

**Skirting the Issue:  
What Does Believing in Repression Mean?**

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**Skirting the Issue:**

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In their reply, Brewin et al. (in press) 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 et al.'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 et al., 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 1015 participants using MTurk (mean age = 42,  $SD = 14$ ; 52% female)<sup>1</sup>. We administered a questionnaire on memory beliefs along with follow-up questions. The critical statement was “Traumatic memories are often repressed” (six-point Likert scale 1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). If people agreed

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<sup>1</sup> A full description of the study can be found in the online Supplemental Materials (<https://osf.io/puzdy/>)

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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., 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 exhume 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.

**References**

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