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Psychologists uncover suppressed-memory clues

James Butcher

Sigmund Freud's thesis that the brain can repress unwanted memories has been given a scientific basis this week with the publication of a study by two US psychologists. "Our work allows Freud's idea to be understood in terms of widely accepted mechanisms of cognitive control that apply in a broader range of circumstances", says Michael Anderson (University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA), one of the authors of the study.

The scientists used a simple experimental paradigm to test whether human beings can consciously suppress a memory. The participants studied 40 pairs of words (eg, ordeal–roach) so that they could easily provide the right hand word when given the left hand one as a cue. Importantly, they were asked to either fixate on the printed cue word for 4 s and make a conscious effort not to think about the associated word, or to recall the associated word as quickly as possible (*Nature* 2001; **410:** 366–69).

When they were later given a memory test for all the word pairs, those words that were consciously suppressed were remembered less often than when the participants had been encouraged to think about the association. "We even found the effect when we gave the subjects monetary incentives to come up with as many right answers as possible", enthuses Anderson. "Thus as predicted, trying to avoid awareness of an unwanted memory actually led people to forget later on, even when they really wanted to recall it."

According to Martin Conway (University of Bristol, UK) what is especially surprising is that this existence of consciously initiated, executive inhibition of memory "occurs for unrelated pairs of words–hardly comparable to psychodynamic (primitive) motives or

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to the amnesia that can result after the trauma of childhood abuse".