

# A Study on The Impact of Ego Defense Mechanisms on The Formation of Close Relationships in Young Adults

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## Abstract

This study looks into how young adults' defensive mechanisms affect their ability to build close relationships. The study concentrated on investigating the connection between attachment related anxiety and avoidance with mature, immature, and neurotic defense mechanisms. 180 young adults aged between 18 to 25 had their data collected using a quantitative study approach. The experiences in close relationships revised (ECR-R) and the defence style questionnaire (DSQ-40) were used to examine attachment related anxiety/avoidance and defense mechanisms, respectively. The results show a substantial negative link between attachment scores in people with mature defense mechanisms, indicating that people with better interpersonal interactions are also likely to have higher levels of mature defence mechanisms. Nevertheless, no meaningful associations were discovered between immature defense mechanisms and their attachment scores. The results showed a somewhat positive association between neurotic defence mechanisms and attachment scores, suggesting that those with higher attachment related anxiety and avoidance also typically have higher levels of neurotic defence mechanisms. Overall, the findings are consistent with the hypothesis that while neurotic defence systems also influence attachment patterns, mature defence mechanisms are linked to lower anxiety and avoidance in terms of attachment. These results advance our knowledge of how attachment styles and defence mechanisms interact in the setting of close relationships among young adults.

**Keywords:** Defense mechanisms, Young adults, Close relationships, Mature defense mechanisms, Immature defense mechanisms, Neurotic defense mechanisms, Interpersonal interactions, Attachment related avoidance/anxiety

## Introduction

The term "defense mechanisms" or "ego defense mechanisms" was coined by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in 1926. These mechanisms serve as psychological tools to shield individuals from anxiety-provoking situations and thoughts, thereby preventing emotional distress. By unconsciously managing stress and protecting one's sense of self, defense mechanisms help individuals avoid negative situations that may make them feel vulnerable. This paper defines and discusses various defense mechanisms, including denial, acting out, altruism, anticipation, humor, projection, rationalization, reaction formation, repression, and regression. Furthermore, the paper explores mature defense mechanisms, which are healthier and more adaptive psychological techniques for managing stress and emotions.

Unlike fundamental defense mechanisms, mature defences require greater cognitive understanding and emotional regulation. They enable individuals to navigate life's challenges without distorting reality or harming themselves or others, fostering stronger interpersonal bonds, improved emotional control, and enhanced problem-solving abilities. On the other hand, immature or neurotic defense mechanisms can distort individuals' perceptions of reality and keep threatening thoughts or feelings hidden from awareness. While these defences may temporarily reduce anxiety, they do not promote personal growth or long-term solutions and have been associated with negative mental health outcomes. Additionally, the paper examines the concept of close relationships, emphasizing the importance of companionship, support, understanding, laughter, and tolerance for differences. It discusses attachment theory, focusing on the four main attachment styles: secure, avoidant/dismissive, anxious/preoccupied, and fearful-avoidant. Each attachment style influences individuals' behaviors and perceptions within intimate relationships, affecting their ability to trust, communicate, and maintain emotional intimacy.

Békés et al. (2021) pioneered research on the link between adult attachment and defense mechanisms in depressed individuals undergoing psychotherapy, revealing longitudinal associations during treatment. Richardson, Beath, and Boag (2022) found significant connections between attachment styles and specific defense mechanisms in college freshmen, suggesting the utility of the adult attachment model in understanding psychological defenses. Göçek and Dalı (2020) highlighted positive relationships between insecure attachment patterns, immature defense styles, and acceptance worries among LGB individuals, emphasizing implications for future research and clinical interventions. Studies by Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991), Cramer (2002), Bouchard and Thériault (2003), Prunas et al. (2019), Caron et al. (2012), Cramer and Kelly (2010), Munteanu (2002), and Medina and Dalı (2020) further contribute to understanding attachment its factors, patterns defense mechanisms, and psychological well-being across diverse populations and contexts.

### **Methodology:**

**Objective:** To study the impact of defense mechanisms on the formation of close relationships in young adults.

**Hypothesis:** Mature defense mechanisms will be significantly correlated with lower attachment related anxiety and avoidance.

Neurotic defense mechanisms will be significantly correlated with higher attachment related anxiety and avoidance.

**Sample:** The study comprised 180 young adults aged 18 to 25 years.

**Research Design:** Utilized an ex post facto correlational research design to collect data on defense mechanisms and close relationships.

**Tools:** The Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ-40) developed by George E. Vaillant, was employed to assess defense mechanisms based on Vaillant's hierarchy. The DSQ-40 measures three higher-order **factor scores:** mature, neurotic, and immature defense styles. The internal consistency of the mature, neurotic, and immature defense styles was 0.70, 0.61, and 0.83, respectively. For evaluating close relationships, the Experiences in Close Relationships Revised (ECR-R) was used, Revised Edition of Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR-R). A 36-item self-report attachment measure called the ECR-R was created by Brennan, Waller, and Fraley (2000). This self-report attachment measure assesses attachment related anxiety and avoidance in adult relationships.

<b>TABLE NO 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR EGO DEFENSE MECHANISMS</b>			
Variable	N	Mean	SD
MATURE EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM	60	43.50	17.66
IMMATURE EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM	60	68.68	13.72
NEUROTIC EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM	60	57.41	7.85
TOTAL EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM SCORES	180	56.53	15.47

RESULTS- Descriptive statistics table for the ego defense mechanism style scores and the attachment related anxiety and avoidant scores of the sample.

<b>TABLE NO 2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR ATTACHMENT RELATED ANXIETY/AVOIDANCE FOR MATURE, IMMATURE AND NEUROTIC DEFENSE MECHANISMS.</b>			
Variables		Attachment related avoidance	Attachment related anxiety
Mature	Mean	33.51	33.65
	SD	6.27	8.47
Immature	Mean	58.60	65.11
	SD	9.38	10.50
Neurotic	Mean	77.50	70.71
	SD	13.07	5.85

<b>TABLE.3: t scores of defense mechanisms mean scores for the three subscales</b>					
Variable	N	Mean	t Score.	df	Significance
MATURE	60	43.50	-5.759	117	0.000
IMMATURE	60	68.68			
NEUROTIC	60	57.41	8.718	118	0.000
IMMATURE	60	68.68			
MATURE	60	43.50	5.517	118	0.002
NEUROTIC	60	57.41			

Table 3 shows that the mean score for the MATURE defense mechanism is significantly lower than that for the IMMATURE defense mechanism and mean score for the NEUROTIC defense mechanism is significantly higher than that for the IMMATURE defense mechanism .at 0.000 significance level, meanwhile the mean score for the MATURE defense mechanism is significantly lower than that for the NEUROTIC defense mechanism, at a significance level of 0.002.

**TABLE.4: This table represents the correlation matrix of all three subscales of ego defense mechanism styles (MATURE, IMMATURE, and NEUROTIC) with their related attachment scores.**

	MATURE EGO DEFENSE RELATED ATTACHMENT SCORES	IMMATURE EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM RELATED ATTACHMENT SCORES	NEUROTIC EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM RELATED ATTACHMENT SCORES	CORELATION
MATURE EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM	1.00* (n=60)	-	-	-0.255*
IMMATURE EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM	-	1.00 * (n=60)	-	0.420
NEUROTIC EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM	-	-	1.00* (n=60)	0.260 *

p < .05 (one-tailed), N=180

**INTERPRETATION**

The correlation coefficient between individuals' mature defense style and their attachment scores is 0.255\*. The coefficient value shows a negative correlation between the two variables. The p-value is less than 0.05, showing statistical significance at the 0.05 level (1-tailed). This level of significance indicates that the observed association was unlikely to occur by chance alone. The negative correlation between mature defense style and attachment scores shows that people with more mature defense mechanisms may have lower attachment scores for anxiety and avoidance. Lower scores on both anxiety and avoidance dimensions of attachment typically indicate a more secure attachment style. Individuals with secure attachments are self-confident and have stronger relationships. They are at ease with intimacy and independence, and mature defense mechanisms are viewed as adaptive and productive approaches to dealing with stress and emotions. Lower attachment scores on anxiety and avoidance, and higher scores on mature defence style, indicate a pattern of secure attachment and adaptive coping methods. This combination promotes good relationships, emotional resilience, and general wellbeing.

The correlation coefficient between individuals' immature defense style and their attachment scores is - 0.058. This value suggests a weak negative correlation between these two variables. - The p-value associated with the correlation coefficient is greater than 0.05 (p > 0.05), indicating that the observed correlation is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed). The weak negative correlation coefficient of -0.058 suggests a slight tendency for individuals with higher levels of immature defence mechanisms to have slightly lower attachment scores, and vice versa. However, this correlation is not statistically significant.the lack of statistical significance suggests that any observed relationship between immature defense style and attachment scores may be due to random chance rather than a true underlying association.

The correlation coefficient between individuals' neurotic defence style and their attachment scores is 0.260. This value indicates a positive correlation between these two variables. - The p-value associated with the correlation coefficient is less than 0.05 ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating statistical significance at the 0.05 level (1-tailed). The positive correlation coefficient of 0.260 suggests a moderate positive relationship between individuals' neurotic defense styles and their attachment scores. Individuals with higher attachment scores for anxiety and avoidance, as well as higher neurotic defence style scores, may demonstrate patterns of emotional insecurity, avoidance of intimacy, and maladaptive coping techniques in their relationships. They may suffer increased anxiety and trouble creating and maintaining solid attachments, posing challenges to interpersonal relationships and emotional well-being.

## DISCUSSION

The study explores the interplay between attachment related avoidance and anxiety and defense mechanisms in young adults., providing insights into how these psychological processes affect the development of close relationships.

According to Freud, defense mechanisms are psychological weapons that protect people from ideas and circumstances that make them anxious. This study highlights the different effects of defense systems on emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships by classifying them into three categories: mature, immature, and neurotic. Stronger interpersonal ties and better emotional control are linked to healthier relationship outcomes when defensive systems are mature, which are typified by increased cognitive comprehension and emotional regulation. However, protection mechanisms that are immature and neurotic may skew people's perceptions of reality and impede one's own development, which may have detrimental effects on one's mental health.

The relationship between attachment anxiety, avoidance, and ego defense mechanisms is complex and varies from person to person. Individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety may use defence methods to cope with their fear of rejection, such as denial or projection. Meanwhile, persons with higher degrees of attachment avoidance may employ defences that maintain emotional distance and independence, such as repression or avoidance.

Understanding the interplay between attachment patterns and defense mechanisms can help people navigate relationships and deal with stress. Therapy techniques that target both attachment patterns and defense mechanisms can be particularly useful in helping individuals build more adaptive ways of interacting to others and managing anxiety.

With the idea that mature defense mechanisms would be linked to lesser attachment related anxiety and avoidance than immature and neurotic defense styles, the study's goal was to investigate how defense mechanisms affect the development of close relationships in young adults. The findings showed a negative link between anxiety and avoidant attachment scores and mature defensive mechanisms, suggesting that those who use more mature coping mechanisms generally have healthier relationships. Consistent with earlier findings in the field, this finding emphasizes the role that adaptive coping mechanisms have in promoting healthy relationship outcomes. On the other hand, no significant correlations were discovered between the scores of attachment and immature defensive mechanisms, indicating that the formation of intimate relationships in young adults may not be significantly impacted by immature coping mechanisms. A somewhat positive association was found between neurotic defensive mechanisms and attachment scores, suggesting that people who primarily rely on unhealthy coping methods can have higher anxiety and avoidance insecurities related to their attachments.

These findings may provide to be useful for intervention tactics and clinical practice that attempt to support positive relationship dynamics in young adults. Healthy relationship outcomes may be fostered by interventions that focus on promoting secure attachment and improving adaptive coping abilities. Additionally, examining the role of cultural and contextual factors in shaping defence mechanisms and attachment dynamics can provide a more comprehensive understanding of these processes in different populations and contexts. Finally, this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between defence mechanisms and attachment related anxiety and avoidance., sheds light on the factors that influence the formation of close relationships between young adults. By examining the role of defence mechanisms in shaping attachment dynamics, this research advances understanding of interpersonal relationships and informs the possible use in development of effective intervention strategies to promote healthy relationship outcomes.

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