

ESP Displacement Effects: A Review of Pre-1940 Concepts and Qualitative Observations

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ABSTRACT: A short review of the concept and qualitative observations of ESP displacement published before 1940 is presented. The examples discussed are from ESP experiments and mediumistic studies. Explanations proposed to account for the phenomenon (e.g., deferred telepathic impressions, interference from ESP sources other than the target) are also included. It is pointed out that (a) the concept of displacement is older than previously considered, (b) some of the concerns of modern researchers appear also in the old literature, and (c) the studies and ideas discussed in the paper may provide ideas for further research.

Displacement ESP effects, a situation in which a percipient's response corresponds to a target other than the intended one, have traditionally been of interest to experimental parapsychologists. This may be seen in the publications of Carington (1940), Pratt and Foster (1950), and Soal (1940),² and in more recent studies (e.g., Child & Levi, 1980; Crandall & Hite, 1983; Palmer, Bogart, Jones, & Tart, 1977; for reviews of the literature see Braud, 1987; and Milton, 1986, 1988a, 1988b).

The concept of and evidence for displacement have generally been considered a modern development.³ Thouless (1942, p. 11) gave credit to Whately Carington for its discovery. Braud (1987, pp. 209–210, 216) traced the concept from Abbot's (1938) publication to recent discussions. Neglect of the history of the concept, however, precedes these authors. Neither Abbot (1938) nor Carington (1940) mentioned previous discussions of displacement. In his initial publication on the topic, Soal (1940, pp. 152–153) said that Carington suggested that Soal look for displacement in the records of his card experiments. Soal did not mention previous observations on displacement except for remarks regarding some problems

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² Soal's work has probably been the best known and most influential set of studies on displacement (see also Soal & Bateman, 1954, pp. 124–128, 148–167, 176–190, 208–211, 216–218; Soal & Goldney, 1943; Soal & Pratt, 1951). Unfortunately, there are good reasons to suspect that Soal altered some of his figures to simulate significant results (Markwick, 1978).

³ Two exceptions are Milton (1986, pp. 49–50) and Thalbourne (1981, p. 19), who mentioned two studies discussed in this paper (Guthrie, 1885; Sinclair, 1930).

gifted subjects seem to have with ESP impressions. As Soal wrote: "They will refer to some trifling event known to the sitter, which happened last week or yesterday or a year ago, and make no mention at all of what is occupying their client's mind at the moment" (p. 153). (Soal had experienced phenomena of this type before, as reported in his paper on sittings with Mrs. Blanche Cooper [Soal, 1925].)

This paper is not a history of displacement but a review of publications that show that the concept of displacement is older than previously thought. It is possible that many of the observations to be discussed may be explained by normal means (e.g., sensory cues, chance coincidence, response bias) or criticized on methodological grounds (e.g., post hoc arguments, artifacts resulting from a small number of trials, or selected examples). Accordingly, they are not presented as evidence of ESP functioning.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCEPTS OF DISPLACEMENT

Mesmerist Joseph W. Haddock (1851) reported an early example of displacement with his subject Emma. In a traveling clairvoyance test, after the subject had been hypnotized, Haddock asked Emma to "find" a relative of his in London. As he wrote: "She speedily found her, and began to describe her residence, etc.; but suddenly her attention ceased to be directed to my relative, and she became engrossed with the description of a magnificent residence, with its elegant and costly furniture" (p. 105). Haddock suspected that this referred to Buckingham Palace, an opinion he thought was confirmed when his relative (the ESP target) told him that she wanted Emma to describe the palace. In Haddock's opinion, the cause of the unexpected description was that his "relative had wished her to go there; when brought into mesmeric connection with her, the active sentiment of her mind was communicated to Emma's mind, and by this means, her attention was unconsciously directed to the royal residence" (p. 106).⁴

Displacement was also reported in ESP studies published by the Society for Psychical Research during the 1880s. Guthrie (1883) mentioned some "failures" during some of his thought-transference studies. In one trial, Guthrie reported "that although a certain article was placed for observation, a picture hanging on the wall a little above it was described" (p. 28).

⁴ The idea that ESP information from sources other than the subject may interfere with the subject's mentation by providing veridical information unrelated to the target is frequently found in the literature. Balfour (1888, pp. 353-354), Hettinger (1940, p. 184) and Osty (1927, pp. 262-264, 267-270) have speculated on the ESP influence of the experimenter and other observers. Warcollier (1938, pp. 22, 241-244) thought that in group telepathy experiments "mental contagion," or influence between percipients, could occur instead of responses to the target. Prince (1924) speculated on similar lines when he wrote that mediumistic communicators fail to get through a medium "because of the interference of the thoughts of others" (p. 168). For a more recent discussion of the concept of interference in relation to displacement, see Rogo (1979).

This was attributed to the "wandering attention" of the agent. In later tests, Guthrie (1885) referred to "reminiscence" effects with the transmission of taste sensations and of drawings. In his words:

In some taste experiments . . . it happened three times running that the taste which the percipient described was not the one which the agent was at that moment tasting, but the one which he had been tasting in the preceding trial a minute before, none of the substances having been named during the course of the experiments. In looking back over the volumes of diagrams I possess, I find that a good many which I considered failures at the time are evidently due to reminiscence of the preceding diagram which had not, in the majority of instances, been shown to the percipient in the interval. (p. 426)

In one of the earliest reports of ESP tests using statistics to evaluate the results, French physiologist Charles Richet (1884, pp. 643-645) described a series of trials in which the subjects had to select objects or cards through the movements of a wand (sort of like a divining rod) held in their two hands. Some of the failures mentioned by Richet were interesting. The subjects chose the wrong target on several occasions when they had reduced their selection to two similar cards or objects (e.g., two cards with pictures of a man on a horse, two medallions). Regarding a trial using cards as targets, Richet wrote that there had been a "confusion between the two cards representing the same object" (p. 644, my translation).⁵ On another occasion it was noticed that in three consecutive trials the card selected by the percipient was "the card exactly adjacent to the card thought" (p. 645, my translation) by the agent. Richet considered that the mistake was due to a misinterpretation of the movement of the wand.

In later tests, Richet (1888, p. 133) described medical diagnosis through ESP in which, on occasion, subjects produced veridical impressions about patients other than the intended ones.⁶

In other thought-transference tests, Rawson (1887, pp. 147-148; 1895, p. 5) noted that some of the reported successes were obtained with targets that had been originally selected to be used in the study, but were then replaced by other targets. Similar observations have been reported by other investigators (e.g., Hodgson, 1892, p. 14; Hyslop, 1914b, pp. 155, 169; Schrenck-Notzing, 1891, p. 20).⁷

⁵ Regarding these observations, Edmund Gurney (1884) speculated on the possibility that a telepathic impression "is to reveal itself when—and only when—the other element, the image, finds its fellow in a conscious percept, the actual picture of the object" (p. 246). Presumably, Gurney meant that the association of similar images could facilitate confusions when there were two similar targets.

⁶ Osty (1930, pp. 99-104) discussed errors in paranormal diagnosis that he attributed to false beliefs acquired through ESP from observers about the illnesses.

⁷ The underlying assumption here is that ESP of the memory, subconscious impressions, or material in the back of the mind of (or peripherally perceived by) an individual can influence or be perceived even when an attempt to receive or transmit a different target is made. Quevedo (1968/1972, pp. 347-381) and Warcollier (1938, pp. 166-185) discuss this topic with examples.

Sidgwick, Sidgwick, and Smith's (1889)⁸ report of thought-transference experiments with numbers contained the following passage about the performance of a subject called P:

After two successive correct guesses by P., the number 19 was drawn. We waited for 5 1/2 minutes, and then, as P. had no impression, gave it up, and drew another number, which turned out to be 43. Twenty-five seconds after the new number was drawn P. said 19. This was recorded and another number drawn, viz., 75, 13 seconds after which P. said 43. Thus two numbers in succession were rightly given, but one stage later (p. 161)

In later experiments, Sidgwick and Johnson (1892) reported instances of veridical guesses of numbers the agent "had been looking at in the trial immediately preceding, without having had any opportunity of learning by normal means what that number was" (p. 548). These observations, and those of the previously mentioned report, were interpreted as deferred telepathic impressions. That is, the telepathic message was received by the percipient, but it took some time to come to consciousness.⁹

Northcote W. Thomas (1905), once secretary of the Society for Psychical Research, reported the results of thought-transference experiments with playing cards. Thomas himself was occasionally a subject. Thomas noticed what he called "postponed success" in the results, that is, a "tendency for the suits and numbers of the card drawn for one experiment to appear in the guess following" (p. 156). The results of three series of experiments were reported (series A, C, and another one with no particular identification). In series A, postponed success was observed. Thomas noted that "successes and failures in direct results corresponded to failures and successes in postponed results" (p. 161). This he called an "inverse relation" (p. 159). Thomas also wrote about the tendency to guess in "cycles" (response biases or preferences) and about the relation of this response pattern to postponed successes:

If, for example, hearts has been guessed, one of the other three suits is more likely to be guessed . . . in the next trial, and, to a less extent, one of the two remaining ones in the following trial, and so on. The effect of this is, where the series is on the whole unsuccessful, to render a postponed success more probable than if chance alone regulated the choice of a suit. On the other hand, it tends to eliminate any effect due to telepathy, inasmuch as the

⁸For questions about Smith's honesty, see Gauld (1965, pp. 55-57) and Hall (1964, pp. 104-149).

⁹Regarding deferment or latency of ESP impressions, see Gurney, Myers, and Podmore (1886, Vol. 1, pp. 56, 70-71, 201, 519-520), Sidgwick et al. (1889, p. 161), and Saltmarsh (1929, p. 101). Despard and Campbell ("Experiments in Thought-Transference," 1893, p. 5) also reported "deferred successes" in some of their thought-transference experiments with playing cards.

selection is not made at random, so far as the percipient's conscious action is concerned. . . . It seems clear that, so far as direct successes are concerned, the result is to diminish the chances of success if there is any telepathic element; the case is less clear in the case of postponed successes, but probably the chances of success are, after a previous failure, increased; for quite apart from any telepathic element, the chance of guessing right is nearer 1 in 3 than in 4, and the cyclic tendency would not conflict perceptibly with any telepathic impulse to choose the right suit. (pp. 161-162)

The results of a later series C were not considered to provide evidence for telepathy. In other trials with two simultaneous percipients it was noticed that one percipient showed postponed success of the preceding guesses of the other percipient (p. 173).

Miles and Ramsden (1907, 1914) conducted ESP experiments in which Ramsden had to describe places that Miles was visiting or observing at a distance at a prearranged time. Some of the successes were not of the intended targets, but of other things seen by Miles earlier in the day or around the moment of the test (for examples see Miles & Ramsden, 1907, p. 74; 1914, pp. 284-285).

Alexander (1910) conducted telepathic drawing experiments in which he was the agent and his wife was the percipient. He noticed that in some of the series of trials, the percipient's response seemed to correspond to other drawings already used in previous tests or to be used in the next trial. In Alexander's words: "Where the response does fail to synchronize exactly it usually occurs immediately after or before the trial figure" (p. 284). He decided to count as a success a response anywhere in the individual series, because when he tried to send the picture he had "nearly the whole series in mind at once" (p. 284) and because he had already drawn the target or he had been thinking about the next one.

German physician Carl Bruck (1924)¹⁰ reported telepathic drawing tests with four subjects in two conditions: with and without hypnosis. In some trials it was observed that the subjects responded to the previously used target (not known to the subject) and to targets to be used in later trials, which were kept all together in a portfolio by the experimenter. The following is an example:

In this case the original was a bottle; and the subject drew something like a hat. . . . He then left the hat *in statu quo*, and proceeded to make a new drawing below it, of the top of a street lantern; and this corresponded in every detail to the original, waiting in the portfolio, for the next test. (Bruck, 1924, p. 305)

Bruck also mentioned that a possible explanation for this phenomenon

¹⁰The official report of these tests, which I have seen but have not used in this paper, was published in book form a year later (Bruck, 1925). For further examples of displacement in Bruck's research, see Murphy and Dale (1943, pp. 10-12).

was that the subject may have "telepathic access to the whole experimental complex prepared by the investigator" (Bruck, 1924, p. 305).¹¹

The literature discussing the performance of well-known mediums and psychics also presents examples of displacement. As Hyslop (1907) has said in a discussion of confusions and errors in the mentations of mental mediums, it is possible that the information given by a medium "may be true in relation to some other incident or person than the sitter" (p. 582).¹² Examples of this, and other types of displacements, may be found with Gladys Osborne Leonard. Several reports on sittings with Mrs. Leonard contain examples of displacement because instead of the expected communications, the medium's statements referred to veridical events corresponding to the activities of distant individuals (e.g., Crandon, 1929; Salter, 1926, pp. 202-203). Some researchers noticed in Mrs. Leonard's well-known book tests that there were confusions (spatial displacements) between nearby books and particular pages inside the books (Irving, 1927, pp. 565-566; Sidgwick, 1921, pp. 262, 338-347). As Mrs. Sidgwick wrote regarding one of the examples she quoted: "There is a method in the errors which certainly suggests mistakes or confusion rather than reckless statements aided by chance" (p. 269).

Saltmarsh (1929, pp. 107-108) noticed with Mrs. Warren Elliott instances in which the information given by the medium applied to the notetaker instead of to the sitter.¹³

The phenomenon was also noticed with Polish psychic Stephan Ossowiecki. Schrenck-Notzing (1924/1972, p. 73) briefly reported that Ossowiecki described his studio in the middle of a reading about other persons. Geley (1924/1927, pp. 42, 78-79) published other examples of possible displacement in which Ossowiecki's ESP impressions corresponded to the persons that had prepared the ESP target in addition to the target itself.

French researcher Eugène Osty was interested in displacement, because he made special studies of errors during ESP performance. As he wrote regarding his studies of Mme. Morel and other subjects: "It happens

¹¹ Commenting about the explanation for the above-mentioned example with the street lantern, two reviewers of Bruck's work have expressed different opinions. One said that because the experimenter knew the content of the target pool, the percipient could have obtained the information telepathically from his mind (Schiller, 1925, p. 468), whereas the other said that the incident shows that "telepathy is nothing but a particular case of metagony [clairvoyance]" (Sudre, 1925, p. 184, my translation).

¹² Regarding Hyslop, it is of interest to study his ideas on the process of mediumistic communication (Hyslop, 1914a, 1919, pp. 107-121). What we may consider to be examples of displacement were discussed by Hyslop (1919) as examples of crossed communications (pp. 119-120) and of the "diversion of the medium's subconscious attention from the persons wanted" (p. 120). Salter (1930) considered, in relation to Mrs. Leonard's mediumship, that confusions and irrelevance in the communications could be created when information obtained through the sitters' minds "may be wrongly associated with the communicator" (p. 320).

¹³ There are examples of this phenomenon with Mrs. Piper (Hodgson, 1892, p. 109) and with Mrs. Soule, known as Mrs. Chenoweth (Hyslop, 1919, p. 120).

sometimes . . . that a subject instead of receiving and revealing knowledge concerning the individual desired, reveals states of life of another person, usually belonging to the same surroundings, or whom enquiry enables us easily to identify" (Osty, 1922/1923, p. 190). In chair tests conducted with psychic Pascal Forthuny, Osty (1926, p. 192) noticed that on occasion Forthuny's impressions did not correspond to the person in the selected chair, but to someone sitting in the front, back, or to the side of the target chair. Osty also mentioned that some impressions seemed to be a mixture of ESP information from two or three persons sitting nearby the target person.¹⁴ In an article about Forthuny, Sudre (1926) said that because proximity in space was the factor leading to these confusions, a hypothesis could be proposed: "There exists a spatial element, likely a material one, a kind of 'fluid' which favors metagony" (p. 70).

In drawing tests Upton Sinclair did with his wife Mary Craig as percipient, "anticipations," that is, responses to existing targets to be used later, were observed (Sinclair, 1930, pp. 113-120, 124-136).¹⁵ In a particularly interesting example there were several "anticipations." As Sinclair reported:

Drawing number one was a tooth; Craig wrote: "First see a rooster. Then elephant." Drawing number two was an elephant; and Craig wrote: "Elephant came again. I try to suppress it, and see lines, and a spike sticking some way into something." She drew it, and it seems clear that the "spike" is the elephant's tusk, and the head of the "spike" is the elephant's eye. . . . Next, number three was the rooster. But Craig had set "rooster" down in her mind as a blunder. (Sinclair, 1930, p. 124)

Although the drawing the percipient made resembled the target (the rooster) in some ways, Mrs. Sinclair did not identify it as such. As Sinclair wrote, his wife resisted correct images if they had been "anticipated," because they were attributed to memory (p. 136).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have already stated that it was not my intention to present evidence for displacement, but rather to document the existence of the concept before the studies of Abbot (1938) and Carington (1940). Nonetheless, it should be stated again that most of this material is open to criticisms such as reliance on post hoc analysis and chance coincidence.

¹⁴ Similar phenomena have been reported elsewhere. For example, Hettinger (1940, p. 38) noticed in his psychometry experiments that "readings" of objects not only corresponded to the object's owners but also to persons related to the owners in some way. See also Hyslop's (1919, p. 121) discussion of cases of "interfusion" of thought of more than one person in mediumistic communications.

¹⁵ See also Prince's (1932, pp. 57-60) description and comments about the "anticipations." In a review of Sinclair's book, Sidgwick (1930, p. 345) argued that because the agent was acquainted with the target pool, telepathy was a more likely explanation of "anticipations" than precognition.

As was seen in the previous section, instances of alleged displacement have been observed in different contexts (mediumistic and nonmediumistic settings, experimental and quasi-experimental conditions), with a variety of methodologies (forced choice and free response, with and without a designated agent) and using different target types (numbers, drawings, persons). It is interesting to note that several explanations for the phenomenon have been offered, such as deferred or latent ESP impressions, subconscious transmission of peripheral or other unintended targets, and interferences from other ESP "signals." (See the Table.) These explanations have been proposed after the fact because, unlike more recent studies (e.g., Crandall & Hite, 1983), past researchers have considered the phenomenon as an incidental occurrence and did not pursue displacement as the primary objective of their studies.

Some concepts about displacement in the recent literature have precedents in some of the material discussed in the preceding section. For example, Thomas's (1905) "inverse relation" seems similar to more recent observations regarding psi-missing results on the intended targets when significant displacement was observed (e.g., Child & Levi, 1980; Crandall & Hite, 1983; Palmer et al., 1977). Also, Thomas's comments about the effects of response biases (pp. 161-162) are similar to later discussions of the "tendency to avoid repeating calls [that] will increase the probability of obtaining displaced scores in the direction opposite to the direct scores" (Burdick & Broughton, 1987, pp. 117-118; see also Bartlett, 1949).¹⁶

Braud (1987) observed that in some free-response ESP experiments he has conducted, the percipient's impressions "match very closely those of the immediately preceding percipient" (p. 214). Influence between per-

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Competing ESP signals	Osty (1927)
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Spatial proximity	Sudre (1926)
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ESP of the whole target pool	Bruck (1924)

¹⁶ For a previous discussion on the statistical implications of number habits not related to displacement, see R. A. Fisher's comments appended to Jephson's (1928, pp. 269-271) report.

cipients was also noted by Thomas (1905, p. 173) and by Warcollier (1938, pp. 22, 241, 243-244).

Crandall's (1987; Crandall & Covey, 1986) study of background stimuli in relation to displacement may be related to observations and conjectures of the effectiveness of peripheral, forgotten, or subconscious material as ESP targets (e.g., R[awson], 1887, pp. 147-148; Schrenck-Notzing, 1891, p. 20; Warcollier, 1938, pp. 166-185).

Regardless of possible evidential problems with the above-mentioned ideas and observations, they may provide hypotheses for further research on displacement. One line of investigation that may prove fruitful is an examination of the occurrence of deferment. Another idea deserving study is the notion of obtaining information about subconscious material, associations, and peripheral stimuli through ESP. Perhaps it may be possible to induce displacement by manipulating knowledge about the target in selected individuals (e.g., subliminally), or in the handling of objects by different persons, following psychometric ideas.

In summary, the concept of displacement has a long tradition in parapsychology. Perhaps an awareness of this material, even if methodologically weak, may prove of some use to those currently interested in the subject.

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