

## YOU'RE GETTING DEFENSIVE AGAIN!

Freud, A. (1946). *The ego and the mechanisms of defense*. New York: International Universities Press.

In a book about the history of research that changed psychology, one imposing figure would be extremely difficult to omit: Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). It is very unlikely that psychology would exist today as it does, in spite of its varied and complex forms, without Freud's contributions. He was largely responsible for elevating our interpretations of human behavior (especially abnormal behavior) from superstitions of demonic possession and evil spirits to the rational ideas of reason and science. Without an examination of his work, this book would be incomplete. Now, you may be asking yourself, if Sigmund Freud is so important, why does this discussion focus on a book written by his daughter, Anna Freud (1895-1982)? The answer to that question requires a bit of explanation.

Although Sigmund Freud was integral to psychology's history and, therefore, is a necessary part of this book, the task of including his research here along with all the other researchers was a difficult one. The reason for this difficulty was that Freud did not reach his discoveries through a clearly defined scientific methodology. It was not possible to choose a single study or series of experiments to represent his work, as has been done for other researchers in this book. Freud's theories grew out of careful observations of his patients over decades of clinical analysis. Consequently, his writings were abundant, to say the least. The English translation of his collected writings, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 to 1974), totals 24 volumes! Obviously, only a very small piece of his work could be discussed here.

In choosing what to include here, consideration was given to the portions of Freud's theories that have stood the test of time relatively unscathed. Over the past century, a great deal of criticism has been focused on Freud's ideas and, in the last 40 years especially, his work has been drawn into serious question from a scientific perspective. Critics have argued that many of his theories either cannot be tested scientifically; or if they are tested, they prove to be generally unreliable. Therefore, while few would doubt the historical importance of Freud, many of his theories about the structure of personality, the development of personality through the psychosexual stages, and the sources of people's psychological problems have been rejected by most psychologists today. However, some aspects of his work have received more positive reviews through the years and now enjoy relatively wide acceptance. One of these is his concept of the *defense mechanisms*. These are weapons that your ego uses to protect you from your own self-created anxiety. This element from his work has been selected to represent Freud in this book.

Sigmund Freud's discovery of defense mechanisms occurred gradually over 30 or more years as his experiences in dealing with psychological problems grew. A cohesive, self-contained discussion of this topic does not appear anywhere in Sigmund Freud's many volumes. In fact, he passed that job on to his daughter, who was an important psychoanalyst in her own right, specializing in children. Freud acknowledged this fact in 1936 just before Anna's book, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, was originally published in German: "There are an extremely large number of methods (or mechanisms, as we say) used by the ego in the discharge of its defensive functions. My daughter, the child analyst, is writing a book about them" (S. Freud, 1936). Since it was Anna Freud who synthesized her father's theories regarding the defense mechanisms into a single work, her book has been chosen for our discussion of the work of Sigmund Freud.

## THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

In order to examine Freud's notion of defense mechanisms, it is necessary to explain briefly his theory of the structure of personality. Freud proposed that personality consists of three components: the id, the ego, and the superego.

The id consists of basic biological urges such as hunger, thirst, and sexual impulses. Whenever these needs are not met, the id generates strong motivation for the person to find a way to satisfy them, and do so immediately! The id operates on what Freud called the *pleasure principle* and demands instantaneous gratification of all desires, regardless of reason, logic, safety, or morality. Freud believed that there are dark, antisocial, and dangerous instinctual urges (especially sexual ones) present in everyone's id that constantly seek expression. You are not usually aware of these because the id operates on the unconscious level. However, if you were lacking the other parts of your personality and only had an id, your behavior would be amoral, shockingly deviant, and even fatal to you and others.

The reason you do not behave in these dangerous and deviant ways is that your ego and superego develop to place limits and controls on the impulses of your id. According to Freud, the ego operates on the *reality principle*, which means it is alert to the real world and the consequences of behavior. The ego is conscious

and its job is to satisfy your id's urges, but to do so using means that are rational, socially acceptable, and reasonably safe.

However, the ego also has limits placed upon it by the superego. Your superego, in essence, requires that the solutions the ego finds to the id's needs are moral and ethical, according to your own internalized set of rules about what is good or bad. These rules were instilled in you by your parents, and if you behave in ways that violate them your superego will punish you with its own very effective weapon: guilt. Do you recognize this? It is commonly referred to as your conscience. Freud believed that your superego operates on both conscious and unconscious levels.

So, Freud's conceptualization of your personality was a dynamic one in which the ego is constantly trying to balance the needs and urges of the id with the moral requirements of the superego in determining your behavior. Here is an example of how this might work. Imagine a 16-year-old boy strolling down the street in a small town. It is 10 P.M. and he is on his way home. Suddenly he realizes he is hungry. He passes a grocery store and sees food on the other side of the large windows, but the store is closed. His id might say, "Look! Food! Jump through the glass and get some!" (Remember, the id wants immediate satisfaction, regardless of the consequences.) He would probably not be aware of the id's suggestion because it would be at a level below his consciousness. The ego would "hear" it, though, and since its job is to protect the boy from danger, it might respond, "No, that would be dangerous. Let's go around back, break into the store, and steal some food!" At this, the superego would remark indignantly, "You can't do that! It's immoral, and if you do it I will punish you!" So, his ego reconsiders and makes a new suggestion that is acceptable to both the id and the superego: "You know, there's an all-night fast-food place four blocks over. Let's go there and buy some food." This solution, assuming that the boy is psychologically healthy, is the one that makes it to his consciousness and is reflected in his behavior.

According to Freud, the reason most people do not behave in antisocial or deviant ways is because of this system of checks and balances among the three parts of the personality. But what would happen if the system malfunctioned—if this balance were lost? One way this could happen would be if the demands of the id became too strong to be controlled adequately by the ego. What if the unacceptable urges of the id edged their way into your consciousness (into what Freud called the *preconscious*) and began to overpower the ego? Freud contended that if this happens, you will experience a very unpleasant condition called anxiety. Specifically, he called it *free-floating* anxiety, because although you feel anxious and afraid, the causes are not fully conscious, so you are not sure why you feel this way.

When this state of anxiety exists, it is uncomfortable and we are motivated to change it. To do this the ego will bring on its big guns, called the *defense mechanisms*. The purpose of the defense mechanisms is to prevent the id's forbidden impulse from entering consciousness. If this is successful, the discomfort of the anxiety associated with the impulse is relieved. How do the defense mechanisms ward off anxiety? Well, they do it through self-deception and the distortion of reality so that the id's urges will not have to be acknowledged.

## METHOD

Freud discovered the defense mechanisms gradually over many years of clinical interactions with his patients. In the years since Sigmund Freud's death and since the publication of Anna Freud's book, many refinements have been made in the interpretation of the defense mechanisms. The next section summarizes a selection of only those mechanisms identified by Sigmund Freud and elaborated on by his daughter.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Anna Freud identified 10 defense mechanisms that had been described by her father (see p. 44 of her book). Five of the original mechanisms that are ~ commonly used and widely recognized today are discussed here: repression, regression, projection, reaction formation, and sublimation. Keep in mind that the primary function of the defense mechanisms is to alter reality in order to protect against anxiety.

### Repression

Repression is the most basic and commonly used mechanism of defense. In his early writings, Freud used the terms repression and defense interchangeably and interpreted repression to be virtually the only defense mechanism. Later, however, he acknowledged that repression was only one of many psychological processes available to protect a person from anxiety (p. 43). Repression does this by forcing disturbing thoughts out of consciousness. If this is accomplished successfully, the anxiety associated with the "forbidden" thoughts is

avoided. In Freud's view, repression is often employed to defend against the anxiety that would be produced by unacceptable sexual desires. For example, a woman who has sexual feelings about her father would probably experience intense anxiety if these impulses were to become conscious. To avoid that anxiety, she might repress her unacceptable desires, forcing them fully into her unconscious. This would not mean that her urges are gone, but since they are repressed, they cannot produce anxiety.

You might be wondering how such thoughts are ever discovered if they remain in the unconscious. According to Freud, these hidden conflicts may be revealed through slips of the tongue, through dreams, or by the various techniques used in psychoanalysis, such as free association or hypnosis. Furthermore, repressed desires can create psychological problems that are expressed in the form of neuroses. For instance, consider again the woman who has repressed sexual desires for her father. She might express these impulses by becoming involved in successive failed relationships with men in an unconscious attempt to resolve her conflicts about her father.

### **Regression**

Regression is a defense used by the ego to guard against anxiety by causing the person to retreat to the behavior of an earlier stage of development that was less demanding and safer. Often when a second child is born into a family, the older sibling will regress to using earlier speech patterns, wanting a bottle, and even bed-wetting. Adults can use regression as well. Consider a man experiencing a *midlife crisis* who is afraid of growing old and dying. To avoid the anxiety associated with these unconscious fears, he might regress to an adolescent stage by becoming irresponsible, cruising around in a sports car, trying to date younger women, and even eating the foods associated with his teenage years. Another example of regression is the married adult who *goes home to mother* whenever there is a problem in the marriage.

### **Projection**

Imagine for a moment that your ego is being attacked by your id. You're not sure why, but you are experiencing a lot of anxiety. If your ego uses the defense mechanism of projection to eliminate the anxiety, you will begin to see your unconscious urges in other people's behavior. That is, you will project your impulses onto others. This externalizes the anxiety-provoking feelings and reduces the anxiety. You will not be aware that you're doing this, and the people onto whom you project may not be guilty of your accusations. An example of this offered by Anna Freud involves a husband who is experiencing impulses to be unfaithful to his wife (p. 120). He may not even be conscious of these urges, but they are creeping up from his id and creating anxiety. To ward off the anxiety, he projects his desires onto his wife, becomes intensely jealous, and accuses her of having affairs, even though there is no evidence to support his claims. Another example is the woman who is afraid of aging and begins to point out how old her friends and acquaintances are looking. The individuals in these examples are not acting or lying, but truly believe their projections. If they did not, the defense against anxiety would fail.

### **Reaction Formation**

The defense identified by Freud as a reaction formation is exemplified by a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when Hamlet's mother, after watching a scene in a play, remarks to Hamlet, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." When a person is experiencing unacceptable, unconscious *evil* impulses, anxiety over them might be avoided by engaging in behaviors that are the exact opposite of the id's real urges. Anna Freud pointed out that these behaviors are usually exaggerated or even obsessive (p. 9). By adopting attitudes and behaviors that demonstrate outwardly a complete rejection of the id's true desires, anxiety is blocked. Reaction formations tend to appear rapidly and usually become a permanent part of an individual's personality unless the id-ego conflict is somehow resolved. As an example of this, reconsider the husband who unconsciously desires other women. If he employs reaction formation rather than projection to prevent his anxiety, he may become obsessively devoted to his wife and shower her with gifts and pronouncements of his unwavering love. Another example comes from many disturbing news reports of the violent crime referred to as *gay bashing*. In a Freudian interpretation, men who have unconscious homosexual tendencies might engage in this extreme opposite behavior of attacking and beating gay men to avoid their true desires and the anxiety associated with them.

### **Sublimation**

Both Sigmund and Anna Freud considered most of the defense mechanisms, including the four described above, as indicating problems in psychological adjustment (neuroses). Conversely, the defense of sublimation was seen as not only normal, but desirable (p. 44). When people invoke sublimation, they are finding socially acceptable ways of discharging energy that is the result of unconscious forbidden desires. Freud maintained that since

everyone's id contains these desires, sublimation is a necessary part of a productive and healthy life. Furthermore, he believed that most strong desires can be sublimated in various ways. Someone who has intense aggressive impulses might sublimate them by engaging in contact sports or becoming a surgeon. A teenage girl's passion for horseback riding might be interpreted as sublimated unacceptable sexual desires. A man who has an erotic fixation on the human body might sublimate his feelings by becoming a painter or sculptor of nudes.

Freud believed that all of what we call civilization has been possible through the mechanism of sublimation. In his view, humans have been able to sublimate their primitive biological urges and impulses, allowing them to build civilized societies. Sometimes, Freud suggested, our true unconscious forces overpower our *collective ego* and these primitive behaviors burst out in uncivilized expressions such as war. Overall, however, it is only through sublimation that civilization can exist at all (S. Freud, 1936).

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECENT APPLICATIONS

Although Anna Freud made it clear in her book that the use of defense mechanisms is often associated with neurotic behavior, it should be pointed out that this is not always the case. Nearly everyone uses various defense mechanisms occasionally in their lives, especially to help them deal with periods of increased stress. They help us reduce our anxiety and maintain a positive self-image. Use of certain defense mechanisms has even been shown to reduce unhealthy physiological activity. For example, use of projection has been found to be associated with lower blood pressure (Cramer, 2003). Nevertheless, defense mechanisms involve self-deception and distortions of reality that can produce negative consequences if they are overused. For example, a person who uses regression every time life's problems become overwhelming might never develop the strategies necessary to deal with the problems and solve them. Consequently, the person's life will not become as effective as it could be. Moreover, Freud and many other psychologists have contended that when anxiety over specific conflicts is repressed, it is sometimes manifested in other ways, such as phobias, anxiety attacks, or obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Freud's theories have always been extremely controversial. Do the defense mechanisms really exist? Do they actually function unconsciously to block the anxiety created by the forbidden impulses of the id trying to enter the conscious? Probably the most often cited criticism of all of Freud's work is that to test it scientifically is difficult at best, impossible at worst. Many studies have tried to demonstrate the existence of various Freudian concepts. The results have been mixed. Some of his ideas have found scientific support (see Cramer, 2000), while others have been disproven, and still others simply cannot be studied (see Fisher & Greenberg, 1977, 1995).

One fascinating study may have found scientific evidence that *homophobia*, an irrational fear, avoidance, and prejudice toward gay and lesbian individuals, may be a *reaction formation* used to ward off the extreme anxiety caused by their own repressed homosexual tendencies (Adams, Wright, & Lohr, 1996). A group of men were given a test to determine their level of homophobia and divided into two groups: homophobic and nonhomophobic. Then, subjects were exposed to videos depicting heterosexual, gay, or lesbian explicit sexual scenes and, while they viewed these videos, monitored for physiological signs of sexual arousal. The only difference found between the groups was when they viewed the videos of gay males. In this condition, "the results indicate that the homophobic men showed a significant increase in [arousal], but that the [nonhomophobic] men did not" (p. 443). In fact, 66% of the nonhomophobic group showed no significant signs of arousal while viewing the homosexual video, but only 20% of the homophobic group showed little or no evidence of arousal. Furthermore, when asked to rate their level of arousal, the homophobic men *underestimated* their degree of arousal in response to the homosexual video. This study's results are clearly consistent with Anna Freud's description of the defense mechanism of reaction formation and lend support for the explanation of violence against gay individuals discussed earlier in this section.

## CONCLUSION

As evidenced by studies discussed earlier, scientific interest in the defense mechanisms appears to be on the upswing among psychologists in various subfields, including cognitive, developmental, personality, and social psychology (Cramer, 2000). Through an awareness and understanding of the defense mechanisms, your ability to obtain important insights into the causes of people's actions is clearly enhanced. If you keep a list of the defense mechanisms handy in your "brain's back pocket," you may begin to notice them in others or even in yourself. By the way, if you think someone is using a defense mechanism, remember, he or she is doing so to avoid unpleasant anxiety. Therefore, it is probably not a great idea to bring it to his or her attention. Knowledge

of the defense mechanisms can be a powerful tool in your interactions with others, but it must be used carefully and responsibly.

You can easily experience for yourself the continuing influence of Anna Freud's synthesis and analysis of her father's concept of the defense mechanism by picking up virtually any recent academic or scholarly work that discusses psychoanalytic theory in detail. Most of the Freud citations you will encounter will be referring to Sigmund, and rightly so. But, when the discussion turns to the defense mechanisms, it is Anna Freud's 1946 book and its various revisions that serve as the authoritative work on the topic (see Couch, 1995).

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