Resolving Repression
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Abstract: The feuding factions of the memory wars, that is, those concerned with the validity of recovered memories versus those concerned with false memories, are unified by Erdelyi’s theory of repression. Evidence shows suppression, inhibition, and retrieval blocking can have profound yet reversible effects on a memory’s accessibility, and deserve as prominent a role in the recovered memory debate as evidence of false memories. Erdelyi’s theory shows that both inhibitory and elaborative processes cooperate to keep unwanted memories out of consciousness.

Repression has long been the battleground in psychology’s family feud. No other issue has seen such contentious and emotional brawling among psychologists as the question of repression. Once seen as merely an academic debate, the memory wars now rage with such intensity not only because of theoretical disagreements and empirical squabbles, but because there have been very real victims of the war – victims of true physical and sexual abuse, and victims unjustly accused of abuse that did not actually occur. In his treatment of this divisive question, Erdelyi negotiates a peace plan for the feuding factions by reviewing the disparate views and contentions, integrating the relevant ideas and findings, correcting persistent misunderstandings, and synthesizing his unified theory of repression.

The essence of Erdelyi’s theory unifies the warring factions of the memory wars by accepting and synthesizing the two positions. Erdelyi states that “repression is divided into two subclasses:
(1) inhibitory or subtractive processes (e.g., degrading the ‘signal’), and (2) elaborative or additive processes (e.g., adding ‘noise’ to the signal)” (sect. 3.1, para. 3). Erdelyi envisions these two subclasses, avoidance and distortion, not as adversarial processes, as has been assumed by the false memory debate, but rather as processes that cooperate in the service of defensive emotion regulation. This synthesis makes a lot of sense.

Some of the misunderstandings have occurred because of verbal labels. Examples of problematic labels include distinctions among the terms “repression,” “suppression,” and “inhibition.” Erdelyi indicates that if we drop the bogus requirement that repression must be caused by unconscious mechanisms, these terms are essentially synonymous. There may be reason, however, to distinguish suppression from inhibition, even if both are important mechanisms that serve to keep unwanted thoughts and memories out of consciousness. Whereas Wegner has used the term “suppression” to refer to a temporary means of keeping thoughts out of mind (e.g., Wegner 1989), Anderson and his colleagues have used the term “inhibition” to mean the resultant effect on a memory following
repeated suppression of a memory retrieval (e.g., Anderson et al. 1994; Anderson & Green 2001).

Some misunderstandings in the memory wars have been caused by conceptual disagreements. Erdelyi decouples the concepts of “defense” and “repression,” indicating that repression, as a mechanism, might or might not be engaged for the purpose of defensive emotion regulation. Psychologists who focus on the mechanisms of repression can study those mechanisms independently of defensive coping purposes. This understanding is important not only for investigating the mechanisms that underlie forgetting, such as suppression, inhibition, and blocking, but also for investigations that give rise to elaborative repression, such as false memories and memory attribution errors.

Some misunderstandings have persisted because of limited empirical evidence, or more often, because some types of laboratory research have not been commonly associated with the repression debate. The relevance of false memory research done in the laboratory to the repression debate has been made abundantly and compellingly clear by such investigators as Loftus, Roediger, and many others. Empirical studies of forgetting and recovered memories, however, have been cited only rarely in this debate. Erdelyi appropriately points to a long history of laboratory research on mechanisms of forgetting, dating back to Ebbinghaus, and including more recent research on suppression, inhibition, and blocking. These relatively simple laboratory procedures can induce strikingly potent forgetting effects (e.g., Smith et al. 2003). Equally important is research on memory recovery, which includes both reminiscence (e.g., Erdelyi & Kleinbard 1978) and cue-dependent recovery (e.g., Smith et al. 2003).

One piece of the big picture that Erdelyi has neglected concerns the mechanisms and consequences of memory recovery. Although he points out that forgetting need not be due to decay (or “obliviscence”), he implies that reminiscence is caused simply by persistent efforts to retrieve. Reminiscence can be caused by the same type of restructuring that can give rise to insight in problem solving, that is, by breaking mental sets that initially block successful retrieval. For example, Smith and Vela (1991) found incubated reminiscence effects, similar to incubation in problem solving, and their evidence indicates that the increased reminiscence found after a delay is not a result of simply attempting to retrieve more. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2003) showed that appropriate cues can trigger powerful memory recovery effects. The affective consequences of memory recovery may also be important, particularly if recovery is accompanied either by disturbing realizations, or by relief when restructuring makes it clear that stressful memories can be more rationally or innocently reinterpreted. More research is needed to investigate the emotional
outcomes of memory recovery.
Erdelyi's unified theory of repression provides a cogent and compelling framework for understanding several bodies of research, as well as the history of psychotherapy. His theory is also important because of the questions that must now be investigated to expand the utility of his theory. One important gap is research on implicit memory of reversibly forgotten material; that is, the "return of the repressed" in the form of non-declarative memories. Other insufficiently researched questions include what are the limits of forgetting (e.g., how and under what circumstances emotional and distinctive experiences are forgotten), the limits of false memories (e.g., what degree of schema consistency must be maintained for false memories to occur), and the limits of recovered memories (e.g., how do repressed memories degrade in detail and accuracy over time). More research that informs us on the question of distinguishing between false and valid recovered memories is also needed. Finally, we must learn more about methods for recovering memories, including how those methods can enhance the amount and the accuracy of recovered memories, and what the affective consequences of recovery are likely to be.
Erdelyi correctly points out how researchers have continued to misunderstand and misinterpret each other, how we dissociate ideas and research that should be related, and how partisans in the memory war have imposed unjustified distinctions that have blurred our understanding of repression. His theory takes important steps in terms of resolving the subject of repression, and, hopefully, demilitarizing the memory wars.
References


