

# The unified theory of repression

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**Abstract:** Repression has become an empirical fact that is at once obvious and problematic. Fragmented clinical and laboratory traditions and disputed terminology have resulted in a Babel of misunderstandings in which false distinctions are imposed (e.g., between repression and suppression) and necessary distinctions not drawn (e.g., between the mechanism and the use to which it is put, defense being just one). “Repression” was introduced by Herbart to designate the (nondefensive) inhibition of ideas by other ideas in their struggle for consciousness. Freud adapted repression to the defensive inhibition of “unbearable” mental contents. Substantial experimental literatures on attentional biases, thought avoidance, interference, and intentional forgetting exist, the oldest prototype being the work of Ebbinghaus, who showed that intentional avoidance of memories results in their progressive forgetting over time. It has now become clear, as clinicians had claimed, that the inaccessible materials are often available and emerge indirectly (e.g., procedurally, implicitly). It is also now established that the Ebbinghaus retention function can be partly reversed, with resulting increases of conscious memory over time (*hypermnnesia*). Freud’s clinical experience revealed early on that exclusion from consciousness was effected not just by simple repression (inhibition) but also by a variety of distorting techniques, some deployed to degrade latent contents (*denial*), all eventually subsumed under the rubric of *defense mechanisms* (“repression in the widest sense”). Freudian and Bartlettian distortions are essentially the same, even in name, except for motive (cognitive vs. emotional), and experimentally induced false memories and other “memory illusions” are laboratory analogs of self-induced distortions.

**Keywords:** avoidance; Bartlett; defense; denial; distortion; Ebbinghaus; false-memories; Freud; inhibition; repression; suppression

## 1. Introduction

Repression has been a puzzle for scientific psychology. It is not clear to many, even at this date, whether repression is best regarded as an obvious fact of mental life or an outright (and even dangerous) myth. In this article I sketch out a theory of repression that integrates the largely dissociated data of the clinic and the laboratory into a unified framework that is simple, rich – and right.

The article is organized into four sections besides this Introduction. First, in a historical analysis (sect. 2), I show that the classic conception of repression, from Herbart to Freud, is consistent with modern laboratory research, but that confusion has resulted from a semantic distortion introduced, ironically, by Anna Freud, who insisted that repression needed to be an unconscious process, its conscious counterpart being “suppression.” Sigmund Freud, actually, used repression and suppression interchangeably and insisted on “the unity of mental life” across the conscious–unconscious continuum, so that “repression” could be *both* conscious and unconscious. The historical analysis is thought to be important because it dissolves much of the controversy surrounding repression. Building on this historical foundation, the third section articulates the unified theory of repression that is being proposed. Repression, conceived of as a class of consciousness-lowering processes, is divided into two subclasses, inhibitory and elaborative processes. *Inhibitory* (or *simple*) *repression* involves cognitive avoidance (not-thinking) of some target material and leads to loss of accessible memory. Some of the lost memory may, however, express itself indirectly and may be partially recovered with subsequent retrieval effort. *Elaborative repression* distorts the original memory through a variety of

transformations and false additions. These two subclasses of memory degradation subsume most of the classic clinical manifestations of repression and, critically, are extensively buttressed, as shown in Sections 4 (on inhibition) and 5 (on elaborative distortions), by the experimental literature. Consequently, a viable unified framework for repression is afforded.

## 2. History and definition of repression, including distortions of the concept

Although traditionally associated with Freud, the term as well as basic concept of *repression* was introduced into psychology more than half a century before the advent of psychoanalysis by one of the founders of scientific

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