

Comparative Study

A Comparative Study of Defense Mechanism in Wives of Alcohol Dependents and Healthy Controls

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol dependence, a type of substance use disorder, is a chronic mental disorder. Individuals with this disorder develop impaired control over alcohol consumption and become physically dependent on it. As a result, their personal and social lives are seriously disrupted, but despite this, they continue to consume alcohol, even in risky situations. Wives of individuals with alcohol dependence are the most deeply affected members of the family, especially as this disorder puts a lot of distress on the family. Due to its chronic nature and the reoccurrence of relapses, the wives of such individuals resort to defense mechanisms. The present study aims to compare Defense Mechanism in Wives of Individuals with Alcohol Dependence and Healthy Controls. A sample of 30 wives of individuals diagnosed as Alcohol Dependents with no co-morbid psychiatric disorder and a matched group of 30 wives of healthy controls were selected through Purposive Sampling as per the defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Both groups were compared on the Defense Mechanism Inventory (DMI-MS) by Dr. N. R. Mrinal and Dr. Uma Singhal (2012) and obtained data was analyzed using t-test. The results showed that wives of individuals with alcohol dependence had significantly higher scores on 'Reversal' and 'Turning against self' than the control group.

Keywords: *Alcohol Dependence, Defense Mechanism, Healthy Controls*

Alcohol dependence is a severe psychiatric disorder characterized by emotional and physiological dependence on alcohol, with an increased intake of alcohol over time in order to achieve pleasure (VandenBos, 2015). In this disorder, an individual feels a strong desire to consume alcohol. He intends to reduce the amount of alcohol but fails to do so (Sadock, Sadock, & Ruiz, 2015). A person with alcohol dependence places their priority on procuring and consuming alcohol over other important aspects of life. Persistently, he takes alcohol despite facing clear harmful consequences.

Defense mechanisms are cognitive processes that get operationalized to defend the person from heightened anxiety and other negative emotions. Defense mechanisms are also employed to protect the individual from a loss of self-esteem and, sometimes, a loss of self-integration (Cramer, 2008). These defense mechanisms are used in response to inner instinctual demands and external prohibitions (Cramer, 1991). There are various defense

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mechanisms, i.e., repression, projection, displacement, rationalization, etc. Although these defense mechanisms work in different ways, they have a common goal: safeguarding a person from getting overwhelmed by anxiety and protecting the self and his self-esteem (Cramer, 2008).

According to classical psychoanalytic thought, defenses respond to both internal pressures and external forces, such as pressures coming from significant adults. The inability of caregivers to empathize is particularly significant in this aspect since the child mobilizes defenses to avoid acknowledging these shortcomings. According to modern thinking, defenses also serve the purpose of defending the self and one's self-worth. Strong intrapersonal conflict frequently sets up defense mechanisms (Hentschel, Smith, Draguns, & Ehlers, 2004). These defense mechanisms act as a mediator between the person's emotional problems and external and internal stressors.

Vaillant (1992) classified defense mechanisms into four categories: Primitive or Pathological defenses, Immature defenses, Neurotic defenses, and Mature defenses. Mature defense mechanisms are considered more healthy than neurotic and immature defense mechanisms. He thus postulated that defense mechanisms are unconscious and a major means of managing instinct and affect. He further added that though these are discreet, defenses are dynamic and reversible, and these can be adaptive as well as pathological, as described earlier.

The defense mechanism inventory is based on the assumption that defense mechanisms resolve conflicts between the perception of an individual and his or her internalized values. In the defense mechanism process, the ego confronts, twists, or makes some aspect of the world out of awareness. A classification of defense mechanisms was developed by Gleser and Ihilevich (1969) on the basis of the above assumptions and groups the main defense mechanisms into five categories. These are:

- i. **Turning against object:** This category of defenses deals with conflict by confronting an existing or assumed external frustration-causing object.
- ii. **Projection:** In this group of defenses, conflict that is caused by unacceptable impulses toward oneself is resolved by attributing these impulses to another.
- iii. **Principalization:** In this category, conflict is dealt with by a process of separating affect from content; affect is then repressed.
- iv. **Turning against self:** This is a type of defense that deals with conflict by turning aggressive behavior inward, toward the "self."
- v. **Reversal:** In this category, the conflict is managed by reacting either positively or neutrally to an irritating object that may be anticipated to cause a negative reaction.

The above classification has been used in the present study.

Alcohol dependence not only affects the person who is dependent on it but also brings significant distress to the family members as they face great hardships due to this disorder. Although every member of the family gets affected, it is the wife of an individual with alcohol dependence who mostly feels the heat. Wives of alcohol dependents, much like other women, have desires, roles, expectations, and values regarding married life and their spouses. Due to the recurrent cycle of relapse and recovery that characterizes alcohol dependence, a person might become trapped in a problematic pattern of alcohol use even when they are aware of the negative effects on their family, career, social life, marriage, and other aspects of their lives.

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Their wives experience tension and disagreements as a result of this behavior pattern. Given that this illness is linked to chronicity, multiple attempts to treat it usually result in failure. Frustration and distress become commonplace experiences of daily life, and it seems impossible to change these situations. Consequently, the wives of such individuals begin to have low self-esteem, low status, troubled family relationships (Parthasarathy, 2013), and marital dissatisfaction (Kishor, Pandit, & Raguram, 2013; Pujam & Kalavani, 2017; Akbar et al., 2019), because there is a gap between what these wives are perceiving and what their internalized values are. They therefore turn to using a variety of defensive strategies excessively rather than dealing with the issue directly in order to preserve their mental health and ability to work.

Generally, most of the research is carried out on individuals with alcohol dependence, whereas there is a paucity of research on the wives of these individuals. The present study is planned to fill this gap in order to maintain and restore their mental health so that they can effectively deal with their concerned environment and lead a fruitful and meaningful life.

Aim:

The purpose of the present study is to compare Defense Mechanism in Wives of Individuals with Alcohol Dependence and Healthy Controls.

Hypotheses:

1. There would be a significant difference in Turning Against Object defense mechanism in wives of individuals with Alcohol Dependence and Healthy Controls.
2. There would be a significant difference in Projection defense mechanism in wives of individuals with Alcohol Dependence and Healthy Controls.
3. There would be a significant difference in Principalization defense mechanism in wives of individuals with Alcohol Dependence and Healthy Controls.
4. There would be a significant difference in Turning Against Self defense mechanism in wives of individuals with Alcohol Dependence and Healthy Controls.
5. There would be a significant difference in Reversal defense mechanism in wives of individuals with Alcohol Dependence and Healthy Controls.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

The research design formulated for the present study is **Cross Sectional Research Design**.

Sample:

A sample of 60 subjects, 30 wives of clients' fulfilling the diagnosis of Alcohol Dependence according to ICD-11 with no co-morbid psychiatric disorder and a matched group of 30 wives of healthy control subjects, were taken for the study through Purposive Sampling method. The clients were selected from various Rehabilitation and Drug De-Addiction Centres in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand as per the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned below.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Wives of Individuals with Alcohol Dependence (ICD-11 diagnosis of Alcohol Dependence with no other co-morbid psychiatric disorder) and Healthy controls (with no past, present, or family history of major psychiatric disorder in first-degree relatives).
- Wives willing to give their written informed consent for the study.

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- Wives in age range of 30 to 45 years.
- Wives with an education level of minimum 10th standard.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Wives with subnormal physical and mental health.
- Wives unwilling to give their written informed consent for the study.

Instrument

Defense Mechanism Inventory (DMI-MS) by Mrinal and Singhal (2012) was used in the present study. It has 200 items that measure five clusters of defense mechanisms- Turning Against Object (TAO), Projection (PRO), Principalization (PRN), Turning Against Self (TAS), and Reversal (REV). This inventory is made up of ten stories, two for each of the five conflict areas. The conflict areas are related with authority, independence, masculinity (male form only), femininity (female form only), competition, and situational. After going through each story, the subject has to respond to four questions corresponding to four types of behaviour evoked by the situation described in the story i.e., Proposed actual behaviour (AB), Impulsive behaviour (FB), Thoughts (T) and Feelings (F). Each question is followed by five responses. Each response represents one of the five defense mechanisms mentioned above.

Procedure

30 wives of individuals with Alcohol Dependence were selected from various Rehabilitation and Drug De-Addiction Centres in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand as per the defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A matched control group of 30 wives of healthy control subjects was taken. Both samples were selected through Purposive Sampling method. Data was collected from both groups using the Defense Mechanism Inventory after receiving written informed consent from the research participants. The scoring of the responses was done as per the instructions in the Defense Mechanism Inventory manual. The obtained data was analyzed by the latest version of IBM SPSS Statistics software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The scores obtained on the Defense Mechanism Inventory for both groups were analyzed using t-test. The results of the study show that the wives of individuals with alcohol dependence differed in the use of defenses in comparison with the control group.

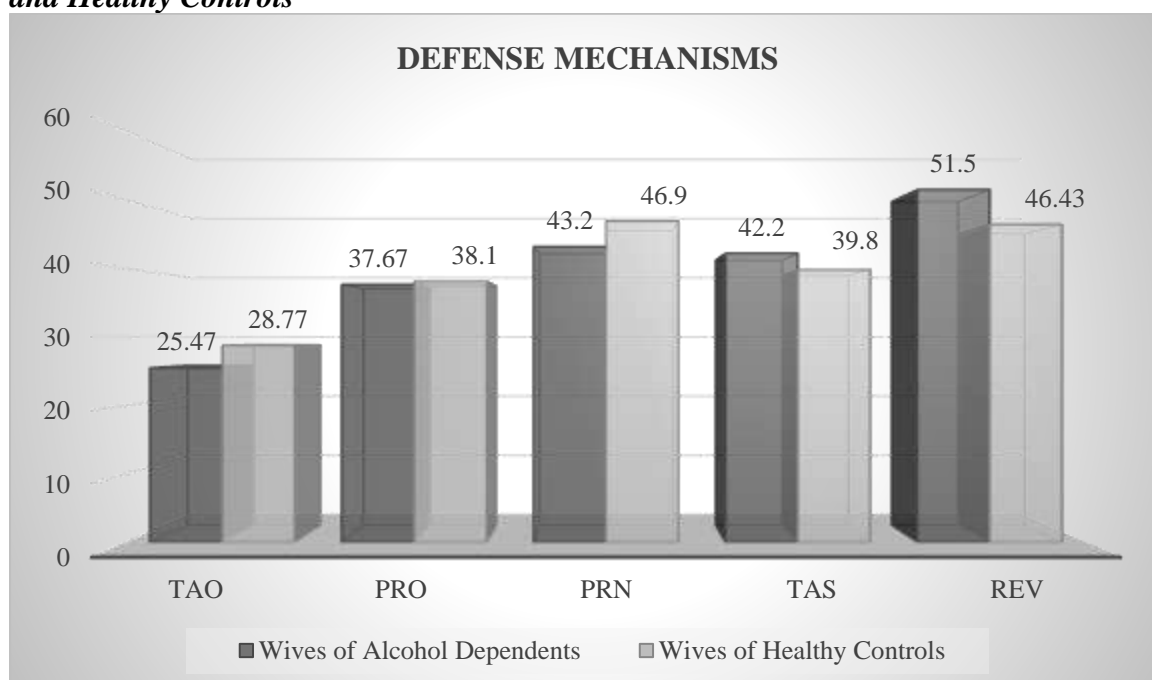
Table 1: Defense Mechanism in Wives of Alcohol Dependents and Healthy Controls

Group	Defense Mechanism	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Wives of Alcohol dependents	Turning Against Object (TAO)	30	25.47	7.67	1.64	58	0.11
Wives of Healthy Controls		30	28.77	7.92			
Wives of Alcohol dependents	Projection (PRO)	30	37.67	8.50	0.22	58	0.82
Wives of Healthy Controls		30	38.10	6.35			
Wives of Alcohol dependents	Principalization (PRN)	30	43.20	5.94	1.88	58	0.06
Wives of Healthy Controls		30	46.90	9.03			
Wives of Alcohol dependents	Turning Against Self (TAS)	30	42.20	4.56	2.21	58	0.03*
Wives of Healthy Controls		30	39.80	3.82			
Wives of Alcohol dependents	Reversal (REV)	30	51.50	8.63	2.37	58	0.02*
Wives of Healthy Controls		30	46.43	7.89			

* $p < 0.05$ level

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Graph 1: Mean scores of various Defense Mechanisms in Wives of Alcohol Dependents and Healthy Controls



Result table 1 shows that hypothesis 1 has been rejected at 0.05 level of confidence as the t-value for **Turning Against Object (TAO)** is 1.64 ($p > 0.05$), indicating no significant difference in the scores of TAO in wives of Alcohol dependents and Healthy controls.

Similarly, the t-value for **Projection (PRO)** is 0.22 ($p > 0.05$) and the t-value for **Principialization (PRN)** is 1.88 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that there is no significant difference in the scores of PRO and PRN in wives of Alcohol dependents and Healthy controls. Therefore, hypotheses 2 and 3 have also been rejected at 0.05 level of confidence.

The t-value for **Turning Against Self (TAS)** is 2.21 ($p < 0.05$) and the t-value for **Reversal (REV)** is 2.37 ($p < 0.05$), showing that there is a significant difference in the scores of TAS and REV in wives of Alcohol dependents and Healthy controls. Thus, hypotheses 4 and 5 have been accepted at 0.05 level of confidence.

The main aim of the present study was to compare defense mechanism in wives of individuals with alcohol dependence and healthy controls. The results of the study indicate that the wives of individuals with alcohol dependence differed in scores of defense mechanism compared to the wives of healthy controls.

No significant difference was found in the scores of Turning Against Object (TAO) ($p > 0.05$), Projection (PRO) ($p > 0.05$), and Principialization (PRN) ($p > 0.05$) scores among wives of individuals with alcohol dependence and wives of healthy controls.

The score on Turning Against Self (TAS) was significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) in wives of alcohol dependents than in the wives of healthy controls. TAS is a type of defense that deals with conflict by turning aggressive behavior inward, toward the “self.” It is evident that female spouses of individuals with alcohol dependence witness the chronic nature of this illness involving relapse and recovery cycles, as well as significant problems in the social and

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occupational spheres of their spouse caused by alcohol dependence. Subsequently, the wives of these individuals experience negative emotions like shame (Mishra & Azeez, 2016), embarrassment (Sharma et al., 2016), and low self-esteem (Parthasarathy, 2013; Anthonisamy & Premsingh, 2016). These, in turn, limit them from seeking and utilizing social support. As a result, they perceive less social support.

Therefore, wives of alcohol dependents find themselves caught between a lack of social support (Bhowmick, Tripathi, Jhingan, & Pandey, 2001; Singh, Bhattacharjee, & Kumar, 2009) and continued distress caused by alcohol dependence in their spouses. In these situations, their conflict seemed to be resolved by ‘turning against self’ defense mechanism. The results of the study by Merinov, Shitov, Lukashuk, and Somkina (2015) also showed that auto-aggressive behaviour patterns are more prevalent in wives of men suffering from alcohol dependence than their normal counterparts.

Similarly, the score on Reversal (REV) was significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) in wives of alcohol dependents than the wives of healthy controls. Reversal is a class of defenses that manages conflict by reacting either positively or neutrally to an irritating object that may be anticipated to cause a negative reaction, like negation or reaction formation. As wives of alcohol dependents are reliant on their husbands for their necessities, they respond to their husbands’ drinking patterns by seeking out a positive side of the same to evade conflict. The research conducted by Zebic, Vukovic, Cvetic, and Britvic (2006) supports the conclusion that wives of alcoholics mostly use negation and reaction formation as defense mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

Wives in particular suffer a great deal when their spouses suffer from Alcohol Dependence. They remain on the receiving end on many fronts. They typically take on various means to deal with these stressful situations; some of them are beneficial and aid in handling the situation, but others have unfavorable effects that worsen the issue and impair their own mental health. They consequently find it more difficult to handle the circumstances. In the process of managing these situations, the wives go through several conflicts, and various defense mechanisms come to the rescue in resolving these conflicts. Obtained results in this study suggest that psychological interventions for wives of individuals with alcohol dependence can be planned by keeping in view ‘turning against self’ and ‘reversal’ defense mechanisms to restore and maintain their mental health.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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