

tions. In short, the concept of fixation was Freud's way of explaining how important psychological characteristics and individual differences in personality develop.

### 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 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 the 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 even being aware of threats.

**Repression** entails blocking from awareness unacceptable unconscious drives such as 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 awareness. However, other defense mechanisms often are called into play following denial or repression (White & Watt, 1981). The three secondary reality-distorting mechanisms we will discuss are *projection*, *reaction formation*, and *rationalization*.

**Projection** involves perceiving personal characteristics in other people that you cannot admit in yourself. For example, a man might repress his own sexual feelings toward his broth-

er'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 projecting feelings of anger 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.

**Table 14.2** Sample Items from Adorno's E and F Scales

**Items from the Ethnocentrism (E) Scale**

One trouble with Jewish business people is that they stick together and prevent other people from having a fair chance in competition.

Negroes have their rights, but it is best to keep them in their own districts and schools and to prevent too much contact with whites.

The worst danger to real Americanism during the last 50 years has come from foreign ideas and agitators.

America may not be perfect, but the American Way has brought us about as close as human beings can get to a perfect society.

**Items from the Fascism (F) Scale**

Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.

When a person has a problem or worry, it is best not to think about it but to keep busy with more cheerful things.

People can be divided into two distinct classes: the weak and the strong.

What the youth needs most is strict discipline, rugged determination, and the will to work and fight for family and country.

An insult to our honor should always be punished.

After Adorno et al. (1950).

## The Authoritarian Personality

One of Freud's most enduring influences is shown in a book dealing with prejudice called *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). The authors of this book were initially concerned with anti-Semitism, or prejudice against Jews. They had seen the slaughter of Jews that had taken place in Europe under Nazi fascism, and they wondered whether Americans had the same potential for fascism that Germans had. They wanted to find what larger pattern of attitudes and personality characteristics was associated with prejudice and fascist tendencies. The authors of the book were very strongly influenced by Freudian personality theory. Thus, they believed that prejudice is an expression of unconscious needs, conflicts, and defense mechanisms.

During the course of the study, a measure of prejudice called the *E-scale* was developed. *E* stands for ethnocentrism, a glorification of one's own ethnic group and a hostility toward other groups. It was found that *E-scale* scores correlated with a measure of personality structure, the *F-scale* (see Table 14.2). People scoring high on the *F-scale* were said to have "authoritarian personalities," which gave them a potential for fascism (thus the name *F-scale*).

What are the characteristics of the authoritarian personality? Adorno et al. showed that authoritarians had a strong interest in power and authority. They tended to be very submissive and obedient toward those with more authority but very harsh and demanding toward those with less authority. They also held very conventional values, with little independent examination of moral questions. They were intolerant of weakness in others and refused to admit weakness in themselves. They also were unable to accept sexuality and aggressiveness in themselves. Finally, they were thought to have the potential to accept fascist political appeals.

Adorno et al. formulated a theory to explain how the characteristics of authoritarian individuals develop and lead people to become prejudiced. The unconscious ego-defense mechanisms which we have just discussed play a large role in their theory. The process begins when parents who demand that their children live up to rigid standards of conventional morality and competence use harsh discipline to enforce these standards and to enforce obe-

top here and  
read next page

## **More Defense Mechanisms**

### **Intellectualization**

**Intellectualization** works to reduce anxiety by thinking about events in a cold, clinical way. This defense mechanism allows us to avoid thinking about the stressful, emotional aspect of the situation and instead focus only on the intellectual component. For example, a person who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness might focus on learning everything about the disease in order to avoid distress and remain distant from the reality of the situation.

### **Undoing**

Undoing is the attempt to take back an unconscious behavior or thought that is unacceptable or hurtful. For instance, after realizing you just insulted your significant other unintentionally, you might spend the next hour praising their beauty, charm and intellect. By “undoing” the previous action, the person is attempting to counteract the damage done by the original comment, hoping the two will balance one another out.

### **Compensation**

Compensation is a process of psychologically counterbalancing perceived weaknesses by emphasizing strength in other arenas. By emphasizing and focusing on one's strengths, a person is recognizing they cannot be strong at all things and in all areas in their lives. For instance, when a person says, “I may not know how to cook, but I can sure do the dishes!,” they're trying to compensate for their lack of cooking skills by emphasizing their cleaning skills instead. When done appropriately and not in an attempt to over-compensate, compensation is a defense mechanism that helps reinforce a person's self-esteem and self-image.

**Humour**: Overt expression of ideas and feelings (especially those that are unpleasant to focus on or too terrible to talk about directly) that gives pleasure to others. The thoughts retain a portion of their innate distress, but they are "skirted around" by witticism, for example self-deprecation.