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## Review of Michael Billig, *Freudian Repression*

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## Review of Michael Billig, *Freudian Repression*

### **Abstract**

In *Freudian Repression* Michael Billig praises Freud for identifying the central concept of repression and for articulating his ideas in a clear and compelling way. In fact, he calls Freud "the greatest of all psychologists" (p. 261). But Billig points out, convincingly, that Freud never explained how repression works. Freud does offer metaphorical explanations, in terms of "censors" shielding one part of the self from threatening thoughts, but Billig argues that these explanations are both vague and conceptually unsatisfying.

### **Comments**

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BILLIG, MICHAEL. Freudian Repression. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. vii + 290 pp.

In Freudian Repression Michael Billig praises Freud for identifying the central concept of repression and for articulating his ideas in a clear and compelling way. In fact, he calls Freud “the greatest of all psychologists” (p. 261). But Billig points out, convincingly, that Freud never explained how repression works. Freud does offer metaphorical explanations, in terms of “censors” shielding one part of the self from threatening thoughts, but Billig argues that these explanations are both vague and conceptually unsatisfying.

Billig suggests that an adequate account of repression should avoid Freud’s emphasis on biological drives and psychological hydraulics. Drawing on classic ideas from Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, plus more contemporary work from Gergen (1994), Harré (1995) and others, Billig offers a social constructionist account of repression that captures Freud’s brilliant insight but leaves behind his metaphysics. In brief, Billig argues that “we push away disturbing thoughts in much the same way as we avoid troublesome topics in conversation” (p. 38). Repression is accomplished through speech, in social context, as people systematically shift conversation or thoughts away from threatening topics.

Freudian Repression has many strengths. Billig takes Freud seriously, praising his penetrating insights, but he does not hesitate to point out Freud’s shortcomings. The book also follows Freud in being clearly written and engaging. Billig weaves several of Freud’s case studies into his text, using them as evidence for his own arguments. In addition to pushing the argument forward, these cases make the text more accessible and teach the reader interesting things about Freud and his times. Billig’s social constructionist account of repression also moves away from biological reductionism and self-contained individualism, toward a more dialogic account of the person, which many find a promising direction (e.g., Harré, 1995; Shotter, 1993).

Nonetheless, completely replacing biological drives with linguistic practices seems a stretch. As Billig describes, Freudian repression depends on a distinction between preconscious and unconscious. While we can access preconscious thoughts just by paying attention, we keep repressed thoughts out of consciousness for a reason. There

is desire behind the repressed thoughts, and motivation to hide that desire. On a non-biological, social constructionist account, what accounts for such desire and motivation? Billig often describes repression as mere distraction—i.e., when an opportunity arises to say something rude, we distract ourselves and others by changing the topic. He argues that anyone who uses language commonly encounters opportunities to be rude, and he concludes that repression must be universal. But rudeness and distraction do not seem powerful enough concepts to explain the motivation behind repression.

In response to this issue, Billig suggests that we must change our whole account of the person. Metaphors, like seeing motivation and desire as “behind” our thoughts, in some primal part of the individual, can skew our theorizing in a biological and individualistic direction. Instead, we must see that emotions themselves are not just inner states but also social products. Billig does not work it out fully, but he points toward a Wittgensteinian account that would capture concepts like motivation and desire in social and not individual terms. At times Billig uses such an account convincingly in his analyses of Freud’s cases. He shows, for example, how Freud consistently interpreted Little Hans’ statements in terms of his “desire” for his mother—while ignoring (as “natural”) the desires that Hans’ parents were imposing on him. Billig also begins to connect his social constructionist account to the macro-social concept of ideology, arguing that ideology can be construed as collective repression in some cases.

In order to make this social constructionist account work, however, I would argue that Billig needs a more complex account of language use. His account of repression focuses on how language represents information. Drawing on conversation analysis, he describes how “little words” (like but and anyway) allow people to change the topic away from threatening issues to benign ones. His social account of repression focuses almost entirely on speakers “opening up and closing down topics” (p. 52). Although this process certainly happens, there is much more to language use than topic management. Speakers use language to accomplish social actions and to adopt social positions, and in doing so they foreground some desires and background others (e.g., Crapanzano, 1992; Silverstein, 1998). Billig could strengthen his case that repression is “dialogical, not biological” if he attended to the complex relational patterns that can be enacted and

transformed through language use. He nonetheless deserves credit for moving us toward an understanding of repression as social action.

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