

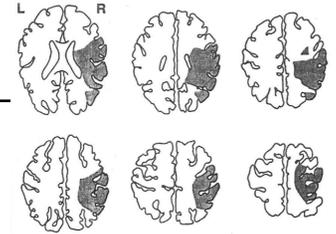
# Metapsychology, neural inhibition, & the structure of repression

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## **Introduction: repression, the troublesome cornerstone**

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- “...*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, & keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*” (Freud, 1915)
- “[Repression] remains an anomalous & awkward concept that has kept psychoanalysis apart from the rest of science” (Nesse, 1990)
- Repression vs defense
- Unconscious mentality
- Explaining how repression occurs



## ***Consider the following***

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- Kaplan-Solms & Solms (2000): Mrs A
- Right perisylvian damage & right hemi-sphere syndrome
- Anosognosia for hemiplegia & hemianopia
- Suicidally depressed because of 'loss'
  
- Anosognosia & retrospective awareness of deficit (Ramachadran, 1994)
- Motivated ignoring hypothesis

# Motivated ignoring

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“... these patients are unconsciously aware of the damaged state of their bodies. They know perfectly well what has happened to their bodies, but they do not *want* to know” (p. 172)

## Paradoxical situation for Mrs A:

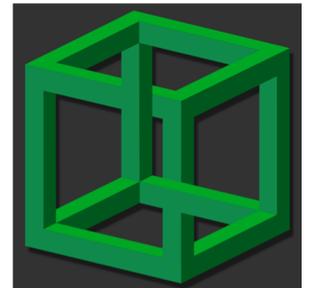
- *Consciously unaware* of her deficits
- *Unconsciously aware* of her deficits

# Unconscious knowing

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“...the concept of unconscious knowledge is indispensable to us. This concept allows us to say that Mrs A’s depression was a reaction to a loss of which she was *unconsciously* aware; it was a reaction to *knowledge that she was defending herself against*” (p. 177)

- ‘Unconscious knowing’ a contradiction in terms (Searle, 2004; Talvitie, 2015)



# Pyschoanalytic paradox

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- *Simultaneously knowing & not knowing*
- *Blindness of the seeing eye: “the strange state of mind in which one knows & does not know a thing at the same time. It is clearly impossible to understand it unless one has been in such a state oneself” (Freud in Breuer & Freud, 1895)*
- With repression “the unconscious element remains in consciousness unattended to” (Fayek, 2005)

# Repression

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- Maze & Henry (1996): how do we account for repression as a dynamic process?

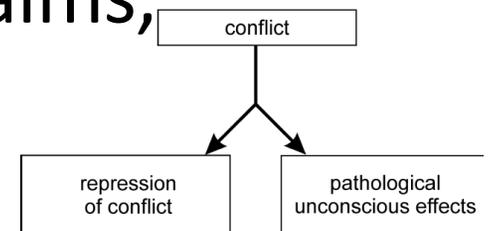
“An important element in the theory of repression is the view that repression is not an event that occurs once but that it requires a permanent expenditure ...” (Freud, 1926)

- Repression also occurs outside of awareness
- Maze, J. R., & Henry, R. M. (1996). Problems in the concept of repression & proposals for their resolution. *Int. Jnl of Psycho-analysis*, 77, 1085-1100

# Internal conflict model

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- Wish  Anxiety  Repression
- Approach/avoidance conflict (eg survival vs reproduction)
- Unmet needs persists ('upward drive')
- **Ongoing repression without awareness**
- How do we screen out the repressed?
- Return of the repressed, substitute aims, compromise formations
- *Knowing in order not to know*
- Axmacher, N. et al. (2010). Natural memory beyond the storage model: repression, trauma, & the construction of a personal past. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 4, 1-11



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‘Repressed’ is a dynamic expression, which takes account of the **interplay of mental forces**: it implies that there is a force present which is seeking to bring about all kinds of psychical effects, including that of becoming conscious, but that there is an **opposing force** which is able to obstruct some of these psychical effects, once more including that of becoming conscious  
(Freud, 1907)

# Repression & dreams

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- Problem of explaining repression exemplified in dream theory
- Freud's dream censor



- Boag, S. (2006). Freudian dream theory, dream bizarreness, & the disguise-censor controversy. *Neuropsychanalysis*, 8, 5-17

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“One of the primary difficulties with the repression model is that it hinges on the troublesome concept of an unconscious & autonomous regulator or “censor”—the gatekeeper of the boundary to conscious awareness”  
(Bonnano & Keuler, 1998)

Boag, S. (2012). *Freudian repression, the unconscious, & the dynamics of inhibition*. London: Karnac

Boag, S. (2017). *Metapsychology & the foundations of psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge

# Paradoxical resistance

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“**[Therapy is] characterised by a paradoxical phenomenon.** While the patient consciously wishes to work with the analyst to get the job done & is more or less determined to say everything that comes to mind, sooner or later he will find that he is no longer able or willing to do so.... We have asked the patient to free-associate in order to discover those feelings that are causing his emotional problems. But ***he is unaware of these feelings, precisely because they cause him so much distress, and because he does not want to be aware of them*** (Pulver, 1995)

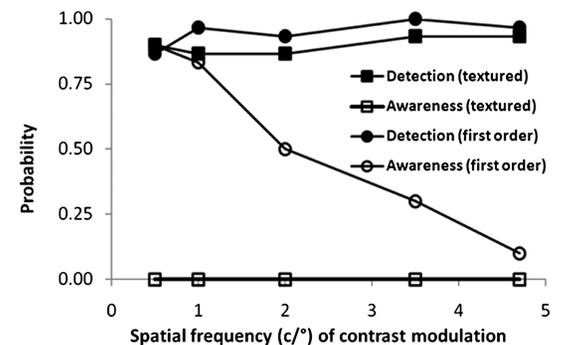
# Psychoanalytic challenges

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- How do we maintain repression?
  - (a) Return of the repressed (internal conflict)
  - (b) Denial of reality (eg. anosognosia)
- Both cases require *knowing in order not to know*
- **Selective inattention based on anxiety**
- Resistance; anosognosia; narcissism
- *Blindness of the seeing eye*

# Step 1: Unconscious knowing?

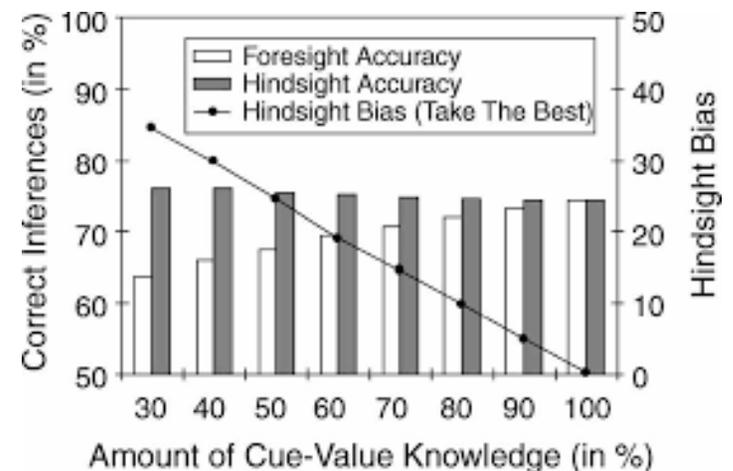
- No logical problem with ‘unconscious knowing’
- eg. relational view of mental acts
- *A simple distinction:*
- Knowing...
- *vs knowing that you know*
- Awareness vs reflective awareness (etc.)
- *Possible to know without knowing that you know*
- eg. blindsight



## Step 2: What is left to explain?

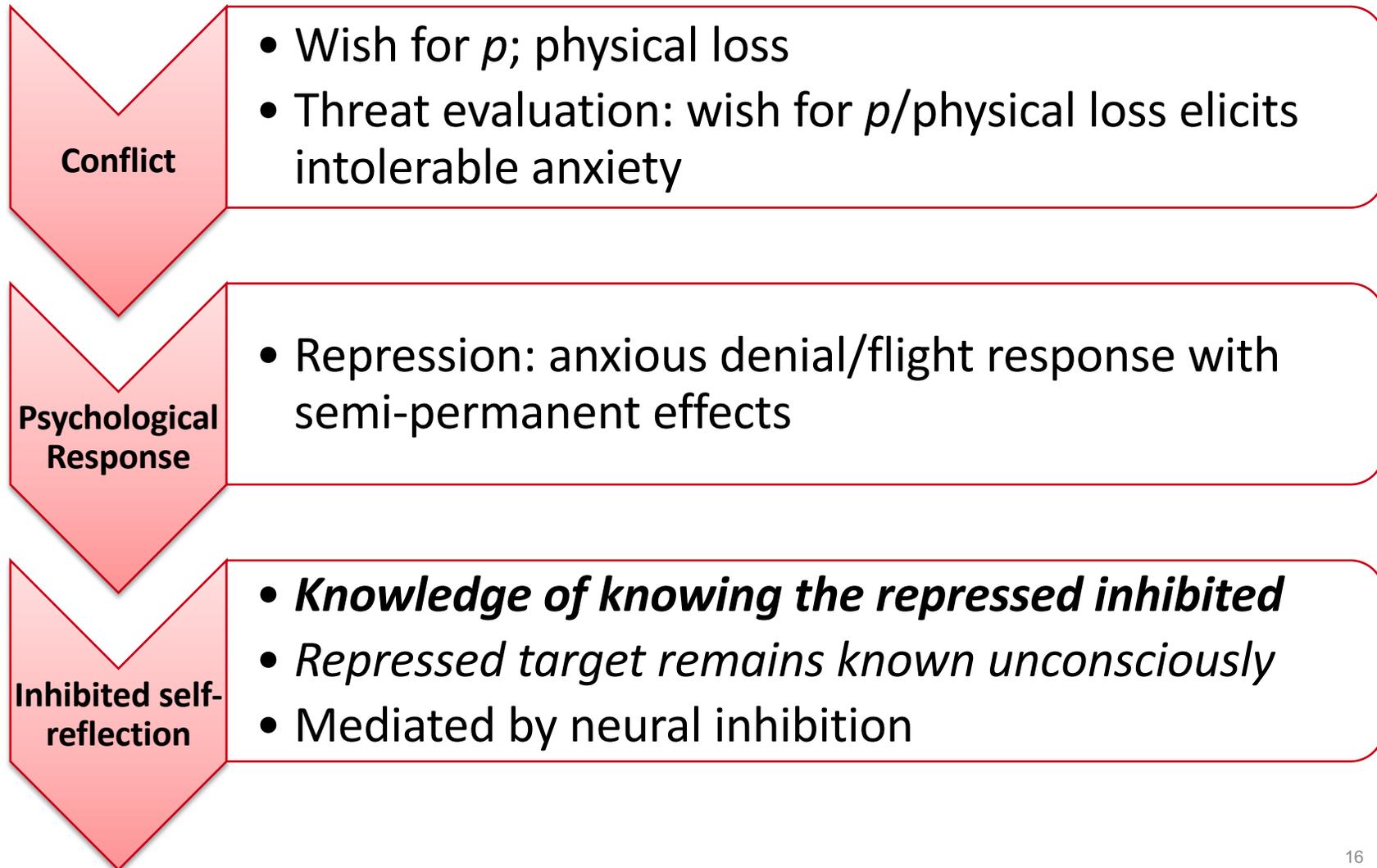
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- How can we explain repression as an active dynamic process?
- Selective inattention & motivated ignoring
- Both knowing & not knowing the repressed
  
- ‘I knew it all along...’ or simply hindsight bias?





# Possible structure of repression



## Impeded reflective awareness

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“... unconsciously these patients do perceive & remember that they are paralysed, notwithstanding the facts that they are unable to direct their conscious attention to these facts”  
(Kaplan-Solms & Solms, 2000)

- Implicit awareness? (Turnbull et al, 2014)

## Impediments to reflective awareness

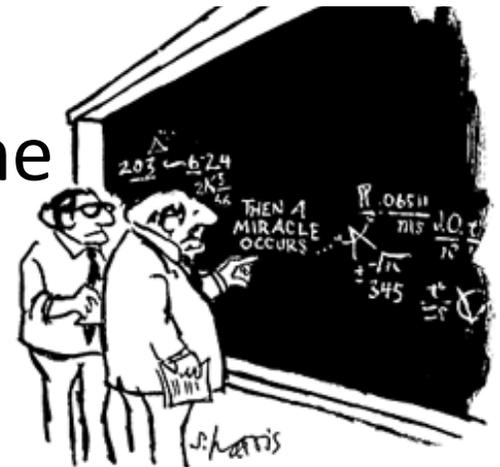
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- Active vs passive neural inhibition
- Motivated defense or simply cognitive deficit?
- Explaining repression & neural inhibition
- Macmillan (1991): repression is a vacuous explanatory construct
- “Freud ... tells us only what the repression is supposed to *do*, not what it *is* & has no potential for referring to real processes” (p. 166)
- Boag, S. (2007). ‘Real processes’ & the explanatory status of repression & inhibition. *Philosophical Psychology*, 20, 375-392

# Conclusion

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- Explaining repression entails apparent theoretical difficulties:
- *knowing in order not to know*
- No logical problem with unconscious knowing
- It is possible to explain both knowing & not knowing the repressed
- Inhibiting knowledge of knowing the repressed
- Neural inhibition hypothesis?



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."



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# Thanks



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