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An Experimental Study of Repression

D. J. DOLAND AND CHARLES F. HANER

INTRODUCTION

The concept of repression is commonly referred to in terms of pleasant and unpleasant material. We say that an individual will tend to remember pleasant experiences and will tend to forget or "repress" unpleasant experiences. Many of the investigators doing research in this field have failed to look into the meaning of the word "unpleasant" as it is used by Freud, and have mistakenly used affective tone as a criterion. Edwards (1942), in an analysis of the concept of repression, arrived at the following conclusions:

It is commonly assumed by those investigators who seek to test the Freudian theory by relating the quality of affective tone to forgetting and retention, that all pleasant experiences are in harmony with the ego's desires, while all unpleasant experiences are in conflict with them. It is our opinion that these relationships do not necessarily hold in all cases. Pleasant experiences, for example, may actually conflict, with a specific frame of reference. In our own culture this is probably true with respect to certain aspects of sexual behavior The important consideration, as we see it, is not so much a matter of determining whether an experience is pleasant or unpleasant, but rather a matter of determining the presence or absence of conflict of this particular experience in terms of the individual's values.(1).

Sears (1943) delimits repressible experiences in essentially the same way:

There are many kinds of "unpleasant" mental content, but the kinds that initiate the repression process are rather narrowly limited. These are the ones associated with anxiety arising from interference either with the conscience (or other motives designed to preserve the parents' love), or with the maintenance of pride and self-esteem.(5).

The present study has been conducted on the basis of this interpretation of the term "repression," with the emphasis on first determining the frame of reference of the subject, rather than assuming that a given experience by its affective tone will lead to repression.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

One of the most commonly used methods of studying repression has been to measure the recall of real life experiences. Stagner (1931) had his subjects report only the *most* pleasant and the *most* unpleasant experience which had happened to them prior to the experiment. He reports that the unpleasant experiences given by his subjects (college students) were for the most part experiences involving conflict, which would seem to indicate that they were of the type which might be considered repressible in Freud's use of the term. The subjects were then asked to record all of their associations (such as colors, sounds, odors, etc.) with these experiences. After a period of 3 weeks they were given a typewritten description of the experiences and were asked to fill in as many of the original associations as possible. The percentage of recalled associations was

reliably larger for the pleasant experience than for the unpleasant experience.

Another study of this kind made by Koch (1930) consisted of testing college students for recall of test grades. During the early part of a semester students were given a total of 10 quizzes, and upon receiving each graded paper the student was required to rate it on a scale of 1 to 5. A rating of 1 would indicate that he was very happy with the grade, and a rating of 5 would indicate that he was very discouraged. The papers were collected again and 5 weeks after the last quiz the students were asked to recall all 10 grades. Those grades which had received ratings of "1" were recalled the best.

Another method of study has been to establish repression by artificial means in the laboratory. In an experiment by Rosenzweig (1941), two groups of subjects (Harvard students) were given a series of 30 jig-saw puzzles to solve. One group was told that they would be assisting the experimenter in classifying the puzzles according to degree of difficulty. The other group was given the same puzzles to solve but was told that it was a form of intelligence test. In both cases the subjects were permitted to finish half of the puzzles but were stopped when half-way through in the remaining half. They were then asked to name the puzzles which they had attempted. The ego-involved group (i.e. the group which had been told that the puzzles constituted an intelligence test) remembered more of the completed puzzles, and the other group remembered more of the uncompleted puzzles.

EXPERIMENTAL METHOD

A. Subjects

In the present study the hypothesis was formulated that recall of material reflecting pro-church sentiment will be significantly higher than recall of material reflecting anti-church sentiment for individuals with a relatively high degree of religious orthodoxy. Two groups of 19 subjects each were chosen from beginning psychology classes on the basis of scores obtained on the Thurstone attitude scale toward the church. Out of a total of 130 students given the attitude scales, only 4 were found who scored in the classification which Thurstone has called "strongly favorable to the church," and no one scored in the classification which he has called "strongly antagonistic." Consequently, the experimental group was made up of subjects whose mean score was 1.8, which placed them in the classification of "favorable to the church"—the second highest group on the scale. The control group was made up of subjects whose mean score was 5.5, which placed them in the classification of "wavering in attitude"—the middle group on the scale.

B. Apparatus

Both groups were to be given 2 short articles to read; one being favorable to the church, and the other being antagonistic to the church. The articles had been organized with 2 objectives in mind: first, that they would be sufficiently unfamiliar that past informa-

tion would be of minimal importance in answering the questions; and second, that they would be sufficiently specific in content to permit an objective examination to be used as a measure of retention. This examination consisted of 24 true and false, matching, and multiple choice questions, half of which were based on the article favorable to the church and, half of which were based on the article antagonistic to the church.

C. Procedure

A period of several weeks elapsed between the time the attitude scales were given and the time that the subjects were asked to appear to participate in the experiment. No indication was given to them of the basis for selection of subjects, and they were informed that the study was one which concerned learning. The subjects were instructed that they were to be given 2 articles to read; that they would study the first one for a period of 10 minutes, and at the end of that time would be given a second one which they would study for 10 minutes, after which time they would be given an objective examination which would cover the material contained in both articles. The order of presentation of the material was regulated so that one-half of each group was given the favorable material to read first, and the other half was given the antagonistic material to read first. There was no time limit imposed for completion of the examination. This part of the experiment was concluded just prior to Christmas vacation. When the students returned from vacation (a time interval of 3 weeks) they were informed that we were now interested in determining how much they had retained of what they had learned, and they were given the same objective test which they had taken previously.

In setting up the experiment it was decided that instead of equating the 2 groups for intelligence, the comparison would be made in terms of the *relative* amounts of retention for the 2 articles, rather than in terms of the *actual* amount of retention. The individual's score on the test would be expressed as the ratio of the number of correct responses to questions on the article favorable to the church, to the number of correct responses to questions on the article antagonistic to the church. Each individual would have 2 scores: the ratio obtained the first time he took the test, and the ratio obtained the second time he took the test. The determination of the ratio figure for each subject on his test immediately following the presentation of the material serves as a measure of the relative amounts of each article he has mastered. By a comparison with the ratio figure obtained after the 3 week interval it would be possible to determine whether there had been a differential forgetting for the 2 kinds of material.

RESULTS

The results obtained in this study are indicated in Table 1.

TABLE 1
DIFFERENCES OF THE MEAN RATIOS* OBTAINED

Group	Mean Ratio 1st Test	Mean Ratio 2nd Test	Difference	Level of Confidence
Control	1.114	1.256	.142	18%
Experimental	1.077	1.476	.399	1%

*Number of correct responses to questions on article favorable to church.

Number of correct responses to questions on article antagonistic to church.

The difference obtained for the control group between the mean ratio on the test which immediately followed presentation of the material to be read and the mean ratio on the test at the end of the 3 week interval is significant at only the 18% level of confidence, which cannot be considered statistically significant. The difference obtained between the mean ratios for the experimental group is significant beyond the 1% level of confidence. Thus, the results of this study tend to substantiate the theory of repression in that material which conflicted with the subject's frame of reference was forgotten to a greater extent than material which was in harmony with it.

In working with a complex mental mechanism such as repression it is extremely difficult to determine and control the many variables. Many of the studies which have been done have tended to substantiate the theory but as Sears (1943) has pointed out, these have added very little to the available information. The directing of emphasis from affective tone to the existence or non-existence of conflict with the individual's frame of reference has been an important step in the study.

In setting up this experiment it had been hoped that it would be possible to select 3 groups of subjects: a group from each extreme of the attitude scale, and a middle one as a control. Most of the experiments which have been done on repression have been content to establish a situation which can be reasonably supposed will conflict with the individual's ego, and the measure of difference of recall for favorable and unfavorable experiences has been a qualitative one rather than a quantitative one. For such ego-involved frames of reference as have already had attitude scales devised for them, there would seem to be a possibility for degree of ego involvement to be determined more or less quantitatively. This would make it possible for one variable to be controlled, and other variables such as length of time between the experience and time of recall could be studied. Such a methodology as has been used in this experiment, using a learning situation, seems particularly well adapted to this type of investigation.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The results of this study tend to substantiate the theory of repression, in that material which conflicted with the individual's frame of reference was forgotten to a greater extent than material which was in harmony with it.
2. The possibility of using attitude scales to determine degree of ego involvement more or less quantitatively is offered as a suggestion for further investigation in the study of repression.

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