



PARADOXICAL AND LESS PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF THOUGHT SUPPRESSION: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT. *The process of consciously trying to avoid certain thoughts is referred to as thought suppression. Experimental research has documented that thought suppression may have paradoxical effects in that it leads to an increased frequency of the to-be-suppressed thought intruding consciousness. It has also been claimed that suppression has disruptive effects on episodic memory (i.e., a less paradoxical effect). The present article critically evaluates studies on the paradoxical and less paradoxical effects of thought suppression. More specifically, the issue of whether thought suppression plays a causative role in the development of various psychopathological symptoms is addressed. While laboratory studies have come up with highly consistent findings about the paradoxical effects of thought suppression, there is, as yet, little reason to believe that such effects are implicated in the etiology of obsessions, phobias, or other psychopathological conditions. Relatively little work has been done on the alleged memory effects of thought suppression. The studies that have examined this issue have found mixed results. Accordingly, the case for the amnesic power of thought suppression is weak. Alternative explanations and competing theories are discussed, and it is concluded that research concerned with the psychopathological consequences of thought suppression would benefit from development of better taxonomies of intrusive thinking and cognitive avoidance strategies. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.*

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IN CLINICAL LITERATURE, the term “repression” may have various meanings. Yet, in most cases, it refers to defensive maneuvers that expel unwanted thoughts from conscious awareness. In a number of case studies, Sigmund Freud sought to document the pathogenic effect of repression. The hysteria of Dora, the phobia of Little

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Hans, the obsession of the Ratman: All of these anecdotal testimonies were presented by Freud as support for the notion that repression is the vehicle behind highly diverse manifestations of psychopathology. Consider the example of the Ratman (S. Freud, 1955). This patient was plagued by the following obsession: He imagined punishing his father by fastening a pan with rats to his father's rectum. How is it possible that someone suffers from such a bizarre intrusion? Freud came up with this explanation: During his youth, the Ratman systematically repressed aggressive thoughts about his father, but as he grew older the repressed material surfaced in the form of a pathological obsession. According to Freud, the Ratman is a prototypical example of the antecedent role of repression in the development of psychopathology. Anna Freud further elaborated this idea and claimed that "Repression is the most dangerous defence mechanism (. . .) Repression is the basis for the formation of neurosis" (A. Freud, 1946, p. 44). She argued that repression is an unconscious, automatic process. By this view, the person does not know that he/she tries to avoid certain thoughts (see, for an extensive analysis, Erdelyi, 1993).

To date, many research psychologists would argue that the Freudian view on repression is problematic. For example, Holmes (1990) summarized a large body of experimental studies concerned with repression and concluded that "despite over sixty years of research involving numerous approaches by many thoughtful and clever investigators, at the present time there is no controlled laboratory evidence supporting the concept of repression" (p. 96). A similar conclusion was reached by Eysenck (1985), who in his "Decline and Fall of the Freudian Empire" carefully reviewed research on repression and other Freudian concepts. Eysenck concluded that

what emerges again and again from examination of the empirical and experimental literature is that authors practically always fail to look at their studies and results from the point of view of psychological theory, to see whether they could have been predicted as well, or better, in terms well known to academic psychologists, rather than in Freudian terms. (pp. 159–160)

Unlike automatic and unconscious repression, deliberate attempts to remove thoughts from consciousness lend themselves much easier to experimental analysis. Wegner (1989) termed this type of mental avoidance "thought suppression," but the phenomenon was already extensively described by William James (1890). James assumed that an unwanted cognition can be avoided (suppressed) by shifting one's attention to another thought. He believed that in this way, people can regulate and control their stream of consciousness. Wegner is less optimistic about this possibility. He maintains that the mental control that people can exert over their stream of consciousness is limited. To illustrate this point, he asked undergraduates to suppress all thoughts about a cup of coffee for a 30-second period. Whenever the students thought about a cup of coffee, they had to ring a bell. The average frequency with which students thought about the to-be-suppressed item was 3.7. Interestingly, when undergraduates were instructed to concentrate on thinking about a cup of coffee for 30 seconds, their thoughts wandered away with an average frequency of 3.3 times. These findings led Wegner (1989) to conclude that people are not able to control their thoughts for periods longer than 10 seconds. He also noted that thought suppression has a paradoxical effect in that it enhances the frequency with which the suppressed thought surfaces in the stream of consciousness. This paradoxical effect would suggest that suppression may have a pathogenic potential. In the words of Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White (1987): "The observed processes, though fairly

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