USE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES AMONG STUDENT TEACHERS IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

The study investigated the use of psychological defense mechanisms in academic activities among student teachers in Nigerian educational system. Three hypotheses were formulated to carry out the study, and they were all tested at 0.05 level of significance. The study involved the use of a structured questionnaire in eliciting information that aided data collection. A Sample size of two hundred (200) NCE 2 students was randomly selected for the study. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The result revealed that a significant relationship exists between projection and denial defenses. In same vein, denial and identification correlated significantly despite the fact that mean scores showed that students use more of identification than denial. A significant correlation was as well found between projection and identification. It was therefore recommended that students who have developed the habit of using primitive defense mechanism should be considered for special psychological needs to help them develop positive personality profile and obtain better success in their academics.

Students indulge in the use of defense mechanisms in order to cover up their inadequacies. Success in school depends on the ability of the learners to effectively carry out the academic activities that would help them to meet up with their specific academic goals and aspirations (Negiri, 2014). Their failure to meet up with these academic requirements is a factor of defense mechanism. Their inability to function adequately in attending lectures, completing assignments, studying for examinations, and attending practical sessions, are encapsulated in several defense mechanisms aimed at exonerating them from blame, public and individual disapproval. They opt out of any form of taking or accepting responsibility due to their failure and inability.

Psychological defense mechanisms are means of protecting oneself from accepting personal failures and getting set to make amend for better performance in the future. Defense mechanisms are cognitive processes that function to protect the individual from excessive anxiety or other negative emotions. They also protect a person from loss of self-esteem and in the extreme, loss of self-integration (Cramer, 2009). Negiri (2014) defined Psychological defense mechanism as a set of actions aimed at reducing or eliminating any changes threatening individual’s biopsychic integrity and stability (Sokolova, 2011). They can both contribute to personal development and stability, as well as lead to disorganization and maladjustment, depending on their internal structure, dynamics, cultural and symbolic level, social mediation and maturity.

The use of defensive mechanism can be likened to or associated with individual behaviour, mode of thoughts, on how to better one’s life or protect oneself, how people distance themselves from being fully aware of unpleasant thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Grohol, 2013). Defense mechanism emanates from social engagement of individuals, family functions and roles. There is often a conflict in the processes of carrying out functions at family level. Individuals’ inability to demonstrate personal capacity in exercising or executing certain functions can also give rise to defense mechanism. Individuals use defense mechanisms in several issues of life especially when there is lack of self-confidence or trust in personal capacity in executing certain responsibilities. Students’ application of defense mechanisms in several areas of academic work or endeavour depicts protection against personal inadequacies, incompetency, and unorganized life style, which in essence exerts its influence on the individual student.
Defense mechanism can be linked to certain personality traits such as attribution and Locus of standing of individuals. These personality types are linked with the way individuals’ views things that happen around them and events that occur in their lives. The way individuals utilize psychological defense mechanism depends on their personality traits (Cramer and Jones, 2007). Consequently, the use of mature defenses is found to be associated with positive personality characteristics, such as empathy, higher self-esteem, an internal locus of control, competence, self-confidence, outgoingness and a secure attachment style. In contrast, the use of immature defenses is associated with indications of difficulty, such as irresponsibility, self-centeredness, unclear “fuzzy” thinking, and anxiety (Cramer, 2002; Cramer & Tracy, 2005; Davidson, Macgregor, et al., 2004; Hibbard et al., 2000; Whitty, 2003).

In the midst of several instances of academic failures and underachievement, students’ tend to rely on defensive mechanism to justify their inadequacies in poor academic achievement. They indulge in this according to Cramer and Jones (2007), in order to preserve their person from unnecessary humiliation and dissolutions. The issue of personal ego becomes visible. In order to defend their ego, they involve themselves in the use of defense mechanism. In this case, they prefer their ego to their academic success. They therefore, indulge in the use of mechanisms that will defend their ego. Ego defense mechanism has been defined as unconscious resources used by the ego to reduce conflict between the id and superego (Frued, 1937). They provide a reflection of how an individual deals with conflict and stress. It is in order to avoid shame and disgrace or the trauma associated with the inability to achieve certain degree of success that individuals involve themselves in the utilization of defense mechanism. In other occasion, some individuals get into the use of defense mechanism due to the fact that their integrity or personal values are under threat by certain environmental stimuli. It is at this point that they want to take action in order to protect their dignity and ego. Since defense mechanisms are unconscious mental operations which individuals involve themselves unconsciously, there is need then to consider how students utilize these mechanisms to achieve some academic objectives or how they encounter problems or face challenges that arise in the course of their academic engagement. Their action is intended to resolve certain level of conflict that arises as a result of tempering with their much cherished ego and dignity (Parekh. Majeed, Khan, Khalid, Khwaja, Khalid, Khan, Rizqui, and Jehan (2010).

Associating personality traits with defensive mechanisms is a proven relationship that influences the action of individuals in time of challenges. When individuals experience distress in academics for instance, the personality trait of that person tends to influence the reaction of the individual towards the situation. Parekh and his colleagues reported that studies conducted on personality trait influence or its relationship with defense mechanisms have found a prevalence of ego defense mechanism being employed by medical students in reaction to situations as anxiety and depression. According to Phanueuf (n.d), defense mechanisms emanated from the conflict between two personalities which are the id and the superego. This conflict emerged from the fact that superego represents an individual’s moral state, where good and evil or punishment and reward are decided. While the superego moves an individual upwards especially when social constraints, pressures, and guilt are present, the id brings the individual downwards thereby bringing the two into constant conflict (Phanueuf, n.d). Hence every defense mechanism demonstrates specific features and behaviours associated with it. Phaneuf further stated that projection tends to display a personality that is sensitive, inability to forgive others mistakes, negative interpretation of events or behavior of others, unjustified suspicion towards others and overemphasizing one’s rights and self-importance.

In essence, studies have indicated that students use various defense mechanisms during their study time to cover up either their weaknesses or liabilities (Parekh, Majeed, Khan, Khalid, Khwaja, Khalid, Khan, Rizqui, and Jehan, 2010, Shaw, Wedding, Zeldow, Diehl, 2006). In 1993, Andrew in his questionnaire of defense styles grouped the defense styles into three major categories of Mature, neurotic, and immature. Mature category involves sublimation, humor, anticipation, and suppression. Neurotic
involves undoing, pseudo – altruism, idealization, reaction, and formation; while immature involves projection, passive aggression, acting out, isolation, devaluation, autistic fantasy, denial, displacement, dissociation, splitting, rationalization and somatization. Neurotic defenses are common in healthy individuals between the ages of three and 90, in neurotic disorders, and in the mastery of acute stress. These defense mechanisms are used to change private feelings, or the expression of instincts. Immature defenses can usually be seen in healthy individuals before the age of 15. The defense is used to relieve stress due to the threat of interpersonal intimacy, or the threat of the loss of interpersonal intimacy. The defenses change as the person matures, or as interpersonal relationships improve (Shaw, Wedding, Zeldow, Diehl, 2006).

Mature defenses are found in individuals who are between the ages of 12 to 90. These defenses allow the individual to integrate reality, interpersonal relationships, and private feelings. Under stress, though, users of mature defenses may revert back to a less mature form (Patrick, 2005). In accordance with Phaneuf’s assertion, defense mechanisms are prevalent in our lives, because they emanate from conflicts which have to do with social engagements, family relationships, problems that have to do with individual’s move towards maturity, as well as academic challenges. In order to enhance an individual’s life endeavours and continuity, when issues of worries, inadequacies and feelings occurs, defense mechanisms become very practical in order to protect one from unnecessary criticism from others. Students have been found utilizing them in different dimensions as the case may be. Shamsalldin, Bahri, and Yaghoubi (2014), in their study found a significant positive correlation between all the dimensions of perfectionism and immature defense mechanism as well as neurotic defense mechanism. Also, a negative correlation was found between mature defense mechanism and narcissism.

It has become very important to understudy the personality traits that can enhance adequate academic progress among College student teachers, because it is whatever skills they acquire while in College that they would transmit to the students they would teach. Shamsalldin, Bahri, and Yaghoubi (2014), assert that since the wide range of university students consist of a community which is considered as very vital and influential set of people, paying attention to their mental and physical health remains very vital. The attention given to them is a crucial aspect of their motivational process which in turn helps them to remain resolute in achieving academic objectives. It is also a source through which they can be helped to moderate their behaviours for good; to avoid unnecessary emergency breakdown in health especially mental health which is very fragile.

Although defense mechanisms are said to differ in their functions, one thing very unique about them is that their functions are similar (Cramer, 2009). In the area of academic activities, they are utilized by students when they fail in their responsibility to accomplish their academic tasks. For instance, if a student fails to attend lectures, carry out assignment, or deficient in other areas of academic activities, he resorts to the use of defense mechanisms in defense of their failure in to justify his inadequacies. Defense mechanism like projection may be an effective tool in their disposal to cover up their weakness and abilities to meet up with the challenges of the time. According to Cramer (2009), defense mechanisms are also part of normal life and everyday functioning. They aid individuals to manage stress, disappointment, and strong negative emotions. In essence, students utilize these mechanisms to defend negative emotions that emanate from academic challenges in the face of their inability to accomplish the demands of academics. In most cases, individuals do not use the entire defense at a time but only use them as the situation arises. In the words of Cramer (2006), one person does not use all of these defenses, and not all defenses are used by all people. Sometimes, grouping individual defenses into clusters becomes necessary in order to ascertain the actual areas or nature of the mechanisms being. This grouping may be based on the relative maturity or immaturity of the defense, where maturity is determined both by theoretical and clinical considerations or it can also be based on developmental considerations and the complexity of cognitive operations involved in the defense. It is in the light of this that this study intends
to consider the use of these psychological defense mechanisms among students covering projection, denial, and identification.

Research has indicated the use of these psychological defenses among students. The study of Cramer and Gaul in Cramer (2009) showed that children in the lack of success group increased their use of denial and projection mechanisms; while the negative effect aroused by the experimental intervention increased the use of these defenses. In contrast, children in the success group increased their use of Identification. In essence, this implies that once students experience success their use of any of these defenses increases. There is indication that student’s application of defense mechanisms is influenced or fueled by the events that occur around them as well as their personality types. In the face of stressful events, their use of various defenses increases. In the study of Sandstrom & Cramer, (2003) on stage induced stress, showed a significant increase in the use of projection and identification defenses.

Research based on college students and community samples demonstrated the relation between defense use and personality functioning. Furthermore, use of mature defenses by young adults has predicted multiple indications of later positive adjustment, whereas immature defense use was related to later problems. A second study with fourth grade girls created stress by using a staged rejection situation (Sandstrom & Cramer, 2003). Patrick (2005) asserts that Psychodynamic formulations of personality are based in a developmental understanding of the role of defense mechanisms underlying personality structures, which allow an individual’s to adjust their conscious thoughts in order to attain the highest level of positive effect and the lowest level of negative effect.

Objectives of the Study
The study intends to find out whether students who fail to accomplish their academic activities use psychological defense mechanisms to cover up their inadequacies and inabilities.

Statement of the Problem
It is obvious that students use psychological defense mechanisms to cover up their inadequacies, inabilities, and personal failures when they discover that they were not able to meet up with academic challenges.

Methodology
A simple survey design was used for the study. Survey is mostly used in studies that consider belief systems, facts about people, opinions and behaviors of people. The population of the study comprised of 2500 NCE 2 student teachers of Federal College of Education Zaria. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select 200 participants comprising of the population. The instrument used for the study was a researcher designed questionnaire to elicit information on the students’ use of psychological defense mechanisms in their academic activities. The items of the instrument were generated from literature especially from the work of Patrick 2005, and Parekh, Majeed, Khan, Khan, Khalid, Khwaja, et al (2010).

Research Questions
The following research questions were raised for the study:

1. What is the relationship between students’ use of projection and denial defense mechanism in their academic activities?
2. How can students’ use of denial defense mechanism relate identification in their academic activities?
3. What is the relationship between students’ use of identification and projection defense mechanism in their academic endeavours?
Hypotheses
The following research hypotheses were raised to guide the study

H0₁ There is no significant relationship between students’ use of projection and denial defense mechanisms in their academic activities.

H0₂ There is no significant relationship in the way students’ use denial and identification defense mechanisms in their academic activities.

H0₃ There is no significant relationship between students’ use of Projection and identification defense mechanisms in their academic activities.

Results

Hypothesis

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between students’ use of projection and denial defense mechanism in their academic activities.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis of the Relationship between Students’ use of Projection and Denial Defense Mechanism in their Academic Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Projection</td>
<td>9.36</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>0.874</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An understanding of the above Correlation analysis revealed that significant relationship exists in the students’ use of Projection and Denial defense mechanisms in their academic activities. This is because the calculated significant P value of 0.014 is lower than the 0.05 alpha level of significance at a correlation index r level of -0.874 at df of 198. This shows that students use more projection in their academic activities than denial since higher mean score depicts the degree of usage of the mechanisms. Hence, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship is hereby rejected.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant relationship between students use of denial and Identification defense mechanisms in academic activities.

Table 2: Correlation Statistics on the Relationship between Students use of Denial and Identification Defense Mechanisms in their Academic Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>-0.884</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>8.26</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).
endeavours, hence, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between students’ use of Denial and Identification defense mechanisms is hereby rejected.

**Hypothesis Three:** There is no significant relationship between students use of Projection and Identification defense mechanism in their academic activities.

**Table 3: Correlation Analysis on the Relationship between Students use of Projection and Identification Defense Mechanisms in their Academic Activities.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>8.26</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>-0.989</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projection</td>
<td>9.36</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).***

Table 3 showed that Projection and identification defense mechanisms as applied by students in their academic endeavours were negatively correlated. This is because the calculated significant P value of 0.000 is less than the 0.05 alpha level of significance at a correlation index r level of -0.989 at df of 198. This depicts that students use projection more than identification in their academic endeavours, hence, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship is rejected.

**Discussion**

The study was concerned with the investigation of how College student teachers apply different psychological defense mechanism in their academic activities of lectures, assignments, reading for examinations, and attending practical sessions. The study in essence sought correlational evidence on how students make use of different defense mechanism in managing their academic activities and how the different types of defenses correlate with each other. A greater prevalence on the utilization of projection defense mechanism was observed in this study. This is sending negative signal of the tendency of low level of involvement of the students in their academic activities. A study has already found that students who use primitive defense mechanisms are at risk and always perform poorly in terms of academic achievement (Negrii, 2014). Hypothesis one showed a significant relationship between projection and denial defense mechanisms. In essence, the mean scores showed that projection scored (9.36) while denial has (7.67). This implies that students make use of projection more in their academics than denial.

The mean scores of correlational analysis in hypothesis two showed identification with a higher mean score of (8.26) and denial with a lower mean score of (7.67). The implication of this is that in students’ application of the defenses, they prefer the use of identification to denial in their academic endeavours during their stay in teacher education training, and although the result of correlational analysis was negative relationship yet the mean score has shown that identification is a common feature among students in their academic activities. This implies that students who belong to one group or other and associate with others stand a better chance of benefiting in their academic endeavours. In consonance with the findings of Negrii (2014), which showed that students with high performance tends to use mature defense mechanisms, and students with low performance the primitive ones. First, this indicates that the emotional maturity based on advanced defense mechanisms helps to achieve higher results in school studies. The study further revealed that student’s use of identification depicts better orientation and the presence of others. They commented that the development of such mechanisms as identification connotes the activities of leading students, which include communication with peers that indicates activities that are socially beneficial. Hence according to them, defense mechanisms like identification symbolize bases for understanding self and others.
Table 3 showed the correlation analysis of hypothesis three on projection and identification, indicating significant negative relationship between them. Meanwhile, projection achieved a mean score of (9.36) while identification scored (8.26). The mean scores are clear indication of the fact that students of teacher education use more of projection than identification in their academic activities. This implies that they tend to blame other people for their failures and inability to achieve adequate academic success. The result of the study agree with findings of Negrii (2014), which showed that students using primitive defenses are at risk and require special attention in the educational and psychological studies. It should be taken into account that the psychological variable and reversible defense mechanisms can be both adaptive and pathological (Sokolova, 2011). This to a large extent can inhibit positive approach to academic activities like help seeking behavior. Vogel, Wester, and Lisa (2007) reported a study which showed that individuals who needed counseling or psychotherapy but had not sought for it had the highest level of treatment fears, suggesting that avoidance factors can inhibit help-seeking behaviour even for individuals who could benefit from such exercise. According to them, it seems, therefore, that many individuals perceive the act of seeking Counseling or psychotherapy as a dilemma; although they are experiencing negative emotional, Interpersonal, or psychological consequences. To such individuals, seeking help may be perceived negatively, and they may see it as even worse than the problem they are going through. To some, they see help seeking as a sign of weakness (Bevan, 2010).

**Conclusion**

The study focused on finding out how student teachers utilize psychological defense mechanisms in their academic activities. Psychological defense mechanisms are said to be a set of actions aimed at reducing or eliminating any changes threatening individual’s biopsychic integrity and stability. Academic success depends on the individual learner’s ability to meet up with academic demands and managing them effectively. The study has revealed various ways through which students use various defense mechanisms in pursuing their academic activities. There is negative significant relationship that exists between projection and denial defenses. In hypothesis two a significant relationship was also found to exist between denial and identification with identification achieving a higher mean score. This signifies students’ preference of identification to denial. Hence, it implies also that there is cooperative behavior among the students from which they benefit that stimulates their identification with relevant groups.

The study also showed that projection gained higher mean score than identification when compared. This as well indicates students’ preference of projection over identification. This signifies a move towards negative direction which indicates avoidance behaviour among the students not accepting personal inadequacies which is supposed to help them to find solution to the problem and prepare for a better future.

**Recommendations**

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Students that use primitive defenses are said to be at risk, hence there is need for special psychological attention to be given to such students in order to help them redirect their focus so that they can make progress in their academics.
2. Students who are used to the application of positive defenses like identification should be encouraged to continue using them in order to enable them achieve better academic success.
3. A psychological programme that would enable student teachers who are fund of using negative mechanisms should be considered very important for such students as to enable them benefit maximally from education.
4. Generally, students who have formed the habit of using primitive defense mechanisms should be considered for special psychological needs to help them develop positive personality profile and obtain better success in their academics.
References


