



DEFENSE STRATEGIES OF ADOLESCENTS WITH A HISTORY OF ABUSE

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Abstract

Evidence shows that both in the family environment and in the special protection system, adolescents report abuse or neglect. We aim to explore the defense strategies of adolescents who have suffered abuse or neglect. The psychodynamic concept of defense mechanisms is nowadays considered by professionals with various theoretical orientations to be of great importance in understanding human development and psychological functioning. More than half a century of empirical research has demonstrated the impact of defensive functioning on psychological well-being, personality organization, and treatment outcome.

Given a glaring lack in the literature of empirical studies based on the concept of defense mechanisms and childhood abuse and neglect, the main purpose of this paper is to investigate the existence of relationships between childhood trauma and abuse and the development of defense mechanisms during adolescence.

The results indicate associations between maladaptive defense mechanisms (neurotic and immature) with high levels of abuse and neglect, but also the emergence of highly adaptive defense patterns, such as affiliation, sublimation and anticipation. Also, a trend toward negative association was observed between physical and sexual abuse and neglect and most adaptive defense mechanisms.

Keywords: *social protection system, abuse, neglect, defense mechanisms, adolescents.*

Introduction

The category of adolescents who have suffered abuse is a very common one in the practice of social workers. This is due to the increase in the number of abandoned children who remain in the protection system. The impact of abuse or neglect of abuse, regardless of the

circumstances in which it occurred, is undeniable and devastating (Shaw et al., 2017; Muram, et al., 1995; Nelson-Gardell, 2001). Exploring defense mechanisms is extremely important for social workers in the child protection system who are put in the position of deciphering the behaviors of adolescents for a more effective intervention.

The concept of psychological defense is a fundamental topic in psychology, and the mechanisms by which the human psyche defends itself against real or imagined threats have been studied from various perspectives. There is a rich literature that studies the issue of defense mechanisms related to attachment (Cramer, Kelly, 2010), as a moderator of trauma symptoms (Warren, 2000) or differentiated according to the type of abuse suffered (Finzi, Har-Even, Weizman, 2003). Cramer (2015) emphasizes the importance of understanding defense mechanisms as an important dimension in psychotherapeutic practice. The major questions related to this topic were whether defense mechanisms were classified as unconscious processes or as pathological defenses.

Both psychoanalytic theories (Freud, 2007) and neo-psychoanalytic theories (Freud, 2002), as well as more recent approaches (APA, 2003/2000; Blackman, 2009), have proposed various classifications of these mechanisms. In the modern view, defense mechanisms are unconscious psychic processes that aim to diminish or eliminate the negative effects of perceived dangers by restructuring internal and/or external reality. The manifestations and behaviors associated with these mechanisms can be conscious or unconscious (Ionescu, Jacquet & Lhote, alternative defense mechanism through perspective).

Those that reduce unpleasant affects from consciousness are frequently described as immature, retroactive, mostly unconscious mechanisms, and with a low or absent level of adaptability (Blackman, 2009). In this context, the Defensive Functioning Scale (DFS) of the DSM-IV, which assesses 27 of the 30 defense mechanisms, becomes an important tool for analyzing psychological defenses.

Another important aspect mentioned in the DSM is the approach to abuse and neglect as factors to be considered in the clinical treatment of affected individuals. Cases of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and child neglect are called “child maltreatment” by psychiatrists and psychologists. Adolescents who have suffered sexual abuse in childhood are more prone to decreased impulse control, and self-destructive and suicidal behaviors are common. Posttraumatic and dissociative stress disorders are also common among adults who have been victims of childhood abuse. The effects of these traumas are influenced by the severity,

frequency, and duration of the abuse or neglect, but also by the nature of the relationship with the aggressor.

Objectives

Research in psychotherapy and psychopathology was inspired by the central concept of defense mechanisms, which play an essential role in psychoanalysis. The specifics of defense mechanisms have only recently been systematically studied in the context of several clinical diagnoses. To this end, the present study aimed to explore the specificities of defense mechanisms in adolescents with adverse events, by exploring the level of physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect, as well as the relationships between them and the development of defense mechanisms.

- Highlighting defense mechanisms on a sample of teenagers: altruism, passive aggression, suppression, sublimation, splitting of other's image, rationalization, humor, projection, reaction formation, self-observation, denial, devaluation of others, projective identification, dissociation, self-assertion, omnipotence, acting out, devaluation of self, autistic fantasy, withdrawal, intellectualization, splitting of self-image, displacement, repression, idealization, isolation of affect, help rejection complaining, undoing, anticipation, affiliation.
- Highlighting on a sample of teenagers the level of physical, sexual abuse and neglect.
- Researching the associations between the degree of abuse (physical and sexual) and neglect experienced in childhood and defense mechanisms.

The Current Study

It is hypothesized that there is a link between defense mechanisms and physical abuse (#1), sexual abuse (#2) and neglect (#3), suggesting that as the level of abuse increases, the defense mechanisms become more maladaptive.

Participants

A total of 75 subjects- adolescents in the special protection system participated in the research, the criteria for inclusion were the openness to participate in the study and the sincerity in preparing the answers to the questionnaires. Among them, 31 subjects were male (41.3%) and 44 were female (58.2%), with an average age of 14.80 years, with a minimum of 12 years and a maximum of 19 years and a deviation standard of 1.71 years.

Measures

The Defensive Style Questionnaire 60 (Thygesen, Drapeau, Trijsburg, Lecours, & de Roten, 2008) is an instrument designed to assess defense mechanisms consistent with the psychological defense mechanisms included in DSM IV (APA, 2003/2000). The score for each defense mechanism is obtained by adding the response (chosen by the participant from a scale of 1 to 9) of 2 items that correspond to a particular defense mechanism. The questionnaire was adapted for the Romanian population (Crașovan & Maricuțoiu, 2012), the authors demonstrating an acceptable factorial solution for the model that assumes the existence of 30 correlated scales.

The Child Abuse And Trauma Scale (Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995) is a 38-item questionnaire that subjectively measures childhood emotional, neglect, physical, and sexual abuse. Subjects are asked to rate on a scale of 0 to 4 (0 – never, 4 – always) how often each abusive experience occurred during their childhood and adolescence. High scores indicate more frequent abusive experiences and provide an index of severity. The scale has a total score and measures 3 subscales: neglect/negative atmosphere (14 items), physical abuse/physical punishment (6 items) and sexual abuse (6 items). In the present research sample, the subscales had acceptable internal consistency for the total scale (α .93), neglect (α .87), sexual abuse (α .74), and physical punishment subscale (α .65).

Procedure

The participants completed the questionnaires used in the paper, with instruction to answer as objectively as possible; the application of the tools used including a short interview (about gender and age). The subjects were informed about the purpose of the research and were assured of the confidentiality of the information revealed during the research process and after it.

Results

1. In order to demonstrate the association between the variables, we calculated parametric correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) since the variables have symmetrical dispersions and the distributions were normal.

For defense mechanisms and abuse through physical punishment, the Pearson r correlation indices calculated (table 1) highlight significant correlations (sig. $\leq .05$) with passive aggression (r .381), projection (r .252), denial (r .266), projective identification (r .334), dissociation (r .238), devaluation of self (r .506), displacement (r .308), isolation of affect (r

.243), and help-rejecting complaining (r .369). Thus, it can be said that, in adolescents, the defense mechanisms are associated with the abuse represented by physical punishment, thus, the higher the physical punishment, the greater the presence of defenses: passive aggression, projection, denial, projective identification, dissociation, devaluation of self, displacement, isolation of affect and help-rejecting complaining.

Table 1. Correlations between physical abuse and defense mechanisms

| Physical abuse | | | | |
|----------------|----------------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------|
| r | Altruism | -.179 | Omnipotence | .168 |
| Sig. | | .124 | | .150 |
| r | Passive aggression | .381** | Acting out | .087 |
| Sig. | | .001 | | .459 |
| r | Suppression | .076 | Devaluation of self | .506** |
| Sig. | | .517 | | .000 |
| r | Sublimation | .123 | Autistic fantasy | .180 |
| Sig. | | .292 | | .122 |
| r | Splitting of other's image | -.038 | Withdrawal | -.036 |
| Sig. | | .748 | | .758 |
| r | Rationalization | .024 | Intellectualization | -.005 |
| Sig. | | .837 | | .965 |
| r | Humor | .129 | Splitting of self-image | .033 |
| Sig. | | .271 | | .776 |
| r | Projection | .252* | Displacement | .308** |
| Sig. | | .029 | | .007 |
| r | Reaction formation | .060 | Repression | .139 |
| Sig. | | .611 | | .233 |
| r | Self-observation | .060 | Idealization | -.067 |
| Sig. | | .608 | | .569 |
| r | Denial | .266* | Isolation of affect | .243* |
| Sig. | | .021 | | .035 |
| r | Devaluation of others | .192 | Help-rejecting complaining | .369* |
| Sig. | | .100 | | .001 |
| r | Projective identification | .334** | Undoing | .069 |
| Sig. | | .003 | | .559 |
| r | Dissociation | .238* | Anticipation | .177 |
| Sig. | | .040 | | .130 |
| r | Self-assertion | -.144 | Afiliation | .169 |
| | | .217 | | .147 |

*. Sig. 0.05 (2-tailed).

** . Sig. 0.01 (2-tailed).

2. For defense mechanisms and sexual abuse, the Pearson r correlation indices calculated (table 2) highlight significant correlations (sig. $\leq .05$) with passive aggression (r .324), sublimation (r .284), projection (r .317), denial (r .313), devaluation of others (r .321), projective identification (r .397), dissociation (r .302), omnipotence (r .301), devaluation of self (r .335), autistic fantasy (r .258), splitting of self-image (r .225), help-rejecting complaining (r .418), anticipation (r.226) and affiliation (r.294).

Thus, it can be said that, in adolescents, defense mechanisms are associated with sexual abuse, with higher levels of abuse being linked to a greater presence of defenses such as passive aggression, sublimation, projection, denial, devaluation of others, projective identification, dissociation, omnipotence, devaluation of self, autistic fantasy, splitting of self-image, help-rejecting complaining, anticipation, and affiliation.

Table 2. Correlations between sexual abuse and defense mechanisms

| Sexual abuse | | | | |
|--------------|----------------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------|
| r | Altruism | .011 | Omnipotence | .301** |
| Sig. | | .924 | | .009 |
| r | Passive aggression | .324** | Acting out | .061 |
| Sig. | | .005 | | .604 |
| r | Suppression | .049 | Devaluation of self | .335** |
| Sig. | | .675 | | .003 |
| r | Sublimation | .284* | Autistic fantasy | .258* |
| Sig. | | .014 | | .026 |
| r | Splitting of other's image | -.013 | Withdrawal | .104 |
| Sig. | | .911 | | .373 |
| r | Rationalization | .095 | Intellectualization | -.008 |
| Sig. | | .418 | | .943 |
| r | Humor | -.007 | Splitting of self-image | .225* |
| Sig. | | .953 | | .053 |
| r | Projection | .317** | Displacement | .186 |
| Sig. | | .006 | | .110 |
| r | Reaction formation | -.003 | Repression | .048 |
| Sig. | | .980 | | .684 |
| r | Self-observation | .107 | Idealization | .086 |
| Sig. | | .361 | | .466 |
| r | Denial | .313** | Isolation of affect | .151 |
| Sig. | | .006 | | .197 |
| r | Devaluation of others | .321** | Help-rejecting complaining | .418** |

| | | | | |
|------|---------------------------|--------|--------------|-------|
| Sig. | | .005 | | .000 |
| r | Projective identification | .397** | Undoing | .079 |
| Sig. | | .000 | | .502 |
| r | Dissociation | .302** | Anticipation | .226* |
| Sig. | | .009 | | .051 |
| r | Self-assertion | -.012 | Afiliation | .294* |
| | | .920 | | .010 |

*. Sig. 0.05 (2-tailed).

** . Sig. 0.01 (2-tailed).

3. For defense and neglect mechanisms, the Pearson r correlation indices calculated (table 3) highlight significant correlations (sig. $\leq .05$) with passive aggression (r .426), projection (r .332), denial (r .339), devaluation of others (r .273), projective identification (r .380), dissociation (r .258), devaluation of self (r .435), autistic fantasy (r .363), displacement (r .231), isolation of affect (r .295), help-rejecting complaining (r .563), and anticipation (r .220). Therefore, it can be concluded that, in adolescents, defense mechanisms are linked to neglect, with higher levels of neglect being associated with a greater presence of defenses such as passive aggression, projection, denial, devaluation of others, projective identification, dissociation, devaluation of self, autistic fantasy, displacement, isolation of affect, help-rejecting complaining, and anticipation.

Table 3. Correlations between neglect and defense mechanisms

| Neglect | | | | |
|---------|----------------------------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| r | Altruism | -.054 | Omnipotence | .165 |
| Sig. | | .643 | | .156 |
| r | Passive aggression | .426** | Acting out | .104 |
| Sig. | | .000 | | .375 |
| r | Suppression | -.027 | Devaluation of self | .435** |
| Sig. | | .818 | | .000 |
| r | Sublimation | .044 | Autistic fantasy | .363* |
| Sig. | | .708 | | .001 |
| r | Splitting of other's image | -.038 | Withdrawal | .059 |
| Sig. | | .747 | | .617 |
| r | Rationalization | -.073 | Intellectualization | .072 |
| Sig. | | .535 | | .537 |
| r | Humor | .093 | Splitting of self-image | .132 |
| Sig. | | .425 | | .258 |
| r | Projection | .332** | Displacement | .231* |

| | | | | |
|------|---------------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------|
| Sig. | | .004 | | .046 |
| r | Reaction formation | -.007 | Repression | .008 |
| Sig. | | .954 | | .945 |
| r | Self-observation | .027 | Idealization | -.034 |
| Sig. | | .820 | | .775 |
| r | Denial | .339** | Isolation of affect | .295* |
| Sig. | | .003 | | .010 |
| r | Devaluation of others | .273* | Help-rejecting complaining | .563** |
| Sig. | | .018 | | .000 |
| r | Projective identification | .380** | Undoing | .164 |
| Sig. | | .001 | | .161 |
| r | Dissociation | .258* | Anticipation | .220* |
| Sig. | | .026 | | .057 |
| r | Self-assertion | -.172 | Afiliation | .099 |
| | | .139 | | .397 |

*. Sig. 0.05 (2-tailed).

** . Sig. 0.01 (2-tailed).

Discussions

The main objective of the present study was to assess defense mechanisms in relation to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect in a sample of adolescents, and to highlight the relationships between these factors. In doing so, the importance of defense mechanisms in diagnosing the developing personality of adolescents was emphasized, along with the demonstrated relationship between defense mechanisms and the abuse and neglect experienced during childhood.

The analysis revealed strong associations between maladaptive defense mechanisms (neurotic and immature) and high levels of abuse and neglect. However, it also highlighted the emergence of highly adaptive defense patterns, such as affiliation, sublimation, and anticipation. Additionally, a negative association trend was observed between physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and adaptive defenses, with the confirmation of this trend providing a basis for future research.

Based on the conclusions of this study, further research into the association between defense mechanisms and attachment styles, as well as the degree of abuse and neglect, is underway. This includes exploring these relationships in clinical groups with affective or personality disorders, across different age groups.

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