

Research on the Influence of Different Psychological Defense Mechanisms on the Psychology of Students

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Abstract: The contradiction between id and ego is the root cause of various problems in the growth process of students. On the basis of understanding the functions of different psychological defense mechanisms, teachers can assist students in dealing with all areas of inner conflict and thus achieve a balanced state. Psychological defense mechanism is one of the means for individuals to deal with setbacks and anxiety. It plays an important role in preserving an individual's mental health. This paper mainly analyzes the impact of different types of psychological defense mechanisms in the growth process of students and discusses its importance as well as its significance. Finally, by analyzing its influencing factors, this paper also proposes strategies for adjusting the psychological defense mechanism, so as to provide reference for teachers in the practical education process.

Keywords: Psychological defense mechanism; Id and ego; Psychological balance; Conflict and contradiction

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1. Introduction

Psychological defense mechanism (PDM) refers to the psychological tendency of an individual to eliminate impetuous or avoid excessive psychological injury, in order to maintain stability when their inner world is in conflict with the objective world in the process of growth, resulting in psychological pressure and anxiety^[1]. Previous studies have revealed that psychological defense mechanism has two sides: on the one hand, the positive side is mainly reflected in strong self-consciousness, where an individual can successfully go through each stage of growth, especially in the face of difficulties and setbacks, the individual's mental state reflects optimism, perseverance, and courage; on the other hand, the negative side is mainly reflected in the inability to deal with internal and external conflicts and contradictions alone in the growth stage, in addition to experiencing symptoms, such as fear, passivity, timidity, malaise, and even depression. Therefore, it is crucial that the practical education work is guided based on the full understanding of the function of PDM.

Freud, as the founder of psychoanalysis, first put forward the concept of PDM. To put it simply, PDM is a form of social adaptation behavior that helps individuals cope with difficulties, resist anxiety, and prevent the collapse of spiritual support. Freud suggested that id, ego, and superego are the three

components of personality structure ^[2]. Id belongs to the category of unconsciousness, which reflects the genetic characteristics. It meets the physiological needs of humans, including water, air, sex, etc., and it is governed by the pleasure principle. Ego is the expression of instinct. Due to the interaction of external environment and education, individual behavior will be dominated by the reality principle. It acts as the balance bar between ego and superego. Superego belongs to the highest level of the personality structure, which involves the moralization and standardization of ego. It is also the pronoun of social moral standards and conscience. Superego follows the principle of perfection. Id, on the other hand, is controlled by ego and superego; however, superego is also restricted by ego. When the balance bar of ego tilts, the individual will experience psychological problems. In order to protect oneself from external encroachment, an individual's conscience will use denial, repression, projection, etc. to deal with personality disorders; this is known as PDM.

Different PDMs are used in view of different personalities in different contexts. Most of the time, an individual may use several PDMs at the same time, because they tend to work better together.

2. Classification and performance of PDM

When individuals encounter difficulties and setbacks in the process of growth, they often use PDM to exclude those memories or emotions that lead to unhappiness. Different types of PDMs, on the other hand, are consistent in improving one's adaptability to self. The psychodynamic school divides PDM into three categories: immature defense mechanism, intermediate defense mechanism, and mature defense mechanism ^[3]. There are also several subdivisions to it, which will be discussed below.

(1) Denial defense mechanism

The denial defense mechanism refers to an individual's subconscious thoughts or emotions, which aim to avoid situations that can cause harm or unpleasant feelings to oneself ^[4]. Denial denotes the refusal to admit that there are urgent problems to be solved. For example, some students have the mentality of denying the fact that there are classmates who are better than them. This defensive behavior allows an individual to avoid certain problems in short term, because when faced with a problem, the individual has to deal with all the challenges that follow when eliminating a specific problem.

(2) Repression defense mechanism

The repression defense mechanism involves burying views that are not accepted by an individual himself or herself. With the passage of time, the individual will forget the existence of those views ^[5]. This mechanism is a form of motivated forgetting. The repressed ideas do not disappear and will affect the individual's behavior and psychology in an unconscious way. For example, some students tend to overreact or express inappropriate emotions when they encounter conflicts and contradictions with their parents.

(3) Projection defense mechanism

The projection defense mechanism is clearly seen when an individual unconsciously imposes an impulse, desire, or motivation that can cause anxiety to others and believes that it has nothing to do with himself or herself ^[6]. Sometimes, when a student is punished for being late, he or she may blame the teacher instead by having thoughts, such as "The teacher does not like me," or "The teacher is in a bad mood today." In fact, most of the time, students simply seek for a scapegoat to absolve themselves of blame, so that they may feel at ease.

(4) Altruism defense mechanism

The altruism defense mechanism means that an individual gains recognition from the surrounding environment by helping others without expecting any rewards in the process of interpersonal communication, and ultimately achieves self-satisfaction ^[7]. Conditional altruism is considered selfishness, whereas unconditional altruism is true altruism. For example, some students offer to assist

teachers in cleaning the blackboard, while others take the initiative to run the class's public affairs, both of which display altruism.

(5) Sublimation defense mechanism

The sublimation defense mechanism is a mature and constructive PDM, which is also highly praised by the public ^[8]. The mechanism involves balancing oneself in socially popular ways with good pressure resistance when suffering setbacks in the growth process. For example, a student who was always known to be mischievous and involved in fights became a sports teacher after graduating from a sports school. His turning point was when he won a sports tournament back in his schooling days, which gave him a lot of confidence.

(6) Regression defense mechanism

The regression defense mechanism refers to the conduct in which an individual consciously chooses the approach of dealing with things in a child-like manner when confronted with problems, rather than using methods and principles appropriate to the individual's current age to achieve satisfaction ^[9]. For example, a senior student may act like a child when playing hide-and-seek. This transient regression behavior is normal and sometimes desperately needed.

(7) Rationalization defense mechanism

The rationalization defense mechanism refers to the fact that when an individual does not obtain what he or she wants, the individual will then try his or her best to come up with justifications to make himself or herself feel better ^[10]. For example, when students arrange a weekend study plan but fail to follow through, they will tell themselves, "I have worked hard by studying every day, why should I suffer more?"; this is a common refrain among students to feel a sense of balance.

(8) Compensation defense mechanism

The compensation defense mechanism mainly refers to when an individual has some objective defects (such as physical disability, weak intelligence, etc.) that make them unable to achieve their desires smoothly. The individual will cover up his or her weaknesses and make up for existing defects by cultivating positive traits. This is a tentative behavior that helps the individual regain self-confidence ^[11]. Compensation can be divided into two categories according to its function: negative compensation and positive compensation. Negative compensation refers to an inappropriate reparation that does not bring valuable help, but instead highlights a problem. Giving an example, a student, who has been rejected by others, joins a bad company in order to gain acceptance from people. Positive compensation refers to taking appropriate measures or behaving positively to make up for physical and mental defects in the process of growth. For example, some students with physical disabilities eventually graduate from college and are employed because of their strong willpower and effort.

(9) Isolation defense mechanism

The isolation defense mechanism refers to separating unpleasant facts, situations, or emotions from one's consciousness, thus avoiding direct emotional experience, and ultimately achieving the purpose of avoiding embarrassment, unhappiness, or anxiety. The "facts" here refer to only a part; they do not include all the facts ^[12]. For example, when a student obtains poor grades in an exam, the student immerses himself or herself in a TV program after school.

(10) Transfer defense mechanism

The transfer defense mechanism refers to when an individual shifts unfavorable behaviors or emotions to another relatively safe scene and releases them ^[13]. In this mechanism, the individual transfers the original unfavorable behavior or emotion to the weak. For example, when a student feels angry in school, the student may transfer this anger onto his or her family at home, thus losing temper for no apparent reason. This is often the case in daily life, which is the result of the transfer defense mechanism.

In short, the function of PDM is to help individuals reduce or eliminate current problems, and not to seek factual truths. In short term, PDM can help individuals gain temporary psychological comfort, but in long term, it is often harmful to the individual's physical and mental development. Therefore, in the long run, PDM is not conducive to training and improving the ability of individuals in dealing with various problems.

3. Influencing factors of PDM

Understanding the influencing factors of PMD can help one understand the essence of PMD, so as to scientifically apply the aforementioned defense mechanisms in the practical education process. This will help improve students' mental health ^[14]. The influencing factors of PDM can be classified into four categories: individual factors, family factors, school factors, and social factors.

3.1. Individual factors

The maturation of PDM is related to the gradual maturation of the cerebral cortex. Previous studies have proven that with the increasing maturity of individual physiological functions, their psychological adaptation and social regulation abilities will gradually enhance. Students are exposed to the society in the growth process. When their inner id needs are in conflict and contradiction with social morality, they may not only adopt more mature PMDs, but also use immature defense mechanisms. After repeatedly using these defense mechanisms, their cerebral cortex will become habitual and gradually form a central trait, which will become the measure to deal with conflicts and anxieties.

3.2. Family factors

Researchers have revealed that parental rearing style and the intimacy among family members have a significant impact on students' PDM. A gentle and modest temperament is the result of having a healthy home environment during childhood. These students will be better at considering the perspective of others when dealing with various events in the future. Growing up in an environment where cold violence is habitual, students may develop a cold and extreme personality that is prone to overusing destructive defense mechanisms.

3.3. School factors

Campus life is another important factor in the growth process of students. Students will always experience different events in different stages of campus life. The nature of some events affects the choice of students' individual defense mechanism. An optimistic campus life will help students achieve a stable state of psychological adjustment and promote the maturity of their PMD. However, a negative campus life will hinder the development and maturity of students' PDM. Students become more sensitive to defending themselves as a result of unpleasant events.

3.4. Social factors

The attention, understanding, and support from parents, teachers, and friends are conducive to students in adopting more mature PMDs. When students are under the safety net with good social support, they will unconsciously give back the love they have received to the society and maintain a positive and healthy attitude when encountering problems. On the contrary, if they are isolated for a long time, they will feel insecure. This will lead to a decline in students' anti-frustration ability and stress tolerance, which will in turn increase the tendency of students using immature defense mechanisms.

4. Strategies for adjusting PDM

4.1. Improving one's own quality

Strengthening one's own psychological quality is the fundamental strategy. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, needs are the core of people's mind, which affect the will and cognition of people. In the course of getting along with their parents, teachers, friends, and other people, students will inevitably encounter various conflicts and contradictions. Therefore, they should have a considerable understanding of PDM. Self PDM can be identified in different ways. Under self-supervision, students can record their current conflicts and contradictions by writing down their current thoughts and emotional experiences, and then reflect about the PDMs that have been unconsciously used. Through repetitive thinking, students will come to learn how to defend themselves.

4.2. Creating a harmonious family environment

Family life is an important part of people's life. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory holds that individuals tend to pay special attention to the needs of love and respect. Students will face all kinds of conflicts and contradictions in the external environment, especially in their family environment. Students may not be able to solve problems alone, so PDM will be used. Therefore, it is particularly important to create a harmonious family environment. First of all, parents should take the initiative to show more concern to their children, including their studies and life. It is easier to cultivate good quality in students through love education. Second, it is crucial to strengthen the communication between family members to make students feel that they are an essential part of the family.

4.3. Strengthening school guidance

School life is another important aspect for students. Hence, it is of great significance to strengthen guidance on campus. This can be done through group counseling activities. First, create an environment for students based on theme activities, help students review and reflect the problems they encounter in life, as well as strengthen their mature defense mechanisms and eliminate their immature defense mechanisms through scenario reproduction and role-playing. Second, provide positive stimulating events, such as completing today's learning tasks with better quality or displaying helpful behaviors while conducting activities. Timely feedback should be given to help students gain a stronger self-esteem experience, so as to use a more mature defense mechanism. Third, negative events can be created. Introducing difficult events that cannot be completed in intervention training, and then teaching the students how to deal with conflicts and contradictions through self-motivation and constructive defense mechanisms, such as altruism and sublimation, may be beneficial. These events train students to deal with crisis and cultivate a rational and peaceful state of mind.

4.4. Increasing social support

For students, psychological conflicts and contradictions not only occur in campus life and family life, but also in the process of social contact with the outside world. Sometimes, when individuals come into contact with the society, they will be affected indirectly by certain conflicts. Therefore, increasing social support requires the joint efforts of people. First, community publicity can be strengthened to improve the general public's understanding of PDMs. In case of special circumstances, simple PDMs can be used to help students deal with basic psychological or emotional problems, so as to reduce or weaken the impact of negative PDMs on students. Second, appropriate guidance policies can also be formulated, while advocating the establishment of a safety net of social support through collaborative effort, which helps students experience the love of the society. This will motivate students to contribute back to society while also maintaining a healthy psychological state in the event of conflicts.

5. Conclusion

PDM is an instinct derived from the process when an individual is under the pressure of id, superego, and the outside world. It weakens the psychological threat to the individual through certain ways of adjustment in easing the conflict, so that the individual's superego and id are accepted or satisfied. To some extent, the strength of PDM is equal to the strength of personality. Teachers should come to understand the formation and performance of different PDMs as well as adopt active defense mechanisms in the teaching practice, so as to help students adjust their psychological needs and achieve a balance. This will help improve students' mental health and promote the healthy development of students' personality.

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