

Do Defense Mechanisms Change With Age? A Study of Age Variations and Further Explorations of Defense Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Defense mechanisms are used to protect the self from feelings of anxiety or guilt. They are not under one's conscious control and are involuntary and adjective functions of the mind. This also implies that with change in situations, experiences and age, there is a possibility of change in types and extent of defense mechanisms used by a person. This paper aims to justify that as an internal form of conflict resolution, the study and evaluation of these defense mechanisms could be the key to gauging the most successful and widely used coping mechanisms, and implementing them into fields of youth studies, geriatric studies and more, for maximum wellbeing. This paper takes the aide of The Defense Mechanism Inventory (DMI-MS), which measures total defense mechanism and also individual types of defense mechanisms. This scale and the statistical and qualitative analysis of it's results is used to study the type, extent and impact of the prevailing defense mechanisms used in a comparative review between a sample size of thirty 20 to 30 year old males, and thirty 50 to 60 year old males. This study attempts to ascertain the prevalence of kind of ego defense systems, the changes between dominating defense mechanisms with change in age, and also to delve deeper into exploring the implications of these changes and their relevance in various fields of psychology and management.

Keywords: *Defense Mechanisms, Age Variations, Further Explorations*

We often use certain unconscious processes to reduce anxiety without actually addressing the problem. Freud called these very unconscious processes defense mechanisms; these strategies do not alter the real conditions of the situation, but the way the person perceives it and cognitively processes it (Freud, 1937). Defense mechanisms could also be termed as elements of self-deception. Memories and undesirable urges that are in the unconscious do not disappear. They

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continue to apply a strong influence on behavior. The forces that try to keep these uncomfortable or socially unacceptable thoughts and memories out of the conscious mind have been called defense mechanisms.

Along with the ego, our unconscious uses one or more defense mechanism to protect us when we come up against a stressful situation in life. They are used to protect the self from feelings of anxiety or guilt, which arise when threatened, or when the id or superego become too demanding, but they are not under conscious control, and often irrational. For example, when one “forgets” a doctor’s appointment rather than by dealing directly with the problem (Butcher & Mineka, 2014). Defense mechanisms are essential for cushioning the blow of failure, reducing cognitive dissonance, alleviating anxiety, shielding against trauma and upholding feelings of competence of personal worth.

Freud identified that defense mechanisms are discrete from one another - and was the first to introduce the concept of individual defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are normal adjective reactions, and therefore fairly consistent with each person. Freud’s work with ego defense mechanisms has led to classifying the ways in which unconscious defense is sought to protect one from external threatening factors that tend to be consistent and inborn as types within each person. Extended research in various fields with respect to ego and defense has tended to confound variations in results of younger and older populations.

In this research, the defense mechanisms of different age groups of males are measured to compare and find the change of defense mechanism usage and types over generations and age.

OBJECTIVE

This research aims at finding and comparing the different kinds of defenses and defense mechanisms that are used by different age groups of the male gender. Since the underlying assumption of the defense mechanism classification system is that each individual has a different way of resolving conflicts on the basis of his internalized values and stress coping mechanisms, this research further aims to try to encapsulate the idea that with an increase in age, the overall and also individual ways of coping with stress, threat and tension differ.

Hence the question that is to be answered is whether defense mechanisms change with maturity and an increased exposure to life’s anxieties and stressful situations, and how.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Freud (1937) suggested, “If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety regarding the outside world, moral anxiety regarding the superego, and neurotic anxiety regarding strength of the id.” And, in order to deal with such conflict and problems in life, Freud said that the ego also employs a range of ego defense mechanisms, which operate at an

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unconscious level and help ward off such unpleasant feelings or make good things feel even better.

This, among other modern models of ego psychology lends a broader impact and emphasis of the role of coping and defense mechanisms as behavioral factors of personality relevant for adjustment and adaptation, especially for stress and lifespan research (Costa et al., 1991; Cramer, 2008; Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996; Haan, 1977; Vaillant, 1992, 1993).

The list of defense mechanisms is vast and there is no conjectural unanimity on the exact number. Classifying defense mechanisms according to some of their properties (like underlying mechanisms, similarities or connections with personality) has been attempted. Different theorists have different categorizations and conceptualizations of defense mechanisms. Anna Freud (1936) initially presented five main mechanisms: repression, regression, projection, reaction formation, and sublimation. Bibring (1950) then listed twenty-four 1st order defenses and fifteen 2nd order defenses. Cameron (1963) reported fifteen and Coleman (1964) described seventeen. Keeping all earlier classifications into consideration, Gleser and Ihilevich (1969) then grouped these defenses into five categories with the underlying assumption that major functions of defenses is the resolution of conflicts between what is perceived by the individual and his internalized values (Kroeber 1963, Miller and Swanson 1960). These defense mechanisms are *Turning Against Object* (dealing with conflict through attacking a real or presumed external frustrating object), *Projection* (expression of aggression towards and external object), *Principialization* (dealing with defenses with conflict through invoking a general principle that differentiates affect from the content and represses the former), *Turning Against Self* (handling conflict through directing aggressive behaviors towards oneself) and *Reversal* (dealing with conflict by responding in a positive or neutral fashion to the frustrating object).

Though there is much debate going on about defense and coping mechanisms, there is reasonable consensus with respect to certain areas of research especially concerning some significant points. One, defense mechanisms are linked to a various aspects of human psyche, including cognition and interpersonal relations (Blanchard-Fields, Mienaltowski, & Seay, 2007). Two, defense mechanisms represent active and multilateral processes (Folkman, 1991). Three, it is useful to study the change in defense mechanisms across ages life span in order to understand their sequence, how they develop, and how individuals of different ages respond to challenges associated with situations of stress and adversity (Costa et al., 1991; Cramer, 2008; Diehl et al., 1996; Folkman, 1991).

Vaillant detailed the different purposes defenses can serve which depict what exactly defense mechanisms are required for and an understanding of how these purposes may vary with age (Vaillant, 1987). These purposes include keeping influences within bearable limits during sudden

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alterations in one's life, restoring psychological equanimity by delaying or avoiding sudden increases in drives, taking a break to master sudden changes in the self that cannot be immediately understood, managing conflicts with important people, resolving cognitive dissonance and adapting to sudden, unanticipated differences between expectation and reality.

Otto F. Kernberg (1967) developed a theory of borderline personality organization. His theory is based on an ego-object relation's theory. Borderline personality organization develops when the child cannot integrate helpful and harmful mental objects together. Kernberg viewed the use of primitive defense mechanisms as central to this personality association. Primitive psychological defenses are projection, denial, dissociation or splitting and they are called borderline defense mechanisms. Robert Plutchik's (1979) theorizes "defenses as derivatives of basic emotions, which in turn relate to particular diagnostic structures". According to his theory, reaction formation relates to joy (and manic features), denial relates to acceptance (and histrionic features), repression to fear (and passivity), regression to surprise (and borderline traits), compensation to sadness (and depression), projection to disgust (and paranoia), displacement to anger (and hostility) and intellectualization to anticipation (and obsessionality). These coincide with the categorization and validation of defense mechanism types as suggested by other theorists, researchers, and psychologists.

In **George Eman Vaillant's (1977)** categorization, defenses form a scale related to their psychoanalytical developmental level. They are classified into pathological, immature, neurotic and "mature" defenses. This goes in accordance with the idea that defense mechanisms have a direct correlation with development, age, and maturity.

METHOD

Variables

The variable measured is defense mechanisms, also further broken down into 5 types. These are measured using the Defense Mechanism Inventory. It is measured across 2 samples of the male population – 20 to 30 year olds and 50 to 60 year olds.

Data

The total sample of population was taken as 60 with thirty males aged between 20 and 30 years and thirty males aged between 50 and 60 years. The Defense Mechanism Inventory – Male Form (DMI-MS) is the primary scale used for this study. It measures total defense mechanism and also individual defense mechanisms based on the classification given by Gleser and Ihilevich (1969) – TAO (Turning Against Object), PRO (Projection), PRN (Principalization), TAS (Turning Against Self) and REV (Reversal). The DMI-MS consists of ten events; two for each of six conflict areas (related with authority, independence and masculinity). 20 questions are asked for

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each event, which the respondent answers by putting a plus sign (+) against the answer most suited to the question, and minus sign (-) against the answer least suited to the question.

After collection of data, based on the age of the respondent, results were segregated into two categories – 20-30 years of age and 50-60 years of age, scored using the scoring sheet provided with the test and further analyzed.

Analytic strategy

Once the data was segregated and scored, the total defense mechanism for each age group was analyzed to calculate the average score and compared with each other. Based on the classification of defense mechanisms, it was also analyzed to find which mechanisms are more used by which age group.

Following are the results of basic statistical data analysis used for further interpretation (up to 2 decimal points):

Table 1: Where,

AG 1 is Age Group 1 – 20 to 30 years

AG 2 is Age Group 2 – 50 to 60 years

Type of Defense Mechanism	Mean		Standard Deviation		Standard Deviation	
	AG 1	AG 2	AG 1	AG 2	AG 1	AG 2
TAO	39.93	31.83	6.82	5.43	1.25	0.99
PRO	40.73	38.5	7.36	5.92	1.34	1.08
PRN	37.2	45.63	9.26	8.08	1.34	1.48
TAS	37.83	37.66	7.11	4.23	1.3	0.77
REV	44.3	46.36	9.83	9.9	1.8	1.81

The above basic statistical data was used to analyze the responses and come to various conclusions and interpretations.

RESULTS

Following are tabular representations of the results found from this study.

Table 2: Shows a comparison of the means of five types of defense mechanisms for both age groups combined.

Type of Defense Mechanism	Age Group	
	20 – 30 years (N=30)	50 – 60 years (N=30)
TAO	39.93	31.83
PRO	40.73	38.5
PRN	37.2	45.63
TAS	37.8	37.66
REV	44.3	46.36

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This comparison revealed that there are significant differences in the types and extent of use of defense mechanisms in both age groups. The use of Turning Against Object, Projection and Turning Against Self defense mechanisms declined with increase in age, while Principalization and Reversal Defense Mechanisms increased with age.

Table 3: Shows the change in use of each type of defense mechanism between the 20 to 30 year age group and 50 to 60 year age group.

Type of Defense Mechanism	Change in Use of Defense Mechanism (%)	Trend
TAO	↓ 20.28%	Decreasing
PRO	↓ 5.47%	Decreasing
PRN	↑ 22.66%	Increasing
TAS	↓ 0.3%	Decreasing
REV	↑ 4.65%	Increasing

This table shows the variations in changes that occurred between each type of defense mechanism with age. It shows the percentage change with respect to the younger population, toward the older population, and also an arrow showing the direction of trend – whether increasing or decreasing. The largest change occurred in the use of Principalization – which was an increase, while the smallest change occurred in Turning Against Object, which was a decrease.

Table 4: Shows the Z-score and interpretation of the average scores of each type of defense mechanism in the 20 to 30 year age group on the basis of norm tables.

Type of Defense Mechanism	Z-score as per Norm Table	Interpretation of Use as per Norm Table
TAO	-0.98	Below Average
PRO	-0.54	Below Average
PRN	+0.17	Moderate
TAS	-0.26	Below Average
REV	+1.51	High

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Table 5: Shows the Z-score and interpretation of the average scores of each type of defense mechanism in the 50 to 60 year age group on the basis of norm tables.

Type of Defense Mechanism	Z-score as per Norm Table	Interpretation of Use as per Norm Table
TAO	+0.37	Moderate
PRO	+0.03	Moderate
PRN	-0.41	Below Average
TAS	-0.06	Moderate
REV	+0.71	Above Average

Tables 4 and 5 are helpful in finding which defense mechanisms are used to which extent for both age groups.

VALUE ANDRECOMMENDATION

Since the objective of this research is to find the difference between defense mechanisms used by 20 – 30 year old males and 50 – 60 year old males, it becomes useful in a variety of fields. With increasing and extensive research in geriatrics and gerontology it becomes even more meaningful to find how the same population reacts and responds to various aspects.

The focus of this study is males so as to make it a more comprehensive research with only one parameter in purview. The two age groups were selected as 20-30 years and 50-60 years because of the importance and impact that these years of the males life has on his well-being and basic management of stimuli. 20-30 years of age are the initial years of adulthood while 50-60 years of age are the final, hence in itself contributing to the most comprehensive way of comparing defense mechanisms of males with respect to change in age and maturity.

The variations in types of defense mechanisms used, as a whole is also useful in finding which defense mechanisms are more prevalent in the chosen population.

The following are brief applications of this research:

- To see how the youth can be trained and helped in solving problems and coping with stress with maturity as how the older sample of population does.
- To gauge coping mechanisms in the older generation so as to make life for them easier and more wholesome depending upon general ways of anxiety and stress management.
- To aide with geriatric and gerontology studies in a more comprehensive way, with ego defense mechanisms being a major psychological field.

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Since knowledge of how defense mechanisms change over the adult life span and the factors that contribute to developmental continuity or discontinuity is fairly limited (Cramer, 2009), this paper adds to the literature on this topic to complement the field.

CONCLUSION AND INTERPRETATION

As per data collected and analyzed, the following conclusions have been made:

- 1) In both age groups, the highest used defense mechanism is Reversal.
- 2) In the 20 – 30 year age group, ‘the lowest used defense mechanism is Turning Against Object.
- 3) In the 50 – 60 year age group, the lowest used defense mechanism is Principalization.
- 4) There are significant changes in all types of defense mechanisms when compared age wise.

For the TAO defense mechanism, there was a 20.28% decrease in use with age. With increase in age, there is a decrease in the use of TAO as older men, due to more experience, reduce attacks on real or presumed external frustrating objects. This could be due to an increase in rationality and maturity in dealing with anxiety and stress causing stimuli. Similarly, the use of Principalization defense mechanism has shown an increase with an increase in age. This is in relation with the idea of dealing with conflict through invoking a general principle that differentiates affect from content, and represses the former. Older men may use this defense mechanism more due to more experience and insight that they have achieved over their years.

The most used defense mechanism in both age groups collectively was Reversal. Reversal includes responding either neutrally or positively to an external frustrating object, when in fact, a negative reaction is expected. Both age groups have the most and highest use of this defense mechanism, as in current times people are more focused on living their own life as peacefully and without disturbances as possible. This means that as compared to other types of defense mechanisms people have acquired to respond with the reversal defense mechanism so as to reduce conflict, not only with other people or the external frustrated object, but also with oneself. While the other types of defense mechanisms are more negative and overt in nature, the reversal defense mechanism has the basic idea of reacting either neutrally or positively with the ultimate motive to let things go and reduce tension as far as possible. People are more concerned with being detached from the entire frustrating situation with their ultimate goal to be satisfied with their neutral or positive reaction.

Defense mechanisms, theorized as behavioral patterns to cope with life stress and adverse situations, are imperative stepping stones of adult personality and are integral to and adult’s psycho-social functioning (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; McCrae & Costa, 2003). Defense mechanisms are vital for knowing how individuals deal with the daily challenges of adult life

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and for short-term and long-term development (Costa, Zonderman, & McCrae, 1991; Folkman, 1991; Vaillant, 1993).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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