A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DEFENSE MECHANISMS INVENTORY AND THE COPING OPERATIONS PREFERENCE ENQUIRY

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An Abstract

Presented to the

Graduate Council of

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in Clinical Psychology

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by

Sam D. Bernard

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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted to investigate the relationship of the scores of the DMI subscales to the Denial score on the COPE. Subjects were 98 student volunteers from Austin Peay State University. Ninety-one were undergraduates and 7 were graduate students. The sample consisted of 31 men and 67 women. With regard to race, 77 were white and 21 were non-white. The DMI and COPE were administered in a group format. The COPE-Denial and DMI subscales intercorrelations did not approach significance in support of the Haan/Kroeber Theory and the Lazarus/French Theory.

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To the Graudate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sam D. Bernard entitled "A Study of the Relationship Between the Defense Mechanisms Inventory and the Coping Operations Preference Enquiry." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts, with a major in Clinical Psychology.

John D. Martin
Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Garland E. Blair
Second Committee Member

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The investigation of how humans come to deal with understanding their world is the focus of much research in the social sciences. Ego defense mechanisms are one way of conceptualizing the cognitive processes that are utilized in attempting to order our subjective awareness.

The most widely recognized name in the study of ego defense mechanisms was Freud who pondered and published the concepts that have been attacked as well as elaborated upon by current day researchers. Freud believed that defense mechanisms encompass all techniques which the ego makes use of in conflicts, which may lead to neurosis (1926/1959). These defense mechansism are thought to operate at an unconscious level. They function in such a way that the meaning of perceived threats is distorted or excluded from awareness altogether. These defense mechanisms work to diminish anxiety and restore, maintain, or enhance one's sense of well being (Averill, 1973; Thompson, 1981). The views we hold of ourselves and of others are thought to be powerfully affected by these deeply engrained ego defensive processes that we possess and ply.

According to Freudian theory, during the course of human development the ego sometimes confronts conflicts with which it cannot cope. Impulses, memories, thoughts, and feelings can arouse excessive anxiety and force the ego to defend itself by extreme measures. Freud's thinking and theorizing

relative to the role of the unconscious mind is crucial to his notion of ego defense mechanisms. The ego uses the restraining forces or anticathexes to bring about repression, or the forcing out of consciousness, of memories, thoughts, and ideas that arouse anxiety. Although repression is a very powerful mechanism, repressed material sometimes pushes back through the ego defensive structure to awareness and finds expression in some disguised form. When repression alone fails to control the threatening material, it is joined by additional defense mechanisms.

Definitions and discussions of some of the major defense mechanisms follow. Rationalization occurs when there is an assigning of some rational or plausible explanation of motive, behavior, or activity to cover the true reason or motive. Rationalization comes, as it were, in two flavors: (1) "sweet lemon." In light of the alternatives the old lemon with which one is stuck becomes a sweet lemon; or (2) "sour grapes." When a desired object cannot be attained, one adopts the attitude that the object was not wanted after all.

Reaction formation occurs when an unacceptable thought such as hate or hostility is repressed (pushed out of the conscious mind into the unconscious) and replaced by love at the conscious level. Denial can involve simple, normal forgetfulness, repression, amnesia, or detachment from the act, emotion, or memory of a painful event. Denial is, in short, denial of reality in any form. Sublimation is the

repression of a socially undesirable activity and its replacement by a socially desirable activity. For example, unacceptable aggressive behavior can be sublimated by engaging in athletic events such as football or wrestling.

Intellectualization is the masking of a painful experience or event by isolating the affect and, then, discussing the event solely by cognitive means without the feeling component. Displacement is the transferring of an unacceptable drive, wish, or emotion from one person to another thus making it more acceptable or less dangerous.

Compensation is the excessive or exaggerated development of a trait or skill to avoid a sense of inferiority or pain associated with awareness of certain personal limitations. Undoing is the repetition of a wish, fantasy, or impulse--as if by magic--through the use of rituals, acts and ceremonies, thus removing the painful thought's magical power to create pain or anxiety.

Projection is the attributing to others one's own unacceptable wishes, desires, thoughts, or impulses. Introjection is the incorporation of characteristics, qualities, and traits of the loved object to avoid the painful, anxiety-producing effects of loss, separation, or removal from that loved one.

Identification is the avoidance of harmful, punitive, or anxiety-producing effects of another on oneself by identifying with the other, more powerul figure. An example would be identifying with the aggressor.

All of these defense mechanisms develop because the infant's ego is too weak to cope with environmental demands, and therefore, needs help in warding off stimuli and reducing tension. The use of ego defense mechanisms is a universal phenomenon. Some use of these mechanisms is quite normal. If used excessively, however, defense mechanisms can only interfere with psychological development in that they prevent one from dealing with the world realistically.

Because of the complexity of the construct of psychological defenses, little empirical research has been conducted on them despite the growing concerns that have been both supportive and derogatory in both clinical and theoretical literature. Recognition is given to the voluminous literature that debates the issues surrounding the entire concept of ego defenses and will not be reviewed herein. For a review of a few of these issues see Fingarette (1969), Sjoback (1983), and Greenberg and Fisher (1984).

Fisher and Greenberg (1977) review the methodological problems encountered in attempting to develop instruments that have acceptable psychometric qualities and maintain the credibility of Freudian theories. Some researchers have attempted to develop psychometric instruments that would further investigate the concept of ego defenses (Baehr & Baehr, 1959; Blum, 1956; Finney, 1965; Glesser & Ihilevich, 1969; Hann, 1965; Joffe & Naditch, 1977; Schutz, 1967) and have found difficulties in their attempts to demonstrate that their measures are both anchored in psychoanalytic theory and

have met psychometric standards for reliability and validity.

The following researchers have developed their own models to explain the concepts associated with ego defense mechanisms. Some investigators use the concepts of coping and defense interchangeably. Others, however, do not share those sentiments.

The Haan/Kroeber Theory

Haan (1963) and Kroeber (1963) suggested that a qualitative difference be made between coping and defensive responses to stress or threat. They characterized defense mechanisms as rigid, reality distorting, and determined by the past. On the other hand, coping was characterized as flexible, future oriented, and related to the reality of the situation. In general, this model considers coping as representing adaptive responses to threat and defenses to be maladaptive responses.

The Lazarus/French Theory

Lazarus (1966) and French (1974) have suggested that responses to threat be divided into two categories, that of "problem-focused" coping and "emotion-focused" coping. Problem-focused coping is concerned with achieving actual or "objective" changes in the self or in the environment. These changes are brought about through the acquisition of new skills, resources or information or by the modification of threatening conditions in the environment. The function of emotion-focused coping is to produce "subjective" changes in one's emotions, cognitions or perceptions. These responses

could include minimizing the significance of perceived threats, making positive comparisons, finding the silver lining, practicing relaxation techniques or ingesting drugs to reduce anxiety.

The Vaillant Theory

Vaillant (1971) theorized that intrapsychic responses to threat could be categorized into four areas: mature defenses (humor, altruism); immature defenses (projection); neurotic defenses (intellectualization); and psychotic defenses (denial, delusions). Research on this model examined the relative amount of variance contributed by different defenses to successful upward mobility by lower socioeconomic individuals. The researchers found that a "neurotic" defense mechanism (intellectualization) contributed more to upward mobility than a number of "mature" defenses (Snarey and Vaillant, 1985). Other studies have shown that a "stoic-acceptance," a mature defense, is correlated with lower survival rates than the use of denial which was classified by Vaillant as a pathological defense (Greer, et al., 1979); Pettingale, 1984).

The Defense Mechanisms Inventory (DMI) Theory

This two-tier classification system of responses to threat developed by Gleser and Ihilevich (1969) is a combination of the theoretical perspectives of Lazarus (1966), Haan (1963), French, et al. (1974), Menninger (1963), Caplan (1964), and Horowitz (1976). The DMI theory proposes to classify all responses to threat into three major categories:

problem-solving responses, coping strategies, and defense mechanisms. Secondly, Gleser and Ihilevich believe that there is value in distinguishing between problem-solving efforts aimed at changing the self and efforts aimed at changing the environment. As compared to problem-solving efforts that aim to have a direct impact on perceived threats, coping responses do not impact upon perceived threats directly but do affect morale, mood, motivation and effort expended on finding solutions to problems. Coping responses lead to changed objectives, an accommodation with perceived threats, increased efforts to solve problems or the delay of solution to a more opportune time. Coping differs from defense mechanisms in that it does not remove problems from awareness (repression), attack their substitutes (displacements), or create the illusion that internal threats are of an external origin (projection). Coping involves framing observed threats in positive, manageable terms so that solutions or accommodations are perceived as possible. Defenses create the illusion of mastery over perceived threats in order to provide a means of coming to terms with an otherwise consciously agonizing condition (Laughlin, 1979). Psychometrically, the DMI has a number of problems. According to Walsh (1983), the norms are scanty and perhaps somewhat misleading, the relia- bilities are moderately good, but the response set seems to involve contamination; the validity data are promising but not thoroughly supportive. However, compared to other tests, the DMI rates well.

Caution must be used when looking at the results of the DMI because the indices used by the DMI reflect more than one defense.

The Schutz and Waxler Theory

Schutz and Waxler (1959) propose that there are five major hypothetical characteristics involved in anxiety-provoking situations. These include: denial, isolation, projection, regression-dependency, and turning-against-the-self. Schutz and Waxler developed the Coping Operations Preference Enquiry (COPE) to make idiographic comparisons for the preference for one defensive style over another. No reliability data are available on this scale. Burros reports that the validity of the COPE is "suspect" and that the five defense mechanisms "were selected as representative of all coping mechanisms following an extensive analysis." He also reports that the COPE has the "poorest" psychometrics (Burros, 1985).

In a recent study by Vicker and Herrig (1981) of United States Marine recruits, responses to the DMI, COPE, and scales developed by Joffe and Naitoh (1977) showed low convergent validity because the same defense was not highly correlated across instruments. Similar patterns of correlations occurred within instruments. Vicker and Herrig theorized that the instruments or theories lacked validity or that the scales were valid but assessed different parameters of defensiveness (e.g. intensity vs. breadth of use).

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the

relationship of scores on the DMI subscales to the Denial score on the COPE as determined by on correlational coefficients. It was hypothesized that the Denial score on the COPE would not correlate with the DMI subscale scores since these two instruments are probably measuring different concepts.

CHAPTER 2

Method

The Sample

Subjects for the present study were 98 student volunteers who were registered for summer classes at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee. Ninety-one of the subjects were undergraduates and seven were graduate students. The sample consisted of 31 men and 67 women. With reference to race, 77 were white and 21 were non-white. The age range was 17 to 55 years, with a mean age of 28 years.

The Instruments

The present study used the Defense Mechanisms Inventory (DMI) which was developed out of the Defense Mechanisms Inventory Theory, and the Coping Operations Preference Enquiry (COPE) which was derived from the Schutz and Waxler Theory. The DMI was developed by Ihilevich and Gleser (1969) and is the most widely used instrument for the assessment of mechanisms of defense. The COPE was developed by Schutz and Waxler (1959) and is less utilized than the DMI. The DMI consists of ten (10) vignettes followed by four questions, which are:

1. What would your ACTUAL reaction be?
2. What would you IMPULSIVELY (in fantasy) want to do?
3. What THOUGHT might occur to you?
4. How would you FEEL and why?

Five possible choices are available from which to choose an answer to the four questions. Each of the five choices

corresponds to one of the five defenses being measured, which are:

1. Turning Against Object (TAO)
2. Projection (PRO)
3. Principalization (PRN)
4. Turning Against Self (TAS)
5. Reversal (REV)

The COPE consists of six vignettes which describe a person and his/her behavior in a particular situation. The subjects are asked:

"How would you guess he/she really feels now?"

The subjects are then asked to rank order five alternative ways he/she might feel, each one of the choices representing one of the five coping mechanisms measured by the inventory, which are:

1. Denial
2. Intellectualization
3. Projection
4. Regression
5. Turning against-the-self

The COPE is thus a projective test, since it is based on the assumption that subjects will rank order the mechanisms in terms of their own perferences.

Procedure

The DMI and COPE scales were administered in a group format. Subjects completed both instruments in one testing session with the total time required for testing ranging from

30 minutes to 55 minutes. There were no time limits on either instrument. Although subjects completed the entire DMI and COPE, only the Denial (D) scores from the COPE were used in the present study. Both instruments were hand scored as directed by their manuals. The DMI was scored by using the appropriate templates to obtain the four raw scores that were added to constitute the overall area scores. The COPE was scored by ordering the responses to get area scores but the Denial score was the only one utilized.

CHAPTER 3

Results

A computer analysis, utilizing Multivariate Correlation techniques, compared the COPE-Denial scores to the DMI subscales scores -- TAO, PRO, PRN, TAS, REV. The COPE-Denial and the DMI subscales intercorrelations did not approach significance at $p=0.05$.

The means ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviations (s) are as follows: COPE: $\bar{x}=26.01$, $s=4.48$; DMI TAO: $\bar{x}=37.35$, $s=9.21$; DMI PRO: $\bar{x}=37.95$, $s=6.22$; DMI PRN: $\bar{x}=47.53$, $s=6.27$; DMI TAS: $\bar{x}=36.78$, $s=6.98$; DMI REV: $\bar{x}=39.75$, $s=7.35$. Table 1 shows the actual r values for each correlation.

TABLE 1

CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR DMI SUBSCALES AND COPE DENIAL SCORE

DMI SUBSCALES	CORRELATION WITH COPE DENIAL SCORE
TAO	-0.024
PRO	0.002
PRN	-0.039
TAS	0.150
REV	-0.159

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

The nonsignificant correlations between the COPE-Denial score and the DMI subscores derived from the data in this study are supported by other researchers (Haan, 1963; Kroeber, 1963; and Vicker and Hervig, 1981). The current study further shows that the COPE-Denial subscore does not significantly correlate with the DMI-REV subscale which also purports to measure denial.

The authors of the DMI believe that they have demonstrated adequate validity for their instrument. The validity of the COPE has been "suspect." Therefore, it is patently plausible to assume that the DMI is measuring defensive responses and that the COPE is not. A nonsignificant relationship between the scores on those instruments would, therefore, eventuate.

In the COPE manual "coping mechanisms" and "defensive mechanisms" are used interchangeably. That position may be both unfortunate and unfruitful. Haan (1963) and Kroeber (1963) have stated that a "qualitative" difference exists between coping and defensive responses to threat. They characterize defense mechanisms as rigid, reality distorting, and determined by the past. On the other hand, coping was described as flexible, future oriented, and reality based. In general, the Haan and Kroeber theory considers coping as representing adaptive responses to threat and defenses as maladaptive responses. It appears that their defense

mechanisms operate unconsciously whereas coping is a conscious process.

It follows that if the DMI is tapping unconscious defense mechansims and the COPE is tapping conscious processes no relationship should exist between the scores on those instruments.

The Lazarus/French model classifies responses to threat into "problem-focused" coping and "emotion-focused" coping. The former endeavors to attain actual or "objective" changes in to self or in the environment. Conscious processes are obviously operating in such a situation. The role of emotion-focused coping is to produce "subjective" changes in the person's emotions, thoughts or perceptions. Emotion-focused responses include traditional defense mechanisms, but are not limited to them. Ego defense mechanisms are known to operate unconsciously.

Assuming that the concepts of coping and defensive responses are qualitatively distinct, and assuming that coping is essentially a conscious process whereas defensive responses are unconsciously determined, and assuming further that the COPE is measuring conscious processes and that the DMI is measuring unconscious mechanisms, it follows that the scores from those instruments should be uncorrelated.

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