

REJOINDER

Skirting the Issue: What Does Believing in Repression Mean?

Henry Otgaar

Maastricht University and Catholic University of Leuven

Jianqin Wang

Fudan University

Olivier Dodier
Université de NantesMark L. Howe
Maastricht University and City, University of LondonScott O. Lilienfeld
Emory University and University of MelbourneElizabeth F. Loftus
University of California, IrvineSteven Jay Lynn
Binghamton UniversityHarald Merckelbach
Maastricht UniversityLawrence Patihis
University of Portsmouth


We show that, in contrast to [Brewin, Li, Ntarantana, Unsowrth, and McNeilis \(2019\)](#), large proportions of laypersons believe in the scientifically controversial phenomenon of *unconscious* repressed memories. We provide new survey data showing that when participants are asked specific questions about what they mean when they report that traumatic memories can be repressed, most provide answers strongly consistent with unconscious repression. Our findings continue to show that researchers, legal professionals, and clinicians should be wary of invoking unconscious repression in their work.

Keywords: unconscious repression, repressed memory, trauma, memory

In their reply, [Brewin, Li, McNeilis, Ntarantana, and Unsowrth \(2020\)](#) criticized us for relying on a single questionnaire item to measure repression. Brewin and colleagues have, intentionally or not,

skirted the core issue animating our critique. Our goal was not to measure repression in multiple ways but to correct the shortcomings in [Brewin, Li, Ntarantana, Unsowrth, and McNeilis's \(2019\)](#) study. Although they claimed to examine unconscious repression, they did not include the term *unconscious repression*. Furthermore, although they criticized previous survey research on repression for lacking “sound methodology,” their design did not allow for clear conclusions regarding what people mean when they say they believe in repression. Hence, we improved on their design ([Otgaar et al., in press](#)) and, together with an extended replication of our work ([Dodier, Gilet, & Colombel, 2020](#)), found that many people indeed believe in unconscious repression, even more so than in deliberate suppression (see [Dodier et al., 2020](#)).

We believe that the burden of proof falls on Brewin et al. to demonstrate what people mean when they say that they believe in repression. As a first step in this direction, we conducted a new study that included additional statements assessing what people mean when they endorse the view that traumatic memories can be repressed. We recruited 1,015 participants using MTurk (mean age = 42, standard deviation [*SD*] = 14; 52% female).¹ We administered a questionnaire on memory beliefs,

 Henry Otgaar, Department of Clinical Psychological Sciences, Maastricht University, and Faculty of Law, Catholic University of Leuven; Jianqin Wang, Department of Psychology, Fudan University; Olivier Dodier, Faculty of Psychology, Université de Nantes; Mark L. Howe, Department of Clinical Psychological Sciences, Maastricht University, and Department of Psychology, City, University of London; Scott O. Lilienfeld, Department of Psychology, Emory University, and School of Psychological Sciences, University of Melbourne; Elizabeth F. Loftus, Department of Psychological Science, University of California, Irvine; Steven Jay Lynn, Department of Psychology, Binghamton University; Harald Merckelbach, Department of Clinical Psychological Sciences, Maastricht University; Lawrence Patihis, Department of Psychology, University of Portsmouth.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Henry Otgaar, Department of Clinical Psychological Sciences, Maastricht University, P.O. Box 616, 6211 LK Maastricht, the Netherlands, or to Lawrence Patihis, Department of Psychology, University of Portsmouth, Winston Churchill Avenue, Portsmouth, PO1 2UP, United Kingdom. E-mail: Henry.Otgaar@maastrichtuniversity.nl or lawrence.patihis@port.ac.uk

¹ A full description of the study can be found here: (<https://osf.io/puzdy/>).

along with follow-up questions. The critical statement was “Traumatic memories are often repressed” (6-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). If people agreed with this statement, they received follow-up questions regarding whether traumatic memories are (a) accessible during repression and (b) unconscious during repression. We found that 89.5% ($n = 909$) agreed to some extent that traumatic memories can be repressed, and of those, 73.7% ($n = 670$) agreed that such memories are inaccessible, and 80.9% ($n = 735$) agreed that such memories are unconscious. Both answers on the follow-up questions are strongly consistent with the concept of unconscious repression.

We have provided the first evidence that, *contra* Brewin et al. (2019), when additional items are asked, large proportions of laypersons endorse the concept of unconscious repression. Given the weak scientific evidence supporting unconscious repression of autobiographical memories, the apparent strong belief in unconscious repression among much of the general public, and the potential hazards associated with this belief (e.g., uncritical acceptance of suggestive therapeutic techniques to exhumate otherwise inaccessible memories of trauma), our findings provide further grounds for warning researchers, legal professionals, and clinicians against referring to the concept of unconscious repression in their work.

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Received August 3, 2020

Accepted August 10, 2020 ■

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