The Mnemic Neglect Model:
Experimental Demonstrations of Inhibitory Repression in Normal Adults

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Abstract

Normal adults recall poorly social feedback that refers to them, is negative, and pertains to core self-aspects. This phenomenon, dubbed the mnemic neglect effect, is equivalent to inhibitory repression. It is instigated under conditions of high self-threat, it implicates not-thinking during encoding, and it involves memories that are recoverable with such techniques as recognition accuracy.

In a laboratory program of research, we demonstrated in essence inhibitory repression in normal adults. Our starting point was the assumption that people receive mixed (i.e., positive and negative) feedback in their daily lives. For example, an employer may praise them for the completion of a project but point out that the outcome could have been more successful. A friend may remark that she values their dependability but not their fashion sense. A partner may exalt them as a lover but lament their hygiene habits. How do people process mixed feedback? Does it matter if the same feedback refers to the self as opposed to another person? Stated differently, do people process and remember self-referent feedback differently than other-referent feedback? More interestingly, how do people defend the self (compared to another person) from threatening information?

We introduced the mnemic neglect model (Sedikides, Green, & Pinter, 2004) to address these issues. The model endorses the notion that people are motivated to defend, maintain, or increase the positivity of the self-concept (Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). In addition, the model draws a distinction between negative versus positive feedback, central (i.e., pertaining to relatively high certainty, descriptiveness, and importance self-aspects) versus peripheral (i.e., pertaining to relatively low certainty, descriptiveness, and importance self-aspects) feedback, and self- versus other-referent feedback (Sedikides, 1993, 1995). Negative, central, and self-referent feedback is *self-threatening*. The other categories of feedback are either *low self-threat* (i.e., positive central self-referent, positive central other-referent, negative central other-referent) or *tangential* to the self (i.e., positive peripheral self-referent, negative peripheral self-referent, positive peripheral other-referent, negative peripheral other-referent).

The model posits that people neglect disproportionately the processing of self-threatening feedback. Such feedback (e.g., "You would purposely hurt someone to benefit yourself") is inconsistent with one's self-view (i.e., kind), and one cannot imagine behaving in such a rude manner. Thus, self-threatening feedback is processed shallowly. Little, if any, elaboration (i.e., association with similar behaviors) occurs, resulting in a decreased number of retrieval routes and, hence, poor recall. In contrast, low self-threat feedback (e.g., "You would offer to care for a neighbor's child when the baby-sitter couldn't come") is consistent with one's self-view, and one can easily imagine behaving in such a kind manner. Thus, low self-threat feedback is processed deeply. A substantial degree of elaboration occurs, resulting in an increased number of retrieval routes and, hence, better recall.

In our typical experiment, participants are presented with 32 behaviors that are either positive or negative and exemplify either central (i.e., trustworthy, kind) or peripheral (i.e., modest, uncomplaining) self-aspects. Half of the participants are instructed to think of the description as based on actual knowledge that familiar others have of them, whereas the other half are told that the description refers to another person named Chris. The typical finding (Sedikides & Green, 2000, Experiment 2) is that participants remember relatively poorly self-threatening (i.e., negative central self-referent) behaviors. This finding has been replicated in a situation of relatively high mundane realism, in which the feedback was based on an ostensibly valid personality test (Sedikides & Green, 2000, Experiment 1). The finding has been labeled the mnemic neglect effect and is taken

as evidence of self-defense. This effect is conceptually equivalent to inhibitory repression, which, according to Erdelyi (in press) involves "cognitive avoidance (non-thinking)" of threatening material "leads to loss of accessible memory."

Subsequent experiments established that self-threat drives the mnemic neglect effect. Sedikides and Green (2004) showed that feedback negativity (indicating self-threat), rather than feedback inconsistency, is responsible for mnemic neglect. Green and Sedikides (2004) showed that the effect is obtained when the behaviors are diagnostic (indicating self-threat) rather than non-diagnostic of the underlying trait. Finally, Green, Pinter, and Sedikides (2005) showed that the effect is present when the negative feedback is targeted toward unmodifiable self-aspects (indicating self-threat) rather than modifiable self-aspects.

Inhibitory repression, according to Erdelyi (in press), involves cognitive avoidance or not-thinking. Does the mnemic neglect effect also involve not-thinking? Sedikides and Green (2000, Experiment 3) manipulated behavior reading time by presenting behaviors one at a time on computer screens: some participants were given ample time (i.e., 8sec per behavior), others limited time (i.e., 2sec per behavior). The mnemic neglect effect was replicated in the former condition but was absent in the latter. When in a not-thinking (i.e., limited time) condition, participants neglect all behaviors, not just self-threatening ones. This pattern is consistent with Erdelyi's conceptualization of inhibitory repression.

What happens to neglected memories? Are they lost or available and recoverable? Erdelyi (in press) argued that memories can be recovered with retrieval effort or alternative techniques. We employed such a technique, recognition accuracy (Green & Sedikides, 2006). Participants were provided with the usual 32 behaviors and asked to recall them. Next, they were provided with a new set of similar 32 behaviors and asked to recognize them (i.e., state whether each of the 64 behaviors was previously presented). The results were informative. The mnemic neglect effect was replicated in recall but not recognition. That is, recognition accuracy did not differ as a function of feedback self-threat. It appears that self-threatening information was available in memory and accessible through the technique of recognition. This pattern is congruent with Erdelyi's theorizing.

In summary, our laboratory research on normal adults validates Erdelyi's (in press) mechanism of inhibitory repression (i.e., mnemic neglect effect) and extends it. This mechanism occurs in normal adults, in reference to the self, and in relatively high threat situations (i.e., diagnostic feedback targeted to unmodifiable central self-aspects). Importantly, though, even what we labeled "self-threatening" feedback does not appear to be terribly self-threatening. Although in one experiment it was ostensibly based on a computer-administered personality test, in all other experiments it was based on hypothetical feedback. Also, in all cases, it referred to a mere likelihood of the person performing an undesirable behavior. We conclude that normal adults are remarkably intolerant even to the potential of self-threat: They hastingly deploy the mechanism of inhibitory repression or mnemic neglect to ward off relatively innocuous signs of self-threat.

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