

UNITED WISDOM

The Psychology of Suppression and Shadow Work

The Person and the Inner World

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The white bear, projection, and inner parts

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut · United Wisdom · Science · Author series

> ***Archival translator's note.*** *This is a faithful translation of the archived essay, including its original degree of certainty. Its identification of religious, mythical, psychoanalytic, and experimental accounts as one mechanism, its broad claims of scientific confirmation, and its statements that meeting the shadow heals or makes unwanted experience disappear are the authors' interpretations and assertions. They have not been established by a new review of the cited research here. The essay should not be read as a validated clinical method, a diagnosis, or a promise of recovery. The note is an editorial addition; the argument below preserves the source.*

Religion gave the shadow a name. Philosophy gave it space. Myth gave it a body and an address. Symbol gave it a form that could be put on and taken off. Science received the task last: to reproduce the same thing in a laboratory, with samples and measurements. And it obtained the same result, only described in another language.

Suppressing a thought does not mean eliminating it. It means making it louder.

The White Bear

Winter, 1985, San Antonio. Psychologist Daniel Wegner gives students a simple assignment: for five minutes, say aloud everything that comes to mind, on one condition—do not think of a white bear. Whenever the thought appears, ring a bell.

The bells keep ringing. On average, more than six times in five minutes. The students honestly try not to think about the bear—and think about it almost continuously.

Then Wegner changes the instruction: now they may, and should, think about the bear. Something strange happens: students who first suppressed the thought think about the bear more often than those who were allowed to do so from the beginning. Suppression did not remove the image. It intensified it and allowed it to build up.

This was the birth of ironic process theory. According to Wegner, the mind has two systems. The first is an operating process: it looks for anything that can distract us from the forbidden thought. The second is a monitoring process: it automatically checks whether the forbidden

thought has appeared again. When attention becomes tired or overloaded, the operating process weakens. The monitoring process keeps working—and, by its very nature, searches for precisely what is supposed to be absent.

The paradox is built into the architecture itself. To avoid thinking about something, the mind must continually check whether it is thinking about it. Which means thinking about it.

The bear experiment became a classic. It was repeated dozens of times: with emotions, eating behavior, depressive thoughts, and anxiety. The conclusion is the same: suppression works in reverse. The greater the effort not to feel, the more persistent the feeling.

Suppression Becomes Projection

In the 1990s, psychologist Leonard Newman and his colleagues ask the next question: where does what we suppress go? Surely it does not simply dissolve. If the energy has found no outlet through awareness, it seeks an outlet somewhere else.

A series of experiments supplies an answer. Participants inclined to suppress a particular trait in themselves—hostility, for example—are shown another person's ambiguous behavior. They interpret the same words and gestures as more hostile than participants who do not suppress that trait.

What is suppressed does not disappear. It moves onto the screen of another person. The psychological term is projection. The religious term is an encounter with the devil. In myth, the Minotaur comes out of the labyrinth in someone else's guise. This is one and the same mechanism described in four languages.

Anna Freud systematized these strategies in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* in 1936. The list proved short, but universal.

• **Repression:** a thought is pushed out of consciousness but remains within the system, consuming energy to keep it there.

• **Projection:** what is suppressed is attributed to someone else. I am not envious—they are the ones who envy. I am not aggressive—the world is hostile.

• **Reaction formation:** a feeling turns into its opposite. Conspicuous gentleness over suppressed rage. Emphatic righteousness over suppressed desire.

• **Denial:** a fact is not admitted into consciousness at all. Not "I know and refuse to accept it," but "this does not exist."

• **Sublimation:** the only defense mechanism Freud considered mature. Energy is neither suppressed nor projected but redirected into work, creativity, or care. Not denial—transformation.

The list reads like a map of the typical ways we avoid meeting ourselves. On the other side of that same map, it points to where the meeting might take place.

Inner Parts

In the 1980s, American family therapist Richard Schwartz notices that his clients talk about themselves in the plural. “Part of me wants to leave; part of me is afraid.” “It is as though a critic lives inside me.” Schwartz decides not to dismiss this as metaphor but to take the client’s words literally. This is how Internal Family Systems—IFS—comes into being.

According to Schwartz, every person has a Self: a center characterized by curiosity, compassion, and calm. Around it are parts, each with a role of its own. Managers plan, control, and maintain order: they prevent anyone from approaching the pain. Firefighters provide the emergency response: they put out the pain with alcohol, food, aggression, procrastination—by any means available when the managers have failed. Exiles are those hidden most deeply: the child part that carries shame, fear, rejection, the very pain for whose sake the first two groups work.

Schwartz’s central proposition is expressed in the title of his book, *No Bad Parts*. There are no bad parts. There are parts that have ended up in bad roles because, once, those roles helped them survive. The perfectionist manager protected a child from parental anger. The addicted firefighter protected a teenager from unbearable emptiness. An exile is not a defect; it is the place where the unbearable was taken so that life could continue.

Therapeutic work in IFS is not based on eliminating parts or fighting them. It is based on getting to know them. With curiosity, the Self turns toward a manager and asks what it fears. Toward a firefighter: what is it putting out? Toward an exile: what is it carrying? When a part feels seen without judgment, it stops insisting on its role.

This is the same operation Jung called the integration of the shadow. The same gesture toward the Minotaur in the labyrinth: not killing it, but acknowledging it. The same logic by which the apostle Paul wrote of weakness as the place where strength dwells. Wegner’s laboratory findings, Anna Freud’s clinical experience, Schwartz’s method—all are different paths to one conclusion.

What Has Been Confirmed

By now, shadow work has ceased to be the preserve of depth psychology. It has samples, meta-analyses, and neuroimaging. Here are several results tested repeatedly.

Suppressing an emotion increases its physiological markers—heart rate and skin reactivity. Suppressing a thought increases its subsequent intrusion into consciousness. Suppressing a

trait in oneself increases its detection in others. Accepting an emotion—naming it, acknowledging it, allowing it to be—reduces amygdala activation. This is not philosophy; it is a reproducible laboratory finding.

What culture knew symbolically, science has confirmed quantitatively. The shadow becomes more dangerous when it is hidden. Meeting it heals. Not because it is a beautiful metaphor. Because this is how the nervous system is built.

Five Descriptions of One Territory

Here the cycle of five articles comes to a close. We have considered the shadow from five sides.

Religion gave it a name—Satan, Iblis, the serpent. Philosophy gave it space—the abyss into which Nietzsche looks. Myth gave it a body and an address—the Minotaur in the labyrinth, in one's own home. Symbol gave it a form that can be put on and taken off—the mask and the mirror. Science gave it a mechanism—ironic processes, projection, defenses, parts.

Five languages. One subject.

The shadow is not an evil to be defeated. It is a part that went underground because it was not accepted. It returns in precisely the manner in which it was sent away: the more insistent the "not me," the louder its insistence that it is "me after all."

Working with your own white bear is not about getting rid of it. It is about no longer spending your energy hiding it. Then it leaves of its own accord. Not into oblivion, but back to its proper scale. From a monster, it becomes a part with a name, a history, and a right to exist.

This is not victory over the shadow. It is the shadow's homecoming.

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Inherited Archive References

These links accompany the archived Russian article. They have not been newly verified for this translation.

- PDF-L001: Ironic process theory — source PDF page 2.
- PDF-L002: Unwanted thoughts — source PDF page 3.
- PDF-L003: Internal Family Systems model outline — source PDF page 4.
- PDF-L004: Managers, firefighters, and exiles — source PDF page 4.

- PDF-L005: Freud defense reading — source PDF page 5.