

# Displacement (psychology)

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In Freudian psychology, **displacement** (German *Verschiebung*, 'shift' or 'move') is an unconscious defense mechanism whereby the mind redirects effects from an object felt to be dangerous or unacceptable to an object felt to be safe or acceptable.<sup>[1]</sup> The term originated with Sigmund Freud.<sup>[2]</sup>

Displacement operates in the mind unconsciously and involves emotions, ideas, or wishes being transferred from their original object to a more acceptable substitute. It is most often used to allay anxiety and can lead to the displacement of aggressive or sexual impulses.

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## Freud

For Freud, displacement (a primary process) means the transference of physical intensities...along an "associative path," so that strongly cathected ideas have their charge displaced onto other, less strongly cathected ones. This process is active in the formation of hysterical or obsessional symptoms, in the dream work, in the production of jokes, and in the transference'.<sup>[3]</sup>

A major 'achievement of the dream-work is *displacement*....It manifests itself in two ways: in the first, a latent element is replaced not by a component part of itself but by something more remote - that is, by an allusion; and in the second, the psychological accent is shifted from an important element on to another which is unimportant'.<sup>[4]</sup> Freud considered that 'displacement is the principle means used in the *dream-distortion*...*displacement* or shifting of accent - which in conscious thinking we come across only as faulty reasoning or as means for a joke'.<sup>[5]</sup>

As well as dream-work and jokes, Freud considered that 'it is an inherent characteristic in the psychology of the obsessional neurotic to make the fullest possible use of the mechanism of *displacement*...especially apt to become displaced on to what is most insignificant and small'.<sup>[6]</sup>

Subsequently, 'it was above all in the process of refining the analysis of the transference during treatment and its different manifestations — lateral, indirect, and direct transference (Freud, 1915a; Sándor Ferenczi, 1909/1994; Michel Neyraut, 1974) — that the notion of displacement was expanded'.<sup>[7]</sup>

## The psychoanalytic mainstream

Arguably, while generally accepted in the wake of Freud, 'the notion of displacement did not see much further development'<sup>[7]</sup> in the psychoanalytic mainstream. Otto Fenichel highlighted the displacement of affect, pointing out that 'postponement is but one special case among many types of displacement of affects. Another subtype is displacement in respect to the *object*. The affect, which was suppressed in relation to one object, bursts forth against another'.<sup>[8]</sup> More broadly, he considered that 'in part the paths of displacement depend on the nature of the drives that are warded off'.<sup>[9]</sup>

Eric Berne in his first, psychoanalytic work, maintained that 'some of the most interesting and socially useful displacements of libido occur when both the aim and the object are partial substitutions for the biological aim and object...sublimation (psychology)'.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Lacan

In 1957, Jacques Lacan - building on the way in Freud's work, condensation (from German *Verdichtung*) and displacement are closely linked concepts,<sup>[11]</sup> and inspired by an article by linguist Roman Jakobson - argued that the unconscious has the structure of a language, and that condensation and displacement are close equivalents to the poetic functions of metaphor and metonymy.<sup>[12][13][14]</sup> As he cautiously put it, 'in the case of *Verschiebung*, "displacement", the German term is closer to the idea of that veering off of signification that we see in metonymy, and which from its first appearance in Freud is represented as the most appropriate means used by the unconscious to foil censorship'.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Examples

Mortido has the same possibilities for varied expression as libido. Instead of eliminating an opponent of the same sex, it can attack him without eliminating him, as in business competition, athletic competition, or making sarcastic remarks...or it can eliminate an animal instead of a person, as in hunting'.<sup>[16]</sup>

In such scapegoating, aggression may be displaced onto people with little or no connection with what is causing anger. Some people punch cushions when they are angry at friends; a college student may snap at his or her roommate when upset about an exam grade.

Displacement can act in a chain-reaction, with people unwittingly becoming both victims and perpetrators of displacement. For example, a man is angry with his boss, but he cannot express this so he hits his wife. The wife hits one of the children, possibly disguising this as punishment (rationalization).

Ego psychology sought to use displacement in child rearing - thereby 'teaching beginning control through redirection, substitution of goals', as with two-year-old Lawrie resentful at being presented with a baby sister, and offered 'a plastic, inflated dummy called Puncho [to] provide Lawrie with a substitute target for his aggression'.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Criticism

Later writers have spoken of 'the limitations of the Freudian model of displacement. Freud describes the displacement of sexuality into culture, for example, via sublimation. But displacement also *goes the other way*...social crisis and conflict are endlessly displaced into sexuality'.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Cultural analogues

- A John Aubrey anecdote about Sir Walter Raleigh - 'evidently drawn from the usage of "whipping boys" in the education of princes' - describes how at a dinner table 'Sir Walter...gives his son a damned blow over his face. His son, rude as he was, would not strike his father, but strikes over the face the gentleman that sate next to him and sayd, "*Box about: 'twill come to my father anon*". 'Tis now a common-used proverb'.<sup>[19]</sup>
- The suggestion has been made of the "Freud Wars" that 'the real object of attack - for which Freud is only the stalking horse - is the very idea that humans have unconscious motivation'.<sup>[20]</sup>
- Confucius said of his favourite disciple: "'There was Yen Hui; HE loved to learn. He did not transfer his anger; he did not repeat a fault" ...i.e. his anger was no tumultuary passion in the mind, but was excited by some specific cause, to which alone it was directed'.<sup>[21]</sup>

## See also

- Displacement activity
- Identified patient
- Ignacio Matte Blanco

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19. G. Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke Vol 2* (1973) p. 371
20. Jonathan Lear, in Michael Parsons, *The Dove that Returns, the Dove that Vanishes* (London 2000) p. 24
21. James Legge trans., *Confucius* (New York 1971) p. 185

## Further reading

- Arthur J. Clark, *Defense Mechanisms in the Counselling Process* (1998) Chap. 3 "Displacement"
- Mark Krupnick, *Displacement: Derrida and After* (1983)

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