

ACTIVITY 75

DEFENSE MECHANISMS

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Concept

This activity is designed to increase student familiarity with the ways in which defense mechanisms are used. In addition to being a good teaching tool, the activity allows for the expression of a considerable amount of creativity on the part of the students. Defense mechanisms covered include regression, rationalization, repression, projection, fantasy, compensation, identification, and reaction formation.

Instructions

Ask for eight student volunteers for a role-playing exercise. I usually choose four males and four females, since I have found mixed pairs to work best in this activity. Have these eight students leave the room and go with them to explain what they are to do. First group them in male-female pairs and assign two of the defense mechanisms to each pair. Instruct each pair of students to make up two skits, one for each of the mechanisms. I usually allow them about 15 minutes to prepare their skits. While they are working, go back into the room, list the defense mechanisms on the chalkboard, and discuss each one briefly with the class. Then call the role players back into the room to put on their skits. Have each pair perform one of their two skits, and after going through the pairs have each pair do their second skit. The job of the class is to guess which mechanism each skit represents.

Discussion

In discussion you can point out the place of defense mechanisms in personality theory. You should comment on the role of defense mechanisms in normal functioning. When are these mechanisms helpful? When are they harmful? Conduct an anonymous survey of your students asking them to indicate whether or not they have used any of the defense mechanisms during the past year. Do they use some defense mechanisms more than others? If so, which ones?

Suggested Background Readings

- Clum, G. A., & Clum, J. Mood variability and defense mechanism preference. *Psychological Reports*, 1973, 32, 910.
- Houston, J. P., Bee, H., Hatfield, E., & Rimm, D. C. *Invitation to psychology*. New York: Academic Press, 1979. (chap. 11)
- Viney, L. L., & Manton, M. Defense mechanism preferences and the expression of anxiety. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 1974, 2, 50-55.
- Weiner, B. et al. *Discovering psychology*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977. (chap. 15)

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