

The Ego-Defense Mechanisms

As the “executive” of the personality, the ego strives to direct behavior in ways that satisfy the id, the superego, and the demands of reality. In attempting to achieve this goal, the ego develops several defense mechanisms. These *ego-defense mechanisms* are unconscious strategies used by the ego to shield itself from threatening perceptions, feelings, and impulses. The defense mechanisms help keep the demands of the id and the dictates of the superego under control. In doing so, they reduce feelings of anxiety and keep other feelings, such as guilt, conflict, and anger, from overwhelming the ego. However, the ways of behaving and viewing the world that result from these mechanisms are not always effective or realistic. The defense mechanisms can be divided into three groups: (1) the behavior-channeling defense mechanisms, (2) the primary reality-distorting mechanisms, and (3) the secondary reality-distorting mechanisms.

Behavior-Channeling Defenses

The three behavior-channeling defenses are *identification*, *displacement*, and *sublimation*. These mechanisms direct behavior in ways that protect the person from conflict, anxiety, or harm. For the most part, they produce realistic behavior that the person feels is moral.

Identification, first used in resolving the Oedipal conflict, involves attempting to resolve conflicts about one's behavior by identifying with another person who appears successful, realistic, and moral—trying to act as much like that person as possible. Freud regarded identification as a relatively healthy defense mechanism. Conflicts about behavior are generally accompanied by anxiety. By resolving conflicts, identification also reduces anxiety.

Displacement directs aggressive behavior away from someone or something that has aroused anger toward someone against whom it is both safe and morally acceptable to aggress. For example, a man who has been angered by his boss might fear being hostile toward him and might therefore honk his horn at a fellow commuter on the way home, shout at his wife, ridicule his son, or kick his dog. In all of these instances, he is displacing aggression in a way that he feels is safe and acceptable.

Sublimation entails expressing drives for pleasure or aggression in socially acceptable ways. In this way, the id obtains partial satisfaction while the superego's dictates are followed. For example, a person might sublimate his sexual drives into painting highly respectable representations of nudes. Aggressive drives might be channeled into studying military history or playing contact sports. Freud felt that sublimation was extremely important for civilized existence and social achievement.

Primary Reality-Distorting Defenses

One of the most basic ways the ego protects itself from feelings or perceptions that cause anxiety is simply not to feel or perceive them. The two defense mechanisms that protect ego by keeping threatening feelings or perceptions out of awareness are *repression* and *denial*. They are called primary reality-distorting mechanisms because they are the first line of defense. They protect the ego from being aware of threats.

Repression entails blocking from awareness unacceptable unconscious drives and sexual feelings or impulses, aggressive thoughts or wishes, or feelings of

guilt emanating from the superego. For example, a person who feels guilty for cheating on an exam may simply repress these feelings and not consciously experience them.

Denial is the defense mechanism used to keep threatening perceptions of the external world, rather than internal drives and feelings, out of awareness. For example, a person living in California may simply refuse to admit that earthquakes threaten his life and home, or a smoker may deny that cigarettes are hazardous to her health.

Secondary Reality-Distorting Defenses

Repression and denial simply push threatening feelings and perceptions out of all awareness. However, other defense mechanisms often are called into play following denial and repression. The secondary reality-distorting mechanisms we will discuss are projection, reaction formation and rationalization.

Projection involves perceiving characteristics in other people that you do not admit in yourself. For example, a man might repress his own sexual feelings toward his brother's wife and then project those feelings onto her. Thus, the man will perceive that his brother's wife is sexually interested in him. Another common example is for people to project feelings of anger felt toward others onto those other people. A student who is angry with her roommate might project her anger and perceive the roommate as angry or hostile.

Reaction formation is consciously feeling or acting the strong opposite of one's true unconscious feelings because the true feelings are threatening. For example, a girl who hates her father may repress those feelings and consciously experience strong feelings of affection for him instead. These feelings are due to reaction formation.

Rationalization, a very common defense mechanism, involves generating a socially acceptable explanation for behavior that may be caused by unacceptable drives. For example, a person may rationalize aggression by saying that another person deserved to be punished or harmed. A man may rationalize sexually harassing a woman by telling himself that she really wants to have sex with him, even if she does not admit it.

(pp. 477-9)