

## THE CORRELATION OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS AND SELF-ESTEEM AT DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS\*\*

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### Abstract

The article presents the applicability of psychological defense mechanisms in different age groups of personality development, the levels of self-esteem development and correlations between individual psychological defense mechanisms and self-esteem. The data obtained show the frequency of use of psychological defense mechanisms, as well as the interaction of self-esteem of people of both age groups (14-15 and 22-25 years old) with psychological defense mechanisms.

The aim of our research was to study the features of the correlation between defense mechanisms and self-esteem at different stages of personality development.

From the results obtained, it becomes clear that the psychological defense of a teenager is realized primarily through elementary mechanisms. However, mature defense mechanisms are already used by the adolescent, although not as often as elementary defense mechanisms. And young people aged 22-25 more often use more mature defense mechanisms, such as intellectualization, compensation. The frequency of application of defense mechanisms of denial, regression, displacement is decreasing.

The study of correlations between self-esteem and defense mechanisms did not reveal correlations in adolescents, and among 22-25 year olds, correlations of medium strength were revealed with compensation, projection, displacement and intellectualization.

**Keywords:** Self-esteem, psychological defense mechanisms, compensation, projection, displacement, intellectualization.

### INTRODUCTION

Current socio-economic, socio-psychological changes create new challenges for the formation

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and stability of a person's self-esteem, psychological defense mechanisms and adaptation process. Although the issue of self-esteem and defense mechanisms is not new, studies and theoretical approaches don't cover all aspects of the issues. Modern approaches mainly refer to the age dynamics, stability, changes of self-esteem in different situations. The issue of psychological defense mechanisms has also been studied sufficiently, however, the sensitive phases of ego development for their formation, the patterns of manifestation of psychological defense mechanisms, the interaction of psychological defense mechanisms and self-esteem at different age groups of personality development are still not sufficiently studied.

The problem of self-esteem has been studied by a number of scientists who interpreted in their own way the problems related to the structure of self-esteem, its nature and functions, development patterns. Self-esteem is one of the components of a person's self-awareness. Self-awareness is formed during the ontogenetic development of the person. For the formation of self-awareness, the evaluations of people around are very important, but as the personality matures, its own self-evaluations begin to gain primary importance for it. Understanding the correlation between psychological defense mechanisms and self-esteem helps in understanding how individuals manage psychological stress and maintain emotional balance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Bozhovich considers the evaluations given by parents and teachers are the main source of a child's self-awareness formation. According to him, if until adolescence, the child simply internalizes the assessments given to him, at the age of adolescence he already thinks about them. The reflection develops, which helps him to eliminate the shortcomings that can prevent communication especially with peers, by analyzing the evaluations of people around him and his own behavior. Already at the end of the adolescence, a person is able to direct his own behavior with his own evaluations (Bozhovich, 1995).

Bass distinguished 2 components in the structure of self-awareness, which express separate levels of development. The first component was the sensory self, which is specific to both humans and animals. At the level of the sensory self, Bass distinguished double stimulation: the stimulus and the response to it, the recognition of body boundaries and mirror reflection. The other component is specific to humans only and is more advanced. According to Bass, this component is the cognitive component, which in turn consists of several parts. The Cognitive Self includes the self-esteem of a person, which allows us to evaluate ourselves. Self-esteem is formed by valuing others and being evaluated by them (Bass, 1980).

Carl Rogers (1959) proposed that self-esteem results from congruence between one's self-

concept and ideal self. Low self-esteem is often linked to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and vulnerability, which can trigger defensive responses aimed at preserving the individual's sense of self-worth.

Vaillant's work on defense mechanisms demonstrated that individuals with higher self-esteem tended to use more mature defense mechanisms, while those with low self-esteem used more immature defenses. His research showed that mature defenses such as anticipation and humor were positively correlated with emotional resilience and higher self-esteem, while defenses such as denial and projection were associated with lower self-esteem and psychological distress (Vaillant, 1977).

Kohut's work on self psychology emphasizes the relationship between self-esteem and defense mechanisms in individuals with narcissistic tendencies. Kohut argued that individuals with fragile self-esteem often rely on defensive grandiosity (exaggerated self-importance) to protect themselves from feelings of worthlessness, leading to maladaptive behavior patterns. His work highlights how defensive strategies such as idealization or devaluation may stem from low self-esteem but can prevent individuals from achieving healthy self-acceptance (Kohut, 1977).

Cramer presented his research on defense mechanisms carried out over the past 40 years with children, adolescents, adults, and psychiatric patients. He believed that the protection of self-esteem and self-integration are additional functions of defense mechanisms. (Cramer, 2014).

Perry J. explores the role of defense mechanisms in coping with threats to self-esteem studying defenses in both process and outcome in psychotherapy (Perry, 1990).

In adolescence the formation of self-awareness and self-esteem is greatly influenced by contact with peers.

The period of youth age is a relatively stable period of formation and development of personality structures and traits. New formations acquired during previous age stages develop and stabilize. In youth a person's self-awareness is more developed than self-awareness of 14-15-year-olds, as a result of which the mechanisms of self-control and self-evaluation work better.

The main function of psychological defense mechanisms is to protect a person's psyche from anxiety and mental disorders. They are aimed to change the perception of reality, protecting against excessive anxiety, which is caused either by the perception of a disturbing external situation, or as a result of existing internal mental states. A number of psychologists have studied the protection of self-esteem by defense mechanisms.

Dotsenko presents psychological defense as the use of psychological measures by a person to eliminate or weaken the harm threatened by another person. He distinguishes 4 components for analyzing of psychological defense (Dotsenko, 1997).

The first component is the object of psychological defense, which specifies what is being

protected. Psychologists don't agree about the object of psychological defense. Z. Freud considered the main function of the psychological defense is the defense of the I-image or the Self (Z. Freud, 1896). T. Shibutani considered the object of psychological defense are the person's ideas about himself, and E. Hilgard believed that psychological defense protects a person's self-esteem and self-respect (Hilgard, 1962; Shibutani, 1961).

The second component is the threat or what the psychological defense protects against. Psychologists have different opinions about harmful factors also. Z. Freud and A. Freud, E. Heine (1971) found that psychological defense protects against distress that may arise from internal conflicts. According to Nalchajyan and Hilgard, psychological defense mechanisms are ways of protection against frustrations of needs (Freud, 1966; Nalchajyan, 2010).

The third component is the nature of the harm, or what the person is defending to avoid. This component is directly related to the object of protection and the nature of the threat. As a result of exposure to risk factors, a person's self-esteem and ideas about himself, sense of uniqueness, intentions and plans can be damaged.

The fourth component is the means of protection, the manifestations of which are very different (psychological defense mechanisms, coping mechanisms, etc.) (Dotsenko, 1997).

Several studies have explored the relationship between defense mechanisms and self-esteem.

Thus, self-esteem as a component of self-awareness has 3 important functions: regulatory, protective and developmental. In turn, psychological defense mechanisms protect a person's self-esteem and contribute to his development.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of our research was to study the features of the correlation of defense mechanisms and self-esteem at different stages of personality development.

94 respondents participated in the research. The research was conducted in two groups of personality development: 14-15 years old and 22-25 years old. The study involved 47 pupils from school No. 129 and 47 part-time 2nd year students at the Faculty of Educational Psychology and Sociology of ASPU.

For the aim of the study, we used the Lifestyle Index (LSI) questionnaire by R. Plutchik, G. Kellerman and H. R. Conte (Vasserman, Eryshev, Klubova, 2005).

The questionnaire determines the frequency of the respondent's use of a particular psychological defense mechanism, and also determines the general applicability of psychological defense.

For the study of self-esteem, we used the «Self-esteem» test (Trofimova N.M., Polenjakina,

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Trofimova N.B., 2005).

The degree of freedom of data and the assessment of reliability of connections was carried out by using the K. Pearson table (Plohinskij, 2005).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Accordingly, self-esteem is low in 32% of adolescent respondents, average in 49% and above average in 19%.

15% of respondents aged 22-25 years had low self-esteem, 68% had an average level, and 17% had an above average level of self-esteem.

In our study, we examined the use of defense mechanisms and the frequency of their use among 14-15 and 22-25 year old respondents.

Thus, Denial is hardly used or very little used by 53% of 14-15 year olds, moderately used by 32%, and used much by 15%. The data for 22-25 year olds is little different from the data for 14-15 year olds. The results show that 62% of 22-25 year olds don't use Denial or use it very little, 23% use it moderately and 15% use it a lot. The main reason for not using Denial is due to the level of development of the person, the age-specific features of the development of personality structures, which contribute to the work of more mature defense mechanisms. 22-25 year olds already have enough experience, problem solving knowledge and ways to analyze alarming information and find solutions.

A study on the use of Repression among respondents aged 14-15 years showed that 90% of respondents don't use Repression or use it very little, only 4% use it moderately, and only 6% use it quite often. 89% of respondents aged 22-25 use Repression not often. And the remaining 11% were found to have a high level of use of Repression. As Repression is very difficult to identify, we tend to assume that the obtained data are due to the specificity of the Repression, which is unconsciously keeping unpleasant information from person's conscious mind.

The results of the study showed that 60% of respondents aged 14-15 don't use Regression or rarely use it, and 40% use it moderately. The data obtained are due to the age characteristics of adolescents. Adolescents very often have behavioral patterns that are typical of earlier age stages, due to which they avoid solving a problem or choose a form of behavior that has previously contributed to solving a certain problem and has become an appropriate form of behavior. And among the 22-25-year-olds, 70% of the respondents don't apply Regression or use it very little, and 30% apply it. Regression is a basic defense mechanism, the frequency of which decreases with age, because in early adulthood a person tends to solve problems.

32% of 14-15-year-old respondents use Compensation defense mechanism, and 68% don't use

it or use it little. And among 22-25-year-olds, 70% of respondents don't apply for Compensation or do it very little, and 30% apply. According to A.E. Andreeva, Compensation is the newest developed, most compound mechanism of cognitive defense, and adolescents more often use Hypercompensation (Andreeva, 2005).

Projection is the most commonly used defense mechanism. 47% of 14-15 year olds use Projection moderately, and 53% use it a lot. Among 22-25 year olds, 64% use Projection moderately, and 36% use Projection too much. The use of projection depends on the level of psychological maturity of the person. A mature person uses relatively little Projection and takes responsibility for his actions, strengths and weaknesses.

62% of 14-15-year-old respondents don't use the Displacement defense mechanism or use it very little, and only 38% use it a lot. 81% of respondents aged 22-25 use little or don't use Displacement, and 19% use it a lot. As Displacement is a basic defense mechanism, it is assumed that as a person matures, its use should decrease in favor of more mature defense mechanisms.

47% of 14-15-year-old respondents don't use Intellectualization defense mechanism or use it very little, 42% use it moderately, and 11% use this defense mechanism quite a lot. Intellectualization is formed already in early adolescence. The formation of this mechanism is related to the frustration that, for example, a teenager can feel when he fails to compete with his peers. Only 27% of respondents aged 22-25 don't use Intellectualization or use it very little, 41% use it moderately, and 32% use it quite a lot. Intellectualization is one of the mature defense mechanisms. Unlike teenagers, in early adulthood a person is more prone to Intellectualization.

47% of 14-15-year-old respondents either don't use or use Reaction formation very little, 30% use it moderately, and 23% use it very much. And among the 22-25 year olds, 53% don't use or use Reaction formation very little, 30% use moderately and only 17% use Reaction formation defense mechanism a lot. The results of our research indicate that the use of Reaction formation mechanism decreases along with the development of the personality. Teenagers use Reaction formation more often than 22-25 year olds. In general, the frequency of the use of elementary defense mechanisms decreases with the maturation of a person, which is due to the formation and development of mature and cognitive defense mechanisms.

Thus, a teenager's psychological defense is realized primarily through elementary mechanisms. However, mature defense mechanisms are used already by the adolescent, although not as often as elementary defense mechanisms.

And young people aged 22-25 more often use more mature defense mechanisms, such as Intellectualization, Compensation. The frequency of application of Denial, Regression and Displacement is decreasing.



In the study of correlations between self-esteem and defense mechanisms, no correlations were recorded in adolescents, and in youth, correlations of medium strength were revealed with Compensation, Projection, Displacement and Intellectualization.

Thus, the positive correlation of  $p \leq 0.05$  reliability was revealed between Compensation and self-esteem of 22-25-year-olds ( $r=0.304$ ). Knowing one's shortcomings and trying to get rid of them, the person uses Compensation, as awareness of the shortcoming threatens a person's self-esteem.

The positive correlation between Projection and self-esteem ( $p \leq 0.05$ , when  $r=0.322$ ) is also associated with the neutralization of information that threatens self-esteem. By attributing one's own shortcomings and negative qualities to others, the person protects self-esteem, because in case of their realization, the self-esteem of the person would be lower than desired.

$P \leq 0.05$  reliability correlation ( $r=0.302$ ) between Displacement and self-esteem is most likely due to the fact that during Displacement, the person is unable to adequately respond to the person or situation that threatens his self-esteem and has to find an object that is weak or accessible to store negative emotions.

A positive correlation was also revealed between Intellectualization and self-esteem ( $p \leq 0.05$ , when  $r=0.317$ ). During late adolescence, a person's self-esteem is no longer based on external assessments, but on the reflection of the individual, information about himself obtained through self-knowledge.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, elementary defense mechanisms contribute to the formation of personality structure and self-esteem. In turn, formed and developed self-esteem begins to protect the personality structure and contributes to its development, as a result of which the basic defense mechanisms are not enough to protect the personality structure of a new level of maturity, and it becomes necessary to use more mature defense mechanisms, in the activities of which the intellect begins to participate. Both mature and elementary psychological defense mechanisms are already used by young people to protect their self-esteem.

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