

Investigating the Basics and Principles of Defense Mechanisms and Integrative Self-Knowledge

Abstract

Defense mechanisms refer to psychological strategies used unconsciously by one to protect oneself against anxiety from unacceptable thoughts and feelings. The goal of the present study was to investigate the basics and principles of defense mechanisms and integrative self-knowledge. The study method was descriptive-analytical, and library sources were used. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between defense mechanisms and some related variables, types of defense mechanisms, and integrative self-knowledge. Studies have indicated that integrative self-knowledge affects the selection and function of emotion-regulation and stress-coping methods by analyzing past experiences and momentary awareness of psychological states, and the content analysis of peoples' current experiences, and for this, it affects mental health. Integrative self-knowledge is a sign of mental health. Using ineffective defense mechanisms could threaten mental health. When facing stressful conditions, using ineffective defense mechanisms threatens mental health and brings about undesirable consequences. Defense mechanisms are associated with the signs of depression, anxiety and sleeplessness, somatic symptoms, and dysfunctional social action.

Keywords: *Defense mechanisms, Integrative self-knowledge, Depression, Mental health*

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Introduction

Defense mechanisms refer to psychological strategies used unconsciously by one to protect oneself against anxiety from unacceptable thoughts and feelings. The continued use of defense mechanisms will be harmful when it forms an incompatible behavior, and thus, can disrupt the individual's physical-mental health, and social functioning (Walker & MacCabe, 2021). The relationship between mental health and its dimensions with immature defense mechanisms has been confirmed (Haghighi et al. 2019). Defense mechanisms are associated with the signs of depression, anxiety and sleeplessness, somatic symptoms, and dysfunctional social action (Eskandari, 2017). Maladaptive defense mechanisms affect peoples' mental health through emotion regulation (Sala et al. 2015) and harm one's perception of self and others (Ranjbari, Besharat, & Pourhossein, 2017). Haghighi et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between mental health and defense mechanisms in 189 undergraduate students of the Urmia University of Medical Sciences. Findings showed that mental health and its dimensions were significantly related to immature defense mechanisms, with those with lower mental health being more likely to use immature defense mechanisms. However, the subscale of somatic symptoms was found to be weakly and reversely related to neurotic defense mechanisms. For Haghighi et al., there were degrees of dysfunction in various areas of mental health among the studied students, as using immature defense mechanisms could leave negative effects on their mental health.

On the other hand, integrative self-knowledge refers to a dynamic, compatible, and integrating process that can, at any moment, incorporate experiences and attributes relating to self

quite significantly, and associate them by awareness of current and past experiences (Ghorbani et al. 2008). Some researchers consider integrative self-knowledge to be a sign of mental health (Behjati et al. 2011). Integrative self-knowledge refers to a dynamic, compatible, and integrative process associated with compatible mental health and health psychological functions (Ghorbani, Watson & Hargis, 2008). Research has confirmed the relationship between integrative self-knowledge and mental health with self-conscious emotions (Haji-Fathali et al. 2021), and its effects on well-being (Abbasi et al. (2021). The interaction between self-control and integrative self-knowledge helps regulate the relationship between perceived stress and anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms. Integrative self-knowledge as a sign of mental health (Behjati et al. 2011) increases psychological compatibility and reduces psychological harm (Feldman et al. 2021). Integrative self-knowledge is associated with psychological well-being (Abbasi et al. 2021), and self-conscious emotions (Haji-Fathali, Ghorbani & Rostami, 2021). Moradi Kolardeh et al. (2019) investigated the role of integrative self-knowledge, experiential avoidance, and self-compassion in anxiety from exams among female students. This study was conducted via the correlation method and in collaboration with 171 female students of the University of Shahid Chamran of Ahvaz, Iran. Results also confirmed a negative correlation between integrative self-knowledge and self-compassion with exam anxiety and a positive correlation between experiential avoidance and exam anxiety. Their findings also suggested that among the predictive variables, integrative self-knowledge and experiential avoidance could predict exam anxiety among female students. As stated, the present study aimed to

investigate the basics and principles of defense mechanisms and integrative self-knowledge.

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms refer to methods people unconsciously use against anxious events so that they protect themselves against possible mental harm. The idea behind using defense actions was developed by Sigmund Freud in 1894. To him, defense mechanisms help remove conflicting or unpleasant thoughts from the consciousness sphere, and thus, reduce anxiety in individuals (Freud, 1894). Researchers have found that mental health is related to how accepted defense mechanisms are used. The people who use these mechanisms can cope with anxiety well and give compatible responses to conflicts. These researchers have also found that mental pathology, along with using a defense mechanism, is one of the most important psychoanalytical concepts in studying personality. Defense mechanisms refer to automatic regulating processes aimed at reducing cognitive dissonance and minimizing sudden changes in internal or external realities by affecting the way threatening events are perceived. Freud defines defense mechanisms to be subjective functions that protect people against high anxiety caused by externally stressful events and internally destructive states (Andrews 1993). He considers personal defense style, i.e., the frequency of using various defense mechanisms against others, to be the main variable of understanding personality and the level of compatibility. Empirical evidence suggests that defense mechanisms can be regulated by a hierarchy of compatibility. Compatible defense styles are associated with mental and somatic health outcomes, while incompatible defense mechanisms are associated with a wide range of negative health indicators, such as personality disorder and depression (Zoccali, 2007).

Relationship between Defense Mechanisms and Some Related Variables

Research evidence has shown that developing some defense mechanisms, including the anticipation mechanism that involves realistic planning for future discomfort is goal-oriented and affects peoples' mental health and compatibility. Waylant et al. found in their study that people using mature defense mechanisms can cope well with mental pressure and respond to conflicts compatibly. Consistent with studies by Zoccali et al. people who use more mature defense mechanisms can better contain their anger.

Some researchers have investigated immature defense mechanisms and their undesirable impacts on students. For example, Cramer revealed that immature defense mechanisms such as projection were directly related to anger experiences among students. Findings from Mohtashami et al.'s study suggested that the students' use of immature defense styles (projection, denial, fantasy, neurotic, altruism, false, and

undoing) was reversely related to their academic achievement. However, students with higher academic achievement tend to use the mature defense mechanism of humor. Other research has suggested that the defense mechanism of undoing was directly related to unhealthy control ways of anxiety, and morbid fantasy to the lack of creative thinking.

Thus, using ineffective defense mechanisms can threaten the mental health of the students who are thought of as the spiritual and human achievement of society and the future. When faced with stressful events, students' use of ineffective defense mechanisms threatens their mental health and brings them undesirable consequences. In line with studies by Zeighami et al. the prevalence of mental health, disorders have been one of the reasons for the expelling of and drop-out by students. However, if the Office of Mental Health Survey and Monitoring affiliated with the Ministry of Science, and counseling centers at universities use individual evaluations to predict students' possibility of using ineffective defense mechanism in the future, they can take a step towards better planning and preventing undesirable consequences (Watson, 1998).

Other research evidence suggests that negative psychological characteristics can predict the individual's incompatible defense mechanisms. Some studies have shown that personality characteristics are involved in predicting defense mechanisms. According to research, the more positive the individual's scores are in personality attributes, the more they are expected to use mature defense styles, and vice versa. Other findings revealed that extroversion was related to mature defense mechanisms.

Types of Defense Mechanisms

Below are several defense mechanisms.

Identification with the aggressor: Identifying the aggressor is a defense mechanism that involves imitating the behavior of an individual who is more powerful and hostile to a victim. It is a process through which a victim introjects the behavior of an aggressor which may inhibit abuse, and lead the aggressor to establish an emotional relationship with the victim. This will thus end up in a sense of empathy.

Suppression: Suppression is an unconscious defense mechanism used by the ego to keep annoying and threatening thoughts away. The thoughts generally suppressed are the ones that lead to the feeling of guilt about oneself. This is not a successful defense in the long run because it involves the imposition of intrusive wants, ideas, and memories on the unconscious mind, and may cause anxiety despite being repressed. Suppressed memories may be revealed through unconscious tools or changed forms, such as dreams or verbal mistakes (Ibid).

Projection: Projection is a psychological defense mechanism in which the individual attributes unwanted thoughts, feelings, and motivations to another one. The thoughts generally attributed to another by projection include aggressive, violent, and sexual thoughts causing sin. For example, you may hate someone, but your conscience tells you that it is not right to hate. Thus, you can resolve this by the fact it is they who hate you (Ibid).

Displacement: Displacement refers to a changing course towards a weak alternative goal. This goal can be someone or something serving as a symbolic alternative. Changing course occurs when a man wants to do something but his conscience does not allow it. For this, he may find another way to release his internal mental energy. As a result, energy is transferred from a suppressed body into an acceptable body. For instance, the one who is upset with his conscience may go home and kick his dog, beat up a member of the family, or get involved in addiction (Ibid).

Sublimation: Sublimation is like displacement and occurs when we can lead our own unacceptable emotions toward constructive and socially acceptable behaviors, rather than toward destructive activities. For example, many great singers have not had a good life and used singing for self-expression.

Denial: Denial is a defense mechanism that includes refusing to accept reality; therefore, it prevents the awareness of external events. In case the control of a situation proves to be highly difficult, an individual may react by refusing to perceive it or by denying its existence. As you may imagine, this is a primary and dangerous defense mechanism. No one ignores reality and can escape it for so long. Many people in everyday life use denial to void scrambling with painful feelings or events. For example, a husband may ignore the clear signs of his wife's infidelity, or a student may avoid accepting his/her lack of preparation for taking an exam.

Regression (return): Regression is a defense mechanism in which the ego decides to return to the primary stage of growth in response to a stressful situation. Regression serves as a sign of withdrawal and allows the individual to return to the time when s/he felt more secure. For example, when an individual gets terrified, their behavior gets childish. A child may restart sucking his/her thumb finger or suffer from nighttime incontinence after being hospitalized. Adolescents may involuntarily laugh when they engage in a social situation with the opposite sex.

Rationalization: Rationalization is a defense mechanism that includes cognitive distortion to create an event or a motive with fewer threats. When providing reasons for our actions, we do it consciously enough. However, for many people with a sensitive ego, rationalization is so easy that they are never really aware of it. In other words, many of us are fully aware

to believe our lies. For example, when an individual faces a tricky situation, they provide rational reasons for it (Ibid).

Reaction formation: Reaction formation is a psychological defense mechanism in which an individual goes beyond a level higher than denial and behaves in the opposite of what s/he thinks and feels. Conscious behaviors are taken to overcome the anxiety an individual suffers from because of his/her socially unacceptable feelings and thoughts. Reaction formation is usually represented by such behaviors as obsession and prevention. The ego uses reaction formation to be satisfied by keeping itself in ignorance towards real motives. Reaction formation is seen in patients who claim to believe in something and get angry over anyone who opposes them.

Integrative Self-Knowledge

Integrative self-knowledge refers to the momentary awareness of psychological states and the ability to distinguish and analyze the content of current experiences, and also to active processing about self and past events with the outcome of creating a wider scope to direct behavior and form more complicated and fuller individual schema (Ghorbani, Watson, Being, Davison & Lebreton, 2003). Studies have shown that integrative self-knowledge is associated with extraversion, adoption/acceptance, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience in the five-factor model of personality (Tahmaseb, Ghorbani & Pourhossein, 2008); stability against somatic symptoms of illness (Ghorbani, Watson & Cunningham, 2010) and self-esteem, empathy and positive dimensions of self-narcissism (Ghorbani, Watson, Hamzavi, & Weathington, 2010). Integrative self-knowledge refers to peoples' active efforts to integrate their past and present experiences to create a desirable future (Ghorbani et al. 2008).

Rationally, the self cannot be defined because its conceptual derivations should be used to do so, though this is not enough. In general, the self is investigated in two respects. Cognitively, Kelstrom defined the self to be a subjective representation of oneself or an indication of our knowledge of selves. He also considered self to serve as existential integrity and a wide-ranging organization that includes all mental activities in an integrated form. Self-knowledge denotes awareness about apparent and mental states, and the ability to distinguish, continue and attribute them to oneself.

There are multiple theories about self and relevant basics about the psychology of self. Ghorbani et al. (Mashhadi & Tahmaseb, 2006) consider self-knowledge to be dynamic, organized, and integrating the psychological process with a timely nature. In early studies, this construct was divided into two experiential and contemplative aspects. Experiential self-knowledge refers to processing the receiver of information related to the self, which is performed by its momentary and

dynamic changes at present. This self-knowledge provides an immediate output of individual experiences required for coping with challenges and meeting goals ahead; it also avoids automatic and involuntary forms of giving responses. On the other hand, contemplative self-knowledge refers to the cognitive processing of self-related information that relates to the past. In this kind of self-knowledge, an individual analyzes his/her experiences through higher and more complicated cognitive experiences, and thus achieves more complicated subjective schemas, which facilitate his/her compatibility.

Experiential and contemplative self-knowledge is similarly correlated with a wide-ranging spectrum of variables. In the face of challenging conditions requiring accurate attention to self at present, experiential self-knowledge is dominant. Under this situation, reliance on contemplative self-knowledge can cause habit-like responses, having an insignificant relation with realities. Conversely, experiential self-knowledge could lead to frustration in utilizing past insights and experiences to analyze and perceive current conditions if it fails to use contemplative self-knowledge. For this, these two types of self-knowledge are closely related and intertwined. Findings by Ghorbani and Watson (2008) reveal that these two types help constitute integrative self-knowledge.

Self-knowledge is not formed by older age or let's say automatically; conversely, it is a conscious effort that may, at first, appear to be difficult. However, it becomes easier over time and makes you closer to a more beautiful and real life. Self-knowledge means being aware of one's inherent character, tolerance, and limitations, and recognizing one's interests, fears, wants, and desires. This study aimed to investigate self-knowledge from a psychological perspective. The question is "What is the complementary approach to self-knowledge?" In this connection, there are various spiritual, mystical, and psychoanalytical approaches to the subject of self-knowledge. A complementary approach constitutes a big part of self-knowledge and knowledge of personality (later, theories about attributes and scholars like Gordon, Allport, and Hans Eysenck will be introduced). It should be stated that the knowledge of personality, being a big part of self-knowledge, is a subpart of this approach (you may have heard about such terms as extrovert, introvert, emotion-seeking, sensual, and rational about describing self and others). In sum, from a psychological point of view, self-knowledge refers to man's knowledge of morality, spirits, and personality characteristics (Esmacili, 2017).

discussion

The goal of the present study was to investigate the basics and principles of defense mechanisms and integrative self-knowledge. Studies have indicated that using maladaptive defense mechanisms can affect people's mental health through emotion regulation (Sala et al. 2015). People with maladaptive

defense mechanisms may apply maladaptive emotion regulation skills, or lack adaptive emotional regulation skills; as a consequence, they face an increase in the signs of depression and anxiety and a reduction in mental health. Ranjbari et al. (2017) argue that using maladaptive defense mechanisms affects the individual's perception of self and others; for instance, using the defense mechanisms of projection or suppression causes the inability to regulate emotions and may increase negative emotions, and thus cause the development of depression and anxiety. Defense mechanisms can also affect the selection and function of stress-coping strategies, and thereby, increase or decrease mental health. People with maladaptive defense mechanisms make use of emotion-oriented coping strategies, which in the short run can reduce their stress, increase stress, and anxiety, and reduce mental health in the long run. Consistent with the finding, Panfil et al. (2020) demonstrated that there was a relationship between adaptive defense mechanisms and problem-concentrated coping strategies. Also, the correlation between the coping strategy of avoidance and maladaptive defense mechanisms was significant.

On the other hand, findings from Viskovich and Walker (2019) found that integrative self-knowledge mediated the relationship between mindfulness and self-compassion among students, and thus, affected their mental health. Findings by Haj-Fathali, Ghorbani, and Rostami (2021) suggested that integrative self-knowledge, mindfulness, and self-control as self-regulation components were associated with mental health and self-conscious emotions. In a study, Abbasi et al. (2021) concluded that integrative self-knowledge mediated the relationship between improved mindful observation and non-judgmental internal experience with well-being. According to findings by Omid et al. (2019), integrative self-knowledge predicts anxiety among patients with digestive problems. Moradi Kolardeh (2019) demonstrated that there was a negative correlation between integrative self-knowledge and self-compassion with exam anxiety. Also, findings by Saleh Mirhosseini et al. (2016) revealed that the interaction between self-control and integrative self-knowledge played a mediating role in the relationship between perceived stress, anxiety, depression, and somatic signs.

Conclusion

Using ineffective defense mechanisms could threaten mental health. When facing stressful conditions, using ineffective defense mechanisms threatens mental health and brings about undesirable consequences. Defense mechanisms are associated with the signs of depression, anxiety and sleeplessness, somatic symptoms, and dysfunctional social action.

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