-driven behavior, and products of "enculturation" reside in brain networks that influence processes such as awareness, memory, and action. As a pool of information, culture allows individuals to shape behavior and habit patterns and informs as to what is acceptable and normative. As it evolved, it set the stage on which individuals could jointly work out their circumstances in a personal and group-centered way (Fabrega 2002). Culture influences how attention and repression function in a context of competing impulses, values, and goals toward adaptive behavior (Raz et al. 2005). Culturally encoded information influences much of what psychiatric disorders produce in observable behavior (Fabrega 1975). Similar to individual and genetic variations (Fan et al. 2003; Mayr et al. 2005), culture is also wired into the brain, and the neural manifestations of disparate cultures likely correlate with different neural patterns. For example, bicultural individuals can assume different roles as a function of environmental cues, and bilingual persons can report feeling like a different person depending on the language they use. Thus, personality can change as a function of language and culture, including historical periods and mentalities, suggesting that personality is perhaps more malleable, and culture more influential, than is commonly held. Although powerful cultural signals can be offset by awareness and experience, the contextual nature of personality is of importance in a world that is increasingly multicultural and multilingual.

In the context of conflict resolution and conflict monitoring (Bush et al. 2000), one would expect attention, repression, or another suitable behavior-regulating mechanism to explain processing items of information over brief time. However, it should also help explain the larger whole producing extended syndromes of symbolically meaningful and observable behavior that include regulation and coordination of mental material and deployment of motor components (Garro 2001).

In unified context, repression, attention, and culture are useful to the extent that their mechanisms and effects are identifiable and measurable. Attention is well within this scope; repression and culture less so. However, the concept of repression seems to serve a heuristic purpose because researchers can use it to make predictions concerning new studies. Although it is unclear whether Erdelyi's theory is falsifiable in the Popperian sense, a brief glance into the history of science shows that multiple theories were not falsifiable initially, not because they were not sufficiently well operationalized in terms of measurable variables (e.g., in Freudian theories), but because they were not fully developed. We hope that Erdelyi's account will be extended and revised to permit more testable predictions as additional research is conducted using new methodologies.

NOTE

1. Emotion regulation can be a form of self-regulation but it could also be induced by the actions of others.

Towards a post-Freudian theory of repression: Reflections on the role of inhibitory functions

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X06419117 Published online by Cambridge University Press