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The Role of Displacement in Psychoanalysis

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Displacement is a defense mechanism employed by many other defenses and has a different role from all the other defenses. Locating conflicts in a new situation, displacement attempts to find new solutions.

Dis-placement often is a re-placement unless it is part of the repetition-compulsion pattern. The paper explores the technical implications that demand special recognition of displacement beyond the usual analysis of the defenses. References are made to new research in the neurosciences.

At a time when the psychoanalytic process is the primary focus of interest in the field, when object relations concepts and the widening scope of psychoanalysis open new frontiers, it may appear anachronistic to return to the examination of the mechanisms of defense and even more to that of a single defense, one rarely mentioned by Anna Freud (**1936**) in her seminal work on defenses. It is my intention to show that renewed attention to the ways the mind functions may refine our understanding of the dynamics of mental life.

When we study the play of children, we observe displacement at work. When the child builds a car or a tower without adding fantasies and symbolic meaning, we may understand it to be an expression of the

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My interest in the function of the defense mechanism of displacement is an outcome of our study group on the Many Meanings of Play, organized by the Psychoanalytic Research and Development Fund and co-chaired by Drs. Albert J. Solnit and Donald J. Cohen.

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ego, a representation of reality, a cognitive exercise. This action has to be differentiated from play, which has been defined as an effort to resolve a normal or abnormal conflict, the ego's attempt to restrain drive expression or undue environmental or superego influences. Let us take as an example Freud's extraordinary insight into the play of his eighteen-month-old grandson. As is well known, this boy, when his mother was absent, played with a wooden reel that had a string attached to it. He would throw the reel behind a curtain, say, “It is gone,” and then retrieve it and say, “Here.” Freud inferred that the child thus transformed the painful experience of Mother's leaving into an active mode. We do not know from his reported observation whether the child was consciously aware of the loss of his mother while he was playing, but it is clear that it was under his control to make a substitute object disappear or reappear. The displacement allowed him to experiment with the mastery of feelings, a mastery he could not achieve in the relationship with the primary object. If other defense mechanisms had been activated, such as a complete repression, a denial of the event, or a projection, there would not have been the same opportunity to overcome the hurtful experience by asserting reparative forces to heal it. Thus, while *most defense mechanisms restrain drive derivatives, displacement places them where ego mastery over them may be obtained*.

Let me digress for a moment to an issue of therapeutic intervention. In the analysis of conflicts, we follow the proposition that it is advisable or necessary to interpret both the unconscious content—that is, the repressed memory—and the defense mechanisms employed. The question I shall discuss later is whether this is equally desirable when *displacement* is the selected defense.

Before I proceed, it may also be useful to summarize briefly the history of the concept of defense mechanisms in order to profile more sharply the specific task of each. I am drawing on Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (**1936**), on Brenner's “The Nature and Development of the Concept of Repression in Freud's Writings” (**1957**), and on B. P. Jones's “Repression” (**1993**). Freud first used the term *defense* in **1894**; later he employed the term *repression* interchangeably with it. In 1926 he felt that the notion of defense should be maintained “provided we employ it explicitly as a general designation for all techniques which the ego makes use of in conflicts which may lead to neurosis.”

We see that Freud at that time understood defense and repression to be part of pathological processes and saw repression as equal to the other defenses. He further investigated the various illnesses and the

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mode of defenses employed in each and arrived at nine methods of defense: regression, repression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against the self, and reversal. Anna Freud then added a tenth, sublimation, which, she stated, "pertains rather to the study of the normal than to that of neurosis." Since this paper focuses on displacement, I should point out that it was not included in on either Freud's or Anna Freud's list.

Brenner outlined four stages of the development of the concept of repression. I have referred to the first one, the interchangeability of the terms *defense* and *repression*. The second stage links the defense to the topographic system, namely, the repression of infantile wishes and memories. The third stage notes the difference between defense and repression, as discussed above. (It is important that Freud spoke of primal repression as infantile repression and that he thought primal repression was a precondition of repression proper.) The fourth stage reflects structural propositions, the role of anxiety; thus his definition of the primary repression is limited to excessive libidinal impulses.

Anna Freud referred to the displacement of anxiety in her discussion of the phobia of Little Hans in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence,* adding that Little Hans maintained his capacity for reality testing. In *The Analysis of Defence* (Anna **Freud and Joseph Sandler, 1985**), she elaborated on those "defence mechanisms which grow out of primary process functioning. Displacement is a good example, and the turning of passive into active is another." She added: "to speak of repression makes no sense before there is a division between conscious and unconscious ego, between ego and id and so on. On the other hand, the very fact that you can assign certain sensations or happenings to another place *creates* the distinction between inner and outer."

When we consider that displacement originates from a period when outside and inside are not differentiated, when there is a free play between them, we note that this shifting localization contributes to differentiation. Displacement is thus a vehicle that supports development. As such we cannot say, from a genetic point of view, that displacement belongs to the list of primary defense mechanisms, for we must keep in mind that defense mechanisms will change by contributing to development and being modified by maturation.

In the study of play, we found displacement on all levels of phase organization; therefore, whatever its origin, it becomes as much part of the developmental processes as other defense mechanisms do. The difference between displacement and other defense mechanisms seems to lie elsewhere. Displacement transfers conflicts so as to allow

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the search for and discovery of solutions for them; thus, it is not part of the original primary experience. It transfers affect and content while it shifts the conflict to symbolic objects.

Some vignettes will illustrate this. A middle-aged patient remembered his father as a strict disciplinarian, who demonstrated his superiority over his son throughout development. Since the mother, being powerless to restrain her husband's controlling influence, did not count as an ally, the patient retreated to respect and compliance, repressing his sense of humiliation and hostility. He had no memories of having played with his father until he was old enough to learn games. The father, a superior chess player, introduced him to chess when the boy was about eight years old. With remarkable intensity and intelligence, he engaged his father with fervor in this encounter.

Since games impose the same rules on both partners, my patient could now displace his aggression against his father in a situation that did not openly expose it. He became better in defense moves and later, in his attack, which led more and more often to checkmate of his opponent. His father was a bad loser, which increased my patient's pleasure. During his adolescence he enlarged his field of combat by studying the major battles in history, particularly Napoleon's strategies, and enacting them with play soldiers. In his adult life he became a successful businessman; every transaction was a battle in which there was no pardon. The theories he adduced to explain economic laws leaned heavily on psychic components, often referring to the strategy and tactics of warfare. His submissiveness yielded to identification with the aggressor. The repetition of the play yielded—slowly—to psychoanalytic interpretation. As the play of the child becomes the playfulness of the adult, here the game of the child became a characteristic of his work and relationships. The displacement to games became a compromise formation embedded in his character, as a strict follower of rules and laws, and thus his relentless hostility was protected. Always aware of dangers, he used lawyers freely to make a stand in order to destroy the enemies. The rules of the game allowed him to be the victor instead of becoming the victim.

When we examine the ten defense mechanisms more closely, we can observe that most are the result of repression *and,* I'd like to emphasize, that most employ displacement. Projection displaces the conflict to the outside; introjection and identification with the aggressor displace it internally. Denial, disavowal, and negation eliminate the perception of dangers from the outside; sublimation displaces the aim to reach higher goals. Regression demands a return, a displacement, to an earlier state, less painful, by sacrificing maturational or developmental

organization. Only in isolation and restriction of the ego, both of which are attempts to avoid painful external events in order not to reexperience past feelings and conflicts, is displacement *not* a factor in the defensive maneuver.

As one reviews the function of the defense mechanisms, one is informed about the manifold modes available to the ego, but there are distinctions between the defenses against internal dangers and those that defend against outside, unacceptable events. When we pursue our traditional approach to the defenses, we hope to expose the unconscious content—that is, the content of the repressed. We may also pay attention to the dynamics of each individual defense. But we still have difficulties understanding why a specific defense is activated. Freud thought of the role of constitutional preferences; Anna Freud of the relationship to disease entities.

When, following Hartmann's ideas, we examine the units of the ego, the function of the ego apparatus, we cannot avoid neurobiological investigations, which today pay so much attention to consciousness and to memory. We cannot postpone the question of whether neurobiological factors decide the grouping of the ego's defense mechanisms— those that defend against internal drive derivatives and unconscious fantasies and those that protect the ego function from undue external influences, such as denial.

I cannot pursue the neurobiological dimension in detail because of limitations of space and of my knowledge. Two studies sparked my curiosity: a reissue of Freud's Aphasia paper, edited by P. Vogel (**1993**) and Barbara P. Jones's paper "Repression," published in a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*.

In the introduction to Aphasia, Leuschner quotes Bernfeld as saying that Freud never totally abandoned the biological position as a method of inquiry. Freud considered this approach reasonable because in this study he developed concepts that later on became central to psychoanalytic theory: the concepts of association, representation, cathexis, symbol formation, and the complexity of word and object representation. Thus he states, "many authors have lately proposed that Freud has taken proto-psychoanalytic concepts from his Aphasia studies into his psychoanalytic psychology." Others say that the Aphasia study is not a neurological exposition alone because it contains the bridge between the neurosciences and psychoanalysis. This implies that the psychological factors do not cease when the psychic experience begins, or, as Leuschner states, "this fact gives legitimacy to Freud's examination by which he took away from the Physiolage, physiological concepts and used it to describe psychoanalytically psychic phenomena" (p. 21).

Barbara Jones's paper reviewing the newest studies of the repression mechanism allows us to follow the progress made since Freud's first proposition. I take it to be an example of how the various defense mechanisms will be investigated in the future. It is clear that repression studies must include links to memory, unconscious contents, associative memory, and activation. Thus Parallel Disturbed Processing (pdp) was considered to be useful in arriving at a model for explaining repression. "In effect the pdp model recasts the concept of memory, inasmuch as what is stored in the brain, rather than a set of facts or events, is a set of relationships" (**Jones, 1993**). (**Edelman** finds the concept of Freud's repression not inconsistent with *his* model, the Theory of Neuronal Group Solutions [TNGS]). Jones delineates five types of repression: preverbal infantile repression, postverbal infantile repression, state-dependent repression, repression proper, and continued repression. Here we find the proposition that the study of repression is joined to the examination of memory and that the various types of repression expose the developmental-genetic characteristics and the mode of reactions.

These sketchy references are intended to illustrate the refinements that have led to the differentiation of various forms of repression and to link the neurosciences and psychoanalysis.

Displacement and Transference

Displacement of course plays a pivotal role in transference. We understand transference to be a repetition of primary relationships, a displacement to the analyst. In *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* Anna Freud writes: "By transference we mean all those impulses experienced by the patient in his relation with the analyst which are not newly created by the objective analytic situation . . . but have their source in early . . . object relations and are now merely revived." Although we have broadened the concept, we are always aware that there is also the transference of the defense mechanism. We assume that what is transferred is not only the past relationship with the primary object but also the infantile wishes and hopes that have not been fulfilled but are now revived and active in the relationship to the analyst. If we understand this from the side of the ego and consider the defense mechanism of displacement as part of transference, then we may give additional importance to this experience. If transference is a repetition of an actual experience with the primary object, then this displacement may offer new corrective solutions. If transference is an activation of as yet unfulfilled wishes, it may complete a deficient development in the context of psychoanalytic therapy.

Since we have defined the meaning of play with its displacements as an attempt at new solutions, we can recognize displacement to be a mechanism that wishes to undo or at least control the repetition of earlier unresolved conflicts. Transference, therefore, may not always operate under the demand of repetition compulsion alone but, from the ego's point of view, may become a search for conflict resolution.

In examining the role of displacement in play, we have arrived at technical implications suggesting that in analysis we should pursue the child's play without interruption in order to suit the child's ego at that time in his development. Furthermore, the therapist should begin introducing comments or interpretations within the scenario of the play that is within the condition of displacement. This position would respect the role of the defense by not rushing to the underlying primary experience. Similarly, the transference expressions will be seen as searching for alternative experiences in addition to those that follow the repetition compulsion, as the patient may shape the relationship with the therapist in search of conflict solutions. In the transference there can be a displacement either of the object or of the content of the past conflictual experience.

An elderly patient declared at her first visit, “This here is like home,” explaining that she had very good memories of an analyst who was a friend of her family when she was a child and had paid attention to her as she grew up. This became a significant memory, for she felt, not without reason, that she had been misunderstood and abandoned by her parents. Without having tested the reality of the relationship with me, she transferred her positive childhood experience to me. Her ego defended itself by repressing deep hostile feelings against her parents. This displacement of positive memories to the analyst by massive repression of aggression, resulting in splitting of the ego, guided the beginning phase of her treatment. If the repression alone had been effective, we would expect symptom formation or other pathological manifestations. The displacement of her positive wishes served as new expression. Even as a child, she was able to turn from the primary objects to a substitute she idealized.

Another patient, who had been in analysis for some time, never discharged his irritations, his sensitivities, or his dependency in the transference. He never made reference to me, exhibiting a strict neutrality or, better, a remarkable avoidance of the role of his therapist as a significant person in his life. When this was pointed out to him, he stated that he thought this was the rule of therapy. He had once asked his previous analyst a “personal” question. The analyst replied, “Why do you ask that?” To him this indicated clearly that he was not to do it again. This massive repression of affect, both libidinal attachments and

aggression, served the patient well in his professional achievement, where only an “objective” approach counted; but it hindered the analytic process. The freedom to express affect was not available to him. Here we observe that what is transferred can be either the object or the conflict, or the earlier defenses themselves can be reenacted.

It may also be of interest to examine transference displacement when the therapist is perceived as a new object. The first patient discussed above had assigned an old relationship to me, whereas the second avoided any object recognition. When the therapist is a new object, he is endowed with past and present wishes and needs. We widen the concept of transference in order to include enactments of hitherto unexperienced wishes. As a new object, the therapist is given the power not just to repair derailed development or conflict but also to afford the patient an opportunity to experience what has never been experienced before. This does not follow the repetition compulsion principle. When earlier wishes have been stimulated, can we speak of the mechanism of displacement, or is it more accurate to speak of placement? These considerations may give validity to the question of whether displacement is a usual defense mechanism or whether Freud and Anna Freud were correct in not including it in the list.

Thus, in the first patient, the positive feelings for the early extrafamilial object were displaced onto the analyst, and the hostile feelings against the parents were defended against. In the second case, the primary conflicts were displaced onto the analyst, and the object representation was repressed. The third variation (dis)places old wishes, never before fulfilled, to the analyst, and the content of the conflicts and the object representation of the primary experiences were either repressed or absent. Our clinical experience informs us that these variations are rarely clinically separated from one another. Furthermore, the defense mechanism of displacement may be allied with different defense constellations.

When we consider the phobia of Little Hans, we find another constellation. The displacement of his hostility for his father to the horse maintains his positive feelings for his father, and he completes the displacement by making the horse hostile to him, as he feared his father's retaliation.

Anna Freud discusses the difference between animal and school phobia. In school phobia:

> the fear is located in the home and in the family, and the school phobia is a way of dealing with the child's own threatening attack on the mother. What it represents is really the fear of the mother's death, of the wish to kill the mother. Then the child cannot leave the mother alone because he is afraid that this might come true, and therefore he cannot go to

> school. But what is set up next is the dangerous situation in school, which is not a displacement of the anxiety the child felt at home. Usually what appears on the scene is either a threatening teacher, but more often it is another

> child who is threatening. To avoid this threat the child now has to stay at home to protect the mother, which [is] the earlier wish. But my feeling is that this isn't quite the same as what happens in the animal phobia, where the animal is much more the direct successor to the parent with whom the struggle is really going on. When I talk about the analysis of Little Hans's phobia, I refer to it being "discussed," allayed and shown to be without objective foundation. (**Freud and Sandler, 1985**)

These are examples of the ingenious ways in which the mind defends the ego and tries to find new solutions, and it leads us to two questions we have raised before: (1) Why is a particular path selected? And (2) to what degree, and when, does displacement fulfill its promise?

At the present time it is not possible to answer the first question. In her seminal book, Anna Freud attempted to outline the chronology of defense mechanisms and explore the degree of closeness to normality or pathology. She assumed that the choice of defense may codetermine the choice of pathology, the symptom formation. Freud referred to the constitutional factors that influence the availability and the specific motivation of a defense.

As to the second question, we can break this down into four subquestions.

1. How much of the normal or abnormal conflict can be resolved by displacement? It will come as no surprise that there is no satisfactory answer to this question, in view of its occurrence in different pathological conditions, as primitive defense associated with infantile memories, as defense against developmental or maturational unevenness, as part of deficiency syndrome, and so on. Could Freud's grandson's play resolve his anxiety over the temporary loss of his mother at eighteen months? Could Little Hans master an animal phobia that protected his relationship to his father by his continued development, which allowed him to experience horses no longer as symbolic representation of his father, or could he modify his relationship with his father so as to render the phobia obsolete?

2. If the defense of displacement does not achieve resolution, why not? Was the choice of displacement or the displacement of object or aim incorrect, or was another member of the family or a friend unable to replace the relationship to the primary object? Or has the animal phobia repressed the intrafamilial conflicts but widened the inhibition to the external world?

3. How much can we learn from displacement in transference? How

far does the positive transference result in reorganization, leading to new developmental constructions, and when does it become resistance? As we follow its course, do we arrive at a reply to this question by refining its influence dependent on the core pathology?

4. How do we define the working-through phase of treatment? What is the limitation of therapy when we interpret the conflict only in the displacement arena? Under what conditions do we have to lift repressed *primary* experience in order to lay bare the unacceptable wishes and fears and to modify the defense by interpretation and reduce the power of the superego? Displacement, in other words, has to be viewed in the context of a widening frame of reference.

One is reminded of Waelder's (**1932**) suggestion that the repetition of play allows a slow, piecemeal modification of the earlier —primary— conflicts over a long period of time and thus can lead to a significant psychic rearrangement. In addition, one may consider Winnicott's (**1953**) formulation that "play is located in the mind where unconscious and preconscious wishes meet reality and where in this transitional space new formulations, new combinations and new integration can occur." Furthermore, the task of the analysis, to undo past repressed experience, should not lead us to neglect the present tasks of the patient; we should ally ourselves "with the developmental pull to prepare for the future and to create foresight" (**Solnit, 1984**). The genetic search should not prevent the opening of new vistas that span the past, the present, and the future. In this sense, what displacement is in the play of children becomes displacement in the playfulness of adults, and what we have learned from child analytic technique can be applied to our technique with adults. We need to follow the individual life history, the individual constellation of dynamic forces and disposition. Nevertheless, posing these questions may guide us to the answer in each therapy.

By defining this special position of displacement, I may open myself to the argument that I am expecting too much from an analysis of a single defense mechanism. After a view of displacement by itself, it therefore becomes unavoidable to consider the wider context of its dynamic and structural dimensions. This is required as technical issues guide us to consider the complexity, the multiple determinants, of mental functions. Moreover, there are ongoing efforts to refine our interventions and explore new territories that play a part in the regulation and integration of psychic life. I shall mention some work that addresses this topic.

Stone (**1981**) responded to the proposition that psychoanalysis should attend to the "here and now" experience:

> The vigorous exploration and exposure of distortions in object relations, via the transference or in the affective and behavioral patterns of everyday life, including defensive functions, can conceivably catalyze important spontaneous changes in their own right. To further this end, the traditional techniques of psychoanalysis will, of course, be

> utilized. As an interim phenomenon, however, the patient struggles to deal with distortions, as one might with other errors, subject to conscious control or pedagogical correction. It is my personal conviction that such tendency may be productive (both as such, and in its intrinsic capacity to highlight neurotic or conflictive fractions) and has been insufficiently exploited. However, there is no reason that the specific dynamic impact of the past be lost or neglected in its importance, in giving attention to a territory which is, in itself, of great technical potentiality.

Ritvo (**1981**) studied severe chronic psychosomatic patients with excessive anxiety and concluded that "analysis in these situations requires no modification or technique, but emphasizes the necessity of analyzing the intrasystemic antagonisms and conflicts in the ego with the aim of enhancing the autonomy of those functions which are the analyst's necessary allies in any analysis." This is a felicitous formulation for the valuing of the autonomous areas of the ego, and the integrated synthesizing and organizing functions deserve our alliance.

These considerations lead us to Hartmann (**1951**), who, looking at conflicts from the side of the ego, proposed that ego functions should be studied in detail. He suggested that one has to investigate the conflict-free components and their relation to areas invaded by conflicts. Important here is his stress on the interactive past rather than the emphasis on either the past or the present. Thus, he corrects the assumption that the removal of the unconscious alone will free the ego to do its own work.

It may appear to dilute my argument to quote Hans Loewald: "Deviations from a norm of rationality may at times be progressive. They tend to be seen as regressive because recoiling from a plateau of normality; but they, like mutations, may constitute or prepare novel, original forms and modes of experience and of the human mind." Loewald's formulation of repression and displacement is a reminder that displacement to a state of regression is another search for solutions not arrived at in the here and now and a reminder of transference phenomena.

In one of his last and most challenging papers, "Construction in Analysis" (**1937**), Freud discussed the role of memory and of reenactment, repression, and disavowal, leading us to consider the role of displacement in the context of these considerations. He then wrote,

> Let us return to our thesis that the childish ego, under the domination of the real world, gets rid of undesirable instinctual demands by what are called repressions. We will now supplement this by further asserting that, during the same period of life, the ego often finds itself in the position of fending off some demand from the external world which it feels distressing and that this is effected by means of disavowal of the perceptions which bring to knowledge this demand from reality. The disavowal is always supplemented by an acknowledgement; two contrary and independent attitudes always arise and result in the situation of there being a splitting of the ego.

What is true for disavowal or denial is not applicable to the function of displacement, for it does not lead to a splitting of the ego, nor is the external world fended off so that conflict solutions are unachievable. Moreover, we have to differentiate reenactment, the repetition of the old conflict under various conditions, and the placement of the conflicts so that modifications are sought after and possible.

In this paper Freud discusses the role of repression and the use of construction in the dialogue between analyst and patient. Confirmation of historical truth achieves the same therapeutic results as a recaptured memory. The construction may stimulate recall of details around the original events rather than the event itself. "That path that starts out from the analyst's construction ought to end in the patient's recollections; but it does not always lead so far. Quite often we do not succeed in bringing the patient to recollect what has been repressed. Instead of that, if the analysis is carried out correctly we produce in him an assured conviction of the truth of the construction which achieves the same therapeutic result as a recaptured memory." Here Freud examines the need to rely on the technical employment of factors beyond insight into the repressed original experience.

I have chosen these references to demonstrate that the widening scope of analysis asks for additional technical considerations. It is in this context that the significance of the mechanism of displacement may be found.

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