



Differential Impact Of Mature, Neurotic, And Immature Defence Mechanisms On Psychological Flexibility Among Young Adults

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Abstract

Defence mechanism is an unconscious psychological process used by individuals to cope with stress, anxiety, or other uncomfortable emotions. These mechanisms play an important role in shaping how people adapt to challenges and regulate their thoughts and emotions. Psychological flexibility is the ability to adapt to changing situations and remain open to experiences even in the presence of adversities. The present study aims to examine the differential impact of mature, neurotic, and immature defence mechanisms on psychological flexibility among young adults.

The study is conducted on a sample of 200 young adults. Standardised psychological tools are used to assess their defence mechanism and level of psychological flexibility. Defence mechanisms are major in three categories: mature, neurotic and immature. Psychological flexibility was assessed using self report scale.

The result of the study revealed that the immature defence mechanism correlated positively with psychological inflexibility, indicating that young adults who used immature defence mechanisms had low psychological flexibility. Whereas mature defence mechanisms correlated with healthy psychological functioning and adaptability. Neurotic defence correlated moderately with psychological flexibility. Overall, the study sheds light on the significance of defence mechanisms concerning psychological flexibility. It offers useful insight for psychological research and mental health intervention in young adults.

Key Words:

defence mechanisms, mature defence mechanisms, neurotic defence mechanisms, immature defence mechanisms, psychological flexibility, young adults

I. INTRODUCTION

Human beings use various psychological processes to manage stress and internal conflicts. One of the most important processes is the defence mechanism. These are unconscious strategies that protect individuals from anxiety and emotional stress. According to George E. Vaillant, these defence mechanisms fall into one of three classes depending on their maturity level. The mature defence mechanisms are the healthiest, the immature defence mechanisms are the most pathological, and the neurotic defence mechanisms fall in between.

In recent years, psychological flexibility has become a topic of increasing interest within the field of psychology. It was introduced by Steven C. Hayes. Psychological flexibility refers to the ability to adapt

to changing situations, regulate emotions, and behave in accordance with personal values. People with high psychological flexibility tend to have better psychological well-being, and people with low psychological flexibility are more prone to experiencing stress and psychological problems.

Young adulthood is a complex developmental stage during which individuals are often faced with numerous academic, social and emotional challenges. The purpose of this study was to investigate how young adults use defence mechanisms and whether psychological flexibility is associated with these mechanisms.

There is little research about the different effects of mature, neurotic, and immature defence mechanisms on psychological flexibility in young adults. This study aimed to clarify the effects of different defence mechanisms on psychological flexibility.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Conceptualisation of Defence Mechanisms

Defence mechanisms are unconscious psychological processes that helps individual to cope with feelings of anxiety, conflict, or stress. As ego-processes that constitute a spectrum of reaction-forming distortion, Vaillant (1994) describes these defence mechanisms as ranging from mild, adaptive and integrated, to primitive and maladaptive and compulsive. Empirically validated by Vaillant, Bond, and Vaillant (1986), defence mechanisms are commonly classified into three classes of defence mechanisms consisting of mature defence mechanisms (for example, sublimation, humour, and suppression); neurotic defence mechanisms (for example, repression and reaction formation); and immature defence mechanisms (for example, denial, projection, and splitting).

Bond, Gardner, Christian, and Sigal (1983) and Bond (2004) identified the defence styles using the Defence Style Questionnaire. They found that when individuals rated their own defence mechanisms, the mechanisms clustered into three self-constituted defence styles with different implications for personality and psychopathology. Vaillant (1994), and Vaillant et al (1986) found that mature defence mechanisms enhance psychological coherence and adaptation, whereas immature and neurotic defences tend to involve more distortions of reality and less psychological integration. The current study is based on Vaillant's theory regarding mature, neurotic, and immature defence mechanisms and applies them to defence styles of young adults.

2.2 Developmental Patterns and Psychological Outcomes of Defence Mechanisms

Defence-style development across the lifespan suggests that more mature defences will increase and immature defences will decrease with age and experience. Cramer (2002, 2007) found that adults of younger age tended to use more mature defences than children and adolescents of late ages, suggesting defence maturity develops normatively as part of psychological maturation. Eriksen et al. (2013) studied the changes of coping and defence mechanisms across adulthood.

Healthy mature defence mechanisms are associated with better psychological adjustment and resilience. For example, Bond (2019) found that young adults who used more mature defences had better psychological adjustment to stressful events. In another study, Jun et al. (2018) discovered that young adults in high pressure situations such as military service had better psychological adjustment when they used more mature defences. On the other hand, Vaillant et al. (1986) and Bond and Vaillant (1986) found that individuals who used neurotic and immature defence mechanisms generally had more psychopathology and a greater number of psychiatric diagnoses. Rice et al. (2017) found that the severity of DSM-5 symptoms was highly correlated with particular defence configurations that primarily involved more primitive defences. Feldman et al. (2024) and Drapeau et al. (2011) found that a rigid use of immature defences was highly correlated with the severity of depression, anxiety and total symptoms, suggesting that defence style is a transdiagnostic marker for risk.

2.3 Defence Mechanisms and Emotional Regulation

Recent studies have contextualised defence mechanisms within emotion-regulation and attachment frameworks. Singh and Kaur (2022) found that mature defence mechanisms had positive correlations with adaptive emotion regulation and that immature defence mechanisms had positive correlations with avoidant and maladaptive emotion regulation. Martino et al. (2023) found that emotion regulation mediated the relationship between defence mechanisms and resilience, therefore defence mechanisms may work through emotion regulation when influencing resilience.

Malik, Wells, and Wittkowski (2018) found that that insecure attachment predicts the use of less adaptive defence mechanisms, which mediate the relation between attachment and poorer adolescent mental health. This study suggests that defence mechanisms are socially embedded and developmental. Békés and Perry (2021) and Békés et al. (2022, 2024) further advanced theory and research on defence mechanisms, documenting systematic relations between defence styles and compassion fatigue,

depression, and anxiety disorders in a range of high risk and vulnerable populations. Defences are emotional and interpersonal processes. These studies suggest that defences are particularly salient for young adults.

2.4 Psychological Flexibility and Mental Health

Psychological flexibility, a central construct in contemporary contextual-behavioural psychology, is defined as the tendency to experience and observe the present moment, with corresponding adaptability and persistence/ change in behavior in correspondence with personally valued life actions (Hayes et al., 2012). The work of Bond, Hayes, and Barnes-Holmes (2006) suggests that psychological flexibility is important for effective organizational and clinical behavior.

Fledderus et al. (2013) found, using a randomized controlled trial design, that an intervention focusing on increasing psychological flexibility (using an ACT framework) significantly lowered psychological distress for a sample of adults from the general population. Hayes et al. (2012) also viewed psychological flexibility as a key factor for health and functioning, arguing that all types of psychopathologies were a threat to health because they undermined this factor. Adamowicz et al. (2023) and Westhoff et al. (2024) investigated a sample of young adults and established that higher psychological flexibility predicted better global health, lower symptom severity and positive cognitive-affective experiences in everyday life. Kashdan et al. (2021) researched adults experiencing varying levels of chronic stress and found that greater psychological inflexibility was associated with higher reported stress and lower reported optimism — indicating that being flexible in relation to internal and external demands is important for psychological health. Guerrini Usubini et al. (2021) and Singh (2025) explored the association between psychological flexibility and well-being in young adults and established that higher psychological flexibility was associated with greater psychological well-being and lower reported levels of loneliness.

2.5 Research Gap

The simultaneous development of defence mechanism theory and psychological flexibility research has hardly been investigated, and only a few studies explicitly explored how mature, neurotic and immature defence mechanisms together predict psychological flexibility in the same sample. Most of the defence style studies investigate the links between defence styles and psychopathology, attachment, or even compassion fatigue (Békés et al., 2022, 2024; Malik et al., 2018), while the research on psychological flexibility almost always refer to interventions that implement the principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and mostly address the level of well-being (Hayes et al., 2012; Fledderus et al., 2013).

Vaillant (1994), Vaillant et al. (1986) defined mature defences as ego adaptation indicators and more recently Bond (2019), Jun et al. (2018), Feldman et al. (2024) demonstrated that mature defences are related to psychological adjustment and well-being while immature defence mechanisms are related to psychological distress. Conversely, Hayes et al. (2012), Westhoff et al. (2024), and Adamowicz et al. (2023) reported that higher psychological flexibility is related to better mental health in young adults. Based on Freudian defence theories, it is hypothesised that mature defence mechanisms are positively related to psychological flexibility whereas neurotic and immature defence mechanisms are negatively related to psychological flexibility. The empirical research in this field presents many gaps. Among them, there is an urgent need to fill the gap of empirical research by explaining how these three defence mechanisms affect psychological flexibility among young adults.

Defence mechanisms have been studied extensively in psychopathology but little is known about their impact on psychological flexibility in young adults. The current study is the first empirical study to look into the impact of mature, neurotic and immature defence mechanisms on psychological flexibility in young adults, hence bridging the literature gap between the classical defence mechanism theory and the contemporary contextual-behavioral theories. This study sought to explore the impact of defence mechanisms on psychological flexibility with the ultimate aim of aiding in the development of effective psychodynamic and ACT-informed interventions.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To examine the relationship between mature defence mechanism and psychological flexibility among young adults.
- To examine the relationship between neurotic defence mechanism and psychological flexibility among young adults.
- To examine the relationship between immature defence mechanism and psychological flexibility among young adults.

- To determine the differential impact of mature, neurotic and immature defence mechanism on psychological flexibilities.

IV. HYPOTHESIS

- There will be a significant relationship between defence mechanisms and psychological flexibility among young adults.
- Mature defence mechanisms will positively associate with psychological flexibility among young adults.
- Neurotic defence mechanisms will show a moderate relationship with psychological flexibility among young adults.
- Immature defence mechanisms will negatively associated with psychological flexibility among young adults.
- Mature, neurotic, and immature defence mechanisms will significantly predict psychological flexibility among young adults.

V. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

In this study, a quantitative correlational research design was used. It allows the researchers to investigate the degree and the direction of association between variables without manipulating them. The present study aims to examine the relationship between different types of defence mechanism and psychological flexibility among young adults. The study specifically aims to examine how mature, common neurotic and immature defence mechanism influence the level of psychological flexibility.

5.2 Participants

The Study consisted of young adults aged between 18 and 30 years. The participants were selected using convenient sampling techniques.

Sample Size: 200 (as required for correlational research)

Inclusion Criteria: Any individual who is aged between 18 and 30 years

Exclusion Criteria:

Any individual with a diagnosis of psychological disorders (self-reported)

Student unable to understand the questionnaire items.

5.3 Instruments

The following standardised psychological instruments were used to collect data.

Defence Style Questionnaire (DSQ40)

The DSQ 40 was developed by George Andrew, M. Singh, and Michael Bond (1993). It was used to assess defence mechanisms. The questionnaire consists of 40 items designed to measure different dense styles. The DSQ categorised defence mechanisms into mature, neurotic, and immature defence styles. Participants respond to each item using likert-type scale indicating their level of agreement. The instrument has demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity in previous psychological research.

Acceptance and action Questionnaire-II(AAQ-II)

The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II(AAQ-II) was developed by Frank W. Bond and colleagues(2011). It was used to assess psychological flexibility. It has 7 items that measure psychological flexibility. Higher scores on AAQ-II indicate greater psychological inflexibility, whereas lower scores indicate greater psychological flexibility. The scale has shown good psychometric properties and has been widely used in psychological research.

5.4 Procedures

The Data was collected by self-reported questionnaires. Participants were approached through academic institutions and were informed about the purpose of the study. A consent form was given to each participant. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. It will only be used for study purposes. They were also instructed to read each statement carefully and respond honestly, based on their personal experiences.

5.5 Statistical Analysis

The Data was analysed using suitable statistical methods. Mean and standard deviation were calculated to understand the descriptive features of the variables. Pearson's correlation and multiple Regression analysis were used to examine the relationship and predictive impact of defence mechanisms on psychological flexibility.

VI.RESULTS AND TABLES

Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Mature Defence Mechanism	5.86	1.38	200
Neurotic Defence Mechanism	5.57	1.40	200
Immature Defence Mechanism	5.09	1.26	200
Psychological Flexibility	27.70	9.48	200

Table 1

Interpretation: The mean scores show moderate levels of all three defence mechanisms among participants. Psychological Flexibility also showed moderate variability.

Correlational Analysis

Variables	1	2	3	4
Mature Defence	1			
Neurotic Defence	-	1		
Immature Defence	-	-	1	
Psychological Flexibility	.151*	.312**	.444**	1

Table 2 (*p<.05, **p<.01)

Interpretation

Mature defence mechanisms showed a significant but weak positive correlation with psychological flexibility.($r = .151, p < .05$)

Neurotic defence mechanism showed moderate a positive correlation.($r = .312, p < .01$)

Immature defence mechanism showed up positive correlations.($r = .444, p < .01$)

This indicates that all three types of defence mechanisms are significantly associated with psychological flexibility, where immature defence showing the strongest relationship. (The higher scores in AAQ-II indicate psychological inflexibility rather than flexibility. Thus, the positive correlation shows that immature defences are associated with greater psychological inflexibility, which is theoretically consistent.)

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: Psychological Flexibility

Coefficients

Predictor	B	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	12.691	-	4.361	.000
Mature Defence	-1.423	-0.207	-2.443	.015
Neurotic Defence	0.917	0.136	1.486	.139
Immature Defence	3.580	0.474	5.503	.000

Interpretation

The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 18.591, p < .001$)

Defence mechanism explained 22.2% of the variance in psychological flexibility

Key Finding

Immature defence mechanisms were the strongest positive predictor ($\beta = .474, p < .001$)

Mature defence mechanisms showed a significant negative impact ($\beta = -.207, p < .05$)

Neurotic defence mechanisms were not a significant predictor ($p > .05$)

Summary of Overall Finding

Results showed that all three defence mechanism types (mature, neurotic, and immature) were significantly related to psychological flexibility. The immature defence mechanisms most positively correlated and were the only significant predictors of flexible psychological functioning. Neurotic defences showed a moderate positive relation but were not significant predictors of psychological

flexibility in the regression model. A significant inverse predictive effect was present for mature defence mechanisms.

Overall, the regression analysis indicated that defence mechanisms collectively accounted for a meaningful proportion of variance in psychological flexibility, highlighting their important role in understanding adaptive and maladaptive coping processes among young adults.

VII. DISCUSSION

Interpretation Within Theoretical Frameworks and Prior Research

There is convergence between psychodynamic and contextual-behavioural models. George Eman Vaillant et al. (1986) proposed a hierarchy of defences ranging from immature to mature. Upon studying this hierarchy, I was struck by how closely its levels map onto the psychological flexibility continuum proposed by Steven C. Hayes et al. (2012). Mature defences allow greater flexibility, whereas immature defences, as a class (distortions and avoidance), severely limit the capacity to function adaptively.

This study advances the field by identifying the salience of immature defences and their associations with cognitive distortion and behavioral avoidance and their impact on defensive processes in young adulthood, building on the works of Christopher Bond (2019) and Phebe Cramer (2002, 2007). This study therefore validates transdiagnostic risk factor theories of young adulthood. These findings are consistent with prior work (Bond & Vaillant, 1986; Rice et al., 2017; Jun et al., 2018). The decreased predictive utility of mature defenses in regression to defended activity is also likely a result of their being overridden by the more intense maladaptive defense styles, supporting the concept of defensive flexibility introduced by Drapeau et al. (2011).

Clinical and Practical Implications

Psychological flexibility was assessed using the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II, where higher scores indicate greater psychological inflexibility. Defense style assessment with the DSQ-40 is useful for intervention planning. High levels of immature defense mechanisms might suggest that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Fledderus et al., 2013) would be appropriate. A sequential intervention approach combining psychodynamic restructuring and aspects of ACT could be considered particularly effective in a university population. Early assessment of defense mechanisms during first year of university studies might assist in risk stratification and the 22% explained variance in consumption offers a proof of concept for defense–flexibility assessment.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between mature, neurotic, and immature defence mechanisms and psychological flexibility in young adults. The results showed that mature defence mechanisms were significantly and positively correlated with psychological flexibility, whereas immature defence mechanisms were significantly and negatively correlated with psychological flexibility. Neurotic defence mechanisms were moderately correlated with psychological flexibility, suggesting partial adaptiveness. Overall, the study highlights that the type of defence mechanism plays a significant role in shaping an individual's ability to adapt and manage psychological experiences. Promoting mature defence mechanisms may enhance psychological flexibility and contribute to better mental health outcomes.

Despite some limitations, the study makes a significant contribution to the research literature and analyze the need for including adaptive coping skills in any future psychological intervention for young others.

IX. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The current study has several limitations. First, the sample in this study consisted only of young adults, therefore, it is unclear whether similar effects would be observed in other age groups. Second, the current study used self-report measures, which are susceptible to response biases and social desirability effects. Third, the sample size of the current study was relatively small.

Although several previous studies have examined the interplay between defence mechanisms and psychological flexibility, none of them have investigated the longitudinal development of this relationship in a prospective manner. A further restriction of previous studies is that they relied on cross-sectional designs, which means that the relationship between defence mechanisms and psychological flexibility can only be considered associatively. Consequently, no causal interpretations regarding this relationship are possible. In addition, variables such as personality, cultural background and stress factors were not regulated in these studies, which could have influenced the research results.

X. SUGGESTION FOR THE FUTURE RESEARCHES

A clear future direction of research would involve using larger samples of participants of a variety of ages and from different cultures. It is also important to adopt a longitudinal design to further elucidate the temporal relationships between defence processes and psychological flexibility.

Future studies will need to investigate the impact of other psychological variables that might influence adaptive functioning such as personality traits, coping strategies and emotional regulation. The use of mixed methods, including qualitative approaches, could also provide deeper insight into individual coping processes.

An intervention-based research design can be used to examine whether enhancing mature defence mechanisms via psychological intervention has a positive effect on psychological flexibility and mental health.

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