

DEFENSE MECHANISMS VERSUS OPENNESS TO EXPERIENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

ROSEMARY LIBURD

University of Alberta

Abstract

A comparison is made of theories that view defense mechanisms as adaptive processes that promote mental health and those that define absence of defense and openness as criteria of positive life adjustment. Adaptive functions of defense mechanisms are related to providing stability and continuity, protection against intolerable anxiety levels and maintenance of an adequate self-concept. The alternate viewpoint defines defensive processes as antithetical to growth and regards the optimally functioning person as defense-free and open to experience. The author examines the implications of these theoretical models for counselling in relation to the following issues: (1) the openness of the counsellor in the counselling relationship, (2) a view of openness as a form of defense, and (3) dealing with defenses as part of the therapeutic process.

Résumé

On compare les théories qui considèrent les mécanismes de défense comme des processus d'adaptation encourageant la santé mentale aux théories qui considèrent l'absence de défenses et l'ouverture comme des critères d'un ajustement positif à la vie. Les fonctions adaptatives des mécanismes de défense fournissent stabilité et continuité, protègent l'individu de niveaux intolérables d'anxiété et aident au maintien d'un concept de soi adéquat. L'autre point de vue soutient que les mécanismes de défense s'avèrent l'antithèse de toute croissance. De plus, on affirme que la personne retirant le maximum de bénéfices de son existence, est celle sans défense et ouverte à l'expérience. L'auteur étudie les conséquences pour la consultation de ces modèles théoriques par rapport aux trois questions suivantes: 1) l'ouverture du conseiller pendant la consultation, 2) l'ouverture comme forme de défense, et 3) les défenses en tant que partie du processus thérapeutique.

The concept of defense mechanisms is crucial to the development and understanding of most theories of personality and can be considered to be a core concept of some theories, such as that of Sigmund Freud. Defense mechanism theory will be examined in two distinct, yet interrelated areas — those theories that view defense mechanisms as having adaptive functions that make a positive contribution to mental health and those that regard any use of defense mechanisms as unhealthy and define openness to feelings and experience as a prime criterion of mental health.

Concepts about defense mechanisms were originally formulated within the framework of psychoanalytic theory, an approach that focused more on mental illness than on mental health (Maddi, 1972; Munroe, 1955). Munroe (1955) suggested that "It is not accidental that ego devices which approach the normal or even the ideal are still called 'defenses.' The term arises from pathology, from the fact that psychoanalysis has developed a general theory of human psychology based upon principles discovered

largely through investigations of the distortions of mental illness" (p. 94).

DEFENSE MECHANISMS AS PROMOTORS OF MENTAL HEALTH

Literature on defense mechanism theory, subsequent to that which was developed in a psychoanalytic framework, frequently incorporated a comparison between adaptive and maladaptive components of such mechanisms (Hoffer, 1954; Laughlin, 1970; Sawrey & Telford, 1971). This approach provided a more extensive focus on the healthy use of mechanisms of defense. Basic to these writings are the concepts that defense mechanisms are present, to some degree, in all people and that they can be constructive, adaptive forces that contribute to emotional well-being. In their description of an effective system of defense, for example, Brammer and Shostrom (1968) introduced the model of an ideal outer defense system. The latter has qualities of permeability and flexibility and maintains a balance between a rigid system and one that is so

loosely structured that it changes frequently and indiscriminately. Sawrey and Telford (1971), supporting the concept of the adaptive qualities of defense mechanisms, referred to them as patterns of adjustment, as a type of problem solving behaviour, while Laughlin (1970) noted that when the operation of the ego defenses is in proper balance "it is constructively defensive and contributions are made to emotional health and to individual growth and maturity" (p. 9).

More specific discussion of how defense mechanisms operate in their adaptive role is also provided in the literature. A major focus is placed on the use of defensive efforts as a protection against intolerable levels of anxiety (Harrison, 1970; Sawrey & Telford, 1971). In their analysis of this phenomenon, Sawrey and Telford (1971) differentiated between low anxiety levels (which can motivate learning, support creative effort and promote feelings of security) and high anxiety levels (in which panic and behavioural disorganization occur). The latter, if left to follow their natural course, could result in a neurotic or psychotic behaviour pattern. The appropriate use of defense prevents this development. Intrapsychic defense processes can, therefore, be viewed as "providing a useful emotional 'safety valve.' Internal pressures which are otherwise intolerable thereby can be absorbed, neutralized, or given a consciously acceptable outward expression" (Laughlin, 1970, p. 9).

Other references to the positive value of defense mechanisms are not as detailed as those described above. However, there is agreement that the adaptive contribution of mechanisms of defense is closely tied in with the maintenance of an adequate self-concept, the provision of stability and continuity, the diminution of feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, and with the maintenance of more balanced, satisfying relationships with others (Harrison, 1970; Sawrey & Telford, 1971).

OPENNESS TO SELF AND OTHERS: CRITERION OF GOOD ADJUSTMENT

In opposition to the above stand is the body of information that regards openness to all experience as a prime criterion of mental health. Some authors (Jourard, 1963; Rogers, 1961) are very specific in their views of openness as a mark of good adjustment and are in agreement that use of defense mechanisms, to any degree, is undesirable, self-alienating, and restrictive to emotional growth. To Jourard (1963), the "mechanisms of defense might just as legitimately be called mechanisms for increasing self-alienation or methods of evading growth — for such are their consequences" (p. 198). They function in opposition to the real self which prevails in the healthy personality. Defined as the

"process of flow of spontaneous inner experience" (Jourard, 1963, p. 185), the real self is manifested by authentic self-disclosure to others. Although Jourard (1963) recognized that all people respond defensively to threat sometimes, he regarded defensive operations as inconsistent with the nature of the real self and as symptomatic of a weak ego.

A similar approach can be found in Rogers' (1961) description of the fully functioning person. Spontaneity and openness to experience are two primary characteristics of this person, and if he is completely open to experience "every stimulus — whether originating within the organism or in the environment — would be freely relayed through the nervous system without being distorted by any defense mechanism" (p. 187). Openness to experience is regarded by Rogers (1961) as the polar opposite of defensiveness and as completely incongruent with it. Although he recognized the existence of defensive operations (primarily in the form of denial and distortion), he viewed them as restrictive, disabling forces because they "lead to a rejection of thought, feelings or actions that truly express inherent potentialities" (Maddi, 1972, p. 96).

Other authors are also clear in their views of openness to oneself and others as a required component of healthy emotional functioning. Hart, Corriere and Binder (1975), for example, postulate that as children individuals are taught that defending and holding in are the way to live. In explaining their approach to therapy, emphasis is placed on the importance of experiencing "feeling moments," defined as a "critical choice between feeling and nonfeeling" (Hart *et al.*, 1975, p. 24). Defenses, in this context, are clearly viewed as negative forces that reduce and deter feeling expression. In contrast to Hart and his associates, some authors place more stress on the effects of openness as it occurs in interaction with other people. Generally, this approach elaborates on the relationship between openness with others and healthy personality. This viewpoint is thoroughly treated in Jourard's (1964) writings on self-disclosure. Mowrer (1964), in obvious agreement with Jourard (1964) on this issue, refers to honest self-revelation as the "royal road to psychological freedom and personal wholeness" (p. 225). He suggests that openness with significant people in one's life can be regarded "not only as the most effective means of 'treatment', but also as the best form of prevention, as a way of life" (Mowrer, 1964, p. 90).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

Thus far, the literature has been reviewed that represents polar stands on the issue of defense mechanisms — theories that view such mechanisms as adaptive devices that promote

good mental health versus those that define openness and absence of defense as criteria of a positive life adjustment. It seems obvious that the controversy has many implications for the counsellor. His view of defense mechanisms will clearly bear a close relationship to his approach to counselling, i.e., whether he regards them as devices to be valued and maintained, altered or destroyed. This discussion will be restricted to three areas pertinent to the issue: (1) a consideration of the openness of the counsellor in the counselling relationship, (2) a view of openness as a form of defense; and (3) the issue of dealing with defenses as part of the therapeutic process. For the purpose of this paper, the terms "counselling" and "therapy", "counsellor" and "therapist" will be used interchangeably.

The Openness of the Counsellor

There would likely be few counsellors who would agree that a high level of defensive functioning is a desirable client trait. It seems to be a common assumption that, in order to create an atmosphere that will promote emotional growth, a certain level of trust and openness needs to develop in the client in his relationship to the counsellor. Defenses, if not totally relinquished, need to be altered and defensive behaviour needs to be decreased. Moves toward openness, authenticity, and freedom of emotional response by the client appear to be implicitly valued by the counsellor. But what about openness on the part of the therapist? Do we as counsellors adhere to separate value systems for ourselves and our clients? Do we establish a differential set of rules for the ways in which we operate in relationships when we assume a counsellor "role"?

Jourard (1964) refers to the tendency of counsellors and clients to avoid being spontaneous and open with each other as "resistance to being," a phenomenon which evolves when one chooses his behaviour on the basis of the effect he thinks it will have on the other. Corlis and Rabe (1969), in defining authentic and open therapist responses as essential to the therapeutic encounter, suggest that if "the therapist feels and behaves with consistent sameness, it is time to ask himself what the permanent fiction is to which he is responding with machinelike predictability" (p. 27). What, however, is the value of the counsellor's spontaneously disclosing his feelings and reactions during a session? What impact will it have on the client? Jourard (1964) is of the opinion that it will provide an appropriate role-model for the client, will aid him in developing more trust and, generally, will promote his emotional growth. The fringe benefit for the therapist is that such a therapeutic relationship can change him as much as it does the client.

While the writer favors a therapeutic at-

mosphere consistent with the one described by Jourard (1964), it seems appropriate to question whether spontaneity and openness can be carried too far. Corlis and Rabe (1969) are critical of the therapist who is indiscriminately open, who "in the name of truth will tell all. He will tell how he feels, how he reacts, what he sees or what preoccupies him. Note, if you will, that all this openness is developed in the name of a principle" (p. 50). The critical issue, in the writer's opinion, is less related to the degree of counsellor openness and more related to the timing, nature, and appropriateness of the response. Attention to the client's process in each moment is the key issue, and spontaneous counsellor responses should not be permitted to disrupt, sabotage, or interfere with this process but should unquestionably serve to facilitate it.

Openness as a Defense

What are the consequences for the client when the counsellor places a strong implicit or explicit value on openness in the therapeutic relationship? What happens when the client moves in the direction of a more open behaviour only because he senses that openness is expected and highly valued by the counsellor?

Literature on defense mechanisms theory makes it clear that defensive behaviour develops for good psychological reasons, basically because individuals need defenses to survive. It is, therefore, difficult to perceive the relinquishment of defenses as occurring easily, without some emotional struggle. It is the writer's contention that if this relinquishment is not consistent with the client's own process (i.e., if external pressure to give up defensive modes of operation is exerted before the client is ready), one set of defenses can easily replace another. In this context, openness can fill this emotional bill and, therefore, be viewed as a form of defense. Indiscriminate openness, for example, can serve as a method of distancing oneself from others and, thereby, defend the individual from intimate interpersonal involvement. Hart *et al.* provide a good example of this type of defense substitution in their criticism of Primal Therapy in which clients learn "a new secondary defense system where they *try* to be in pain and *try* to be out of control" (p. 398). In relation to this discussion it would seem that trying to be open and spontaneous poses an interesting paradox. The very act of trying would make the goal unattainable.

Dealing with Defenses in Counselling

There seems to be general agreement among counsellors that a client's growth is reflected, in part, in his ability to make more choices for himself, to assume increased responsibility for his actions. Essentially, he becomes able to take

greater charge of his life. Can this be accomplished within the framework of a psychoanalytic view of defense mechanisms? Can a client be assisted to deal with automatic, unconscious devices that are expressed in defensive behaviour, that are limiting his capacity to choose? In order to discuss this issue it seems appropriate to question how defenses can be used as a constructive part of the therapeutic process. Should attempts be made by the counsellor to destroy the client's defense system, to circumvent it, or are there other ways of handling it?

Hart *et al.* define a defense as being the opposite of a moment of choice and maintain that "people want to get around their defenses" (p. 28). In the writer's opinion, assisting the client to focus on the nature and impact of his defense system is one of the most crucial components of the therapeutic process. How can this be done? There are many opportunities in counselling sessions to accomplish this. If the client can be helped to experience his defenses they will emerge from the realm of the unknown, and he will be in a better position to make decisions around them. Even if he elects to maintain them, this is now accomplished on the level of a conscious, deliberate choice. Confrontation of defenses, in this context, provides an avenue for developing awareness of their purpose, for experiencing their impact and for ultimately moving beyond them to a more open, authentic mode functioning. However, the writer thinks the latter becomes possible only when it develops out of the client's choice and he is simultaneously aware that he has the clearcut option to maintain his defenses for as long as he chooses.

SUMMARY

Moving toward increased openness and spontaneity is, in the writer's opinion, an integral and exciting part of the emotional growth process. However, it is believed that there is room for defensive behaviour in this process. As counsellors we run into difficulty when we place definitive value judgments of good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, adaptive or maladaptive on the use of defensive devices as a whole. Whether defenses are

functional or non-functional depends upon how they are being used and whether their contribution to psychological functioning is constructive or destructive (Laughlin, 1970). It seems essential that, as part of his development, the client should have room for making choices around how he will use his defenses. The writer's viewpoint is that there is room for defensive processes in the therapeutic procedure and in normal personality functioning. Before we, as counsellors, set about attempting to modify these processes, before we chip away at defenses, we need to be aware of the basis for their existence, the nature of their function and the purposes they serve.

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