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## Influence of defence mechanisms on obeying orders in a group of professional soldiers

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Joanna Kubicka- Jakuczun

## **INFLUENCE OF DEFENCE MECHANISMS ON OBEYING ORDERS IN A GROUP OF PROFESSIONAL SOLDIERS**

### **Summary**

The aim of this paper is to present the field of defence mechanisms of the human psyche and narrow the topic of their influence on the professional group of soldiers. Some of more common mechanisms are mentioned and described in the text. There are also some examples of mechanisms used by soldiers, given by psychotherapists. It may allow a deeper insight into these psychological processes by using the examinations of this scope in a more utilitarian way.

### **WPLYW MECHANIZMÓW OBRONNYCH NA WYPEŁNIANIE ZLECEŃ W GRUPIE ŻOŁNIERZY ZAWODOWYCH**

### **Streszczenie**

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zorientowanie się w obszarze tematycznym dotyczącym mechanizmów obronnych psychiki ludzkiej oraz zawężenia tematu ich oddziaływania na grupę zawodową żołnierzy. W tekście zostały wymienione i opisane niektóre z bardziej popularnych mechanizmów oraz podane przez praktyków-terapeutów, egzemplifikacje stosowanych mechanizmów obronnych przez żołnierzy, co być może w praktyce pozwoli na głębsze przyjrzenie się tym procesom psychicznym poprzez postępowanie się wynikami badań z tego zakresu w bardziej użyteczny sposób.

### **Introduction**

The order- obey, right-left, black and white, forward and march, attention! Here are some words that quite often appear in the commander dictionary. Very strong words are spoken to a subordinate individual or a group with an expectation of an immediate response. A young soldier, joining the army, is conscious of his duties and expectations from superior soldiers. He might be very often forced to set aside his personal beliefs, and realize what is included in the order.

Identity achievement of an adolescent or a young adult commencing a career in the army, can be changed by a demiurge who might be unconscious of his power. An opened to new experiences and sociable person, in very structured reality may become someone with

rigid rules and respond with some fixed behaviors to specific stimuli. A twenty-year-old man, who touched during the growing up period, a lot of unpleasant experiences which did not allow him to form an identity achievement, can wait for his supervisor like for an architect and be grateful for his appearance.

Before the builder will merge the elements left about and shape the final identity of the soldier, he will have to undergo a sequence of changes under the influence of experiences in the new reality. There will be no space for dilemmas, or discussions on the rightness of the given order here. Deciding on the military service, a young man should be ready for the transformation of his own mental and emotional system. Many times the psyche of the young soldier will have to outwit him if he decides to carry out some order, not matching his moral values. Living according to his conscience and the relative cohesion of psychological structures white permeating into the army, will be possible thanks to using of defence mechanisms.

### **1. Defence Mechanisms**

Defence mechanisms are ways of dealing with internal conflicts. They are applied for the purpose: personality protection, fear reduction, frustration, or a sense of guilt. Mainly they are habitual and unconscious. They appear with different intensity, depending on the level of developing of the individual self-awareness and, what function they perform. They always change the way the reality is perceived what can manifest itself in the behaviour. Disturbed perception of reality is a negative consequence of applying defence mechanisms. A positive character of defence mechanisms manifests itself in their adaptive function. Applied too long, they can have an opposite effect thus make it impossible to adapt.

For over one hundred years, since the science called psychology arose, specialists have paid attention to the issue. Freud started examining psychological defences, but his daughter-Anna Freud introduced the defence mechanisms concept <sup>1</sup>. Everything that was introduced by them into the research still inspires many researchers. Also other psychology classic studied defence mechanisms: W. Reich, K. Horney, E. Fromm, R. Plutchik, H. Kellerman and the H. Conte, or the L. Lazarus and the others. In Poland the scientist who were took up the topic of defence mechanisms up: H. Grzegołowska, Klarkowska, M. Kofta, T. Szustrowa, and

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<sup>1</sup> A. Barabasz, *Mechanizmy obronne jako wskaźnik zdrowia organizacji*, [w:] Stankiewicz J. (red.), *Spoleczne wymiary zarządzania nowoczesnymi przedsiębiorstwami. Ludzie. Kultura organizacji. Spoleczna odpowiedzialność*, Uniwersytet Zielonogórski, Zielona Góra 2010, p. 596).

A. Barabasz, or also Ł. Cichocki and the T. Korolczuk and the others developing it in different contexts, using them in different psychological paradigms.

### **1.1. Defence mechanisms in different psychological paradigms**

The theory of the defence and defence mechanisms underwent numerous alterations and in different periods of its development and it has not always been cohesive and bright. An ultimate theory of the defence and defence mechanisms formulated in 1926, based on the structural theory of the personality (with the division on of Id, Ego and Superego) and of the signal theory of fear. It differentiates a general concept of the defence against not-accepted (because of cultural norms) instincts. It also included a few detailed defence mechanisms, but the most important mechanism is repression.

The defence concerns both- conscious representation of instinct and emotions associated with it but the defence against the conscious representation of instinct is definitely main for Freud<sup>2</sup>. Freud as well as Pervin<sup>3</sup> kept attention on the role of fear in creating defence mechanisms, because as he claims, fear is a signal of danger. Early experiences are the base of fear. Impulsive drives appearing during them are connected with the loss and suffering. The individual feels that, if he or she decides on a not-accepted socially action, he/ she will be punished. In order to curb the fear, defence mechanisms are used and thanks to them he or she avoids being punished, enduring pain and deals with the drives.

According to system theories, defence mechanisms are connected with specific emotions. Plutchik, Kellerman and Conte present the theoretical model of defence mechanisms in the form of five demands:

1. Some specific defence mechanisms (reaction formation, denial, repression, regression, compensation, projection, displacement, and intellectualization) are used to cope with specific emotions (respectively: joy, approval, fear, surprise, sadness, mistrust, anger, and expectation);
2. In order to deal with eight basic emotions, people use eight essential defence mechanisms;
3. The eight basic defence mechanisms can be characterized by resemblance and polarity;

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> L.A. Pervin, *Psychologia osobowości*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2002, p. 112.

4. The main diagnostic personality types (appropriately: mania, hysteria, passive-aggressive type, psychopathy and acting-out, depression, paranoia, compulsive type) have their roots in essential defence mechanisms;
5. An individual can use any combination of defence mechanisms<sup>4</sup>;

From the theoretical point of view, connected with creating personality definitions, this model is useful merely as a classification system, because Plutchik, Kellerman and Conte did not do enough research to prove their theories.

Researchers, who support the theory of learning focus and behavior and cognitive area, are interested in such notions as: stimulus, reaction, reinforcement, rejecting everything that happens apart from the perception, directly in the psyche. The description of defence mechanisms in this theory, drawing from the behavioral paradigm, is limited to repression and thought suppression.

Dollard and Miller maintain that unawareness is tantamount to the lack of verbalization, but some drives and reactions can be unconscious, because they were never verbalized (e.g., psychological conflicts appear in very early childhood) whereas others, because an individual secondarily learnt to avoid verbalization<sup>5</sup>. It is possible to define repression as drives and reactions, which were never verbalized, however thought suppression is just a selective process of ceasing to think or talk about something.

In the cognitive psychology, the discipline competitive to behaviorism and psychoanalysis represented by Lazarus, a particular emphasis is put on tension taking place as a result of the divergences between cognitive structures. Defence mechanisms arise exactly as a result of that tension. Another researcher of defence mechanisms in the cognitive paradigm is Kofta<sup>6</sup>.

In his interpretation the defence mechanism is a kind of disorder of processes which let the individual perceive himself or herself and the world properly. This illusion allows the human being to maintain the unanimity between the information coming from the outside and his or her personal image. Such a process causes that the individual feels in agreement with his or her conscience and with the world, thus reduces unpleasant feelings which could arise if the possibility to use a defence mechanism was lacking.

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<sup>4</sup> H.J. Grzegółowska-Klarkowska, *Mechanizmy obronne osobowości*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1986, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

## 1.2 Types of defence mechanisms

History of the research on defence mechanisms is full of different theoretical classifications, names and definitions. Scientists are still looking for manifestations of defences of different kind in behaviour, creating the entire range of defence mechanisms, which are prepared as a list of the independent department in psychological science. Defence mechanisms appear in psyche of every person, irrespective of the condition of mental health of the individual. There are some mechanisms most often listed in literature:

- **Repression.** (neurotic mechanism) This is one of the most important defence mechanisms in psychology. It actually appears in every paradigm, although it is defined differently. It is possible to describe the repression as removing from awareness some memories which are painful or in other way threatening the cohesion given to the personality of the individual<sup>7</sup>.
- **Projection.** (immature mechanism) In widest understanding of this word the projection means giving personal attitudes and points of view into objective reality or assigning to others own thought and emotions which aren't accepted by the individual<sup>8</sup>.
- **Fantasizing.** (immature mechanism) Way of dealing with frustration by delivering an award in the substitute fantasy, letting oneself free from difficult reality.
- **Annulment** (neurotic mechanisms) It is possible to describe this mechanism as certain way to leave behind some previous and difficult events in one's psyche. Sometimes they can be a magic activity thanks to which one is trying to reverse the effects of some event, and not this event exactly. The mechanism is distinctive for the obsessive-compulsive neurosis. At the basis of compulsive and obsessive behaviours which stem from annulment, there is a hidden desire for fulfilling an act or completion of an event. The obsessive activity is supposed to annul the persistent character of these desires and a deep fear which appears as a result of their compulsory action<sup>9</sup>.
- **Reaction formation.** (neurotic mechanism) It reveals itself by manifesting behaviours, points of view and emotions opposing these which are consciously rejected. It is a defence mechanism consisting in exaggerating the emotional value and significance of a person, a group, family, nation or other object. It is done not allow to

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<sup>7</sup> M. Karlińska, *Obrona siebie i przed sobą*, Charaktery, nr 2 (73), Charakter sp. z o.o., Katowice 2003, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> H. Grzegołowska-Klarkowska, *Samoobrona przez samooszukiwanie się*, w: M. Kofta, T. Szustrowa (red.), *Złudzenia, które pozwalają żyć*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2001, p. 185.

make one aware of some painful and potentially not-accepted aspects of important object or a connection or aggression towards them<sup>10</sup>.

- **Isolation.** (neurotic mechanism) The mechanism of the isolation consists of separating the thought from action, treating own judgments and statements as something unrelated with acts<sup>11</sup>. It lets take action clearly incompatible with beliefs of the man without the risk of exposing himself to unpleasant dissonance.
- **Rationalization (making excuses).** (neurotic mechanism) Defense mechanism being a constant tendency of justifying someone's action and decisions after the fact<sup>12</sup>. There are some varieties of the rationalization which even a layperson can distinguish in the everyday life, and their goal is to camouflage the real motifs of proceedings, effects of the action or undesirable situations to bear the positive image of oneself.
- **Splitting.** (pathological mechanism) Reality perceptions in two dimension, for example a binary fission sets: black and white, good and bad<sup>13</sup>.
- **Denial.** (pathological mechanisms) Mechanism defined as conscious or unconscious rejecting of a part or whole knowledge about a traumatic event to disperse or get rid of fear and suffering associated with it<sup>14</sup>.
- **Sublimation.** (mature mechanism) Socially unexpected needs of the individual are realized by judged as morally right ways in scientific areas and artistic areas<sup>15</sup>.
- **Displacement.** (neurotic mechanism) It refers to transferring not-accepted emotions, mainly aggression on substitute objects instead of the right ones causing difficult emotions. Substitute objects are mostly less threatening because of certain degree of the dependence on the person who is applying the mechanism or simply one is on the bottom of the hierarchy<sup>16</sup>.

In this paper not all definitions of defence mechanisms have been explained because of their wide range listed in literature. Above, there are some mechanisms appearing quite often while everyday functioning of the man. On the one hand they cause adverse effects, but on the other hand they can also be adaptive mechanisms allowing to deal with traumatic experiences.

<sup>10</sup> H. Grzegółowska-Klarkowska, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> M. Karlińska, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> M. Jarymowicz, *Czy jesteśmy egoistami?*, [w:] M. Kofta, T. Szustrowa (red.), *Złudzenia, które pozwalają żyć*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2001, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> A. Barabasz, *op. cit.*, p. 598.

<sup>14</sup> J.H. Shale, C.M. Shale, J.D. Shale, *Denial Often Key in Psychological Adaptation to Combat Situations*, *Psychiatric Annals*, November 2003, San Diego p. 725.

<sup>15</sup> H. Grzegółowska-Klarkowska, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>16</sup> A. Stefańczyk, *Psychologia wywierania wpływu i manipulacji*, Wydawnictwo Złote Myśli, Gliwice 2006, p. 43.

The norm of defence mechanisms is identified when we can notice a big number of appropriate mechanisms at a low intensity. The pathological effect of defences appears if the man schematically and in the high intensity applies without awareness one of them, exposing himself to the high probability of the occurrence of psychological disorders.

## **2. The order and defence mechanisms**

In the army the decision Making and executive chain works by instructions. The soldier should recognize orders which are legal, from orders, which are not, however in critical situations it will be quite complicated, because of frequent action of automatic behaviors. Nowadays it is enough for soldiers to recognize, whether by a chance the order is not a crime. Amongst soldiers it can be described as „a principle of thinking bayonets”<sup>17</sup>.

However the order is connected with the duty to make it. „The order arose as a reply to the specificity of the situations characteristic for the army, where is the requirement concerning almost total obedience in professional matters<sup>18</sup>”. Entering the army and performing duties sent by senior soldiers without a murmur, there might be an existing protest or simply denial in the young man many times about what is going in their department. But there still is an appearing awareness of the power of the order and military principles in his mind. Perhaps an internal conflict, causing unpleasant dissonance may happen in the described situation and in order to reduce this unpleasant feeling of the young soldier a defence mechanisms can show, most often they are connected with aggressive drives. Below there are situations which happened in the army or might take place there, causing psychological defences to free and have destructive or adaptive consequences.

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<sup>17</sup> A. Tokarczyk (2007), *Rozkaz a odpowiedzialność karna*, [www.redakcjawojkowa.pl](http://www.redakcjawojkowa.pl) (9.02.2010)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.



Table No. 1. Examples of consequences of the of pathological defence mechanisms on the soldiers psyche

Name of the defence	The effects of the influence of defence mechanisms on the soldiers psyche observed in behaviours
Splitting	<p>Functioning of the military organization is based on clear rules and a defined hierarchy. Such a structure contributes to the shaping of personality type totality like <i>totality</i> (behaviour of such a person can be characterized by stiffness, they can also be inappropriate to changing surrounding<sup>19</sup>) and is supporting application of primitive defence mechanisms. A very interesting mechanism of the soldier psyche is splitting.</p> <p>In some cases it might be simply desired because of distinct divisions character, here- for the own army own and the army of a foreign and hostile country. In this context the splitting may be an adaptive mechanism because of the identification with the own group. While making a command in times of war the splitting can take place at the security service and reduce a sense of guilt associated with depriving of human life during the fight.</p>

Source: own study

Table No. 2. Examples of consequences of the influence of mature defence mechanisms on the soldiers psyche

Name of the defence	The effects of the influence of defence mechanisms on the soldiers psyche observed in behaviors
Sublimation	<p>Sublimation is compatible with freeing intensive aggressive impulses, so for volunteers going for the mission, on account of the possibility of facing extreme experience and the need of destruction it, is also a perfect „front”. War is a socially accepted form of aggression and violence. Interesting sources of the sublimation are given by Stefańczyk<sup>20</sup> in his book. In his interpretation the person who wants to take part in war, at the same time strictly obeys principles of morality in sexual sphere. „sexual liberation which is observed in the last decades isn't a collapse of customs but a signal of the escalating need of peace amongst people”<sup>21</sup>. It is hard in this case to talk about usefulness of sublimations for a man, however for close friends and family, often it is expected. Aggressive needs are not realized in the family but on the front. Here, some benefits the army can take.</p>

Source: own study

<sup>19</sup> A. Brzezińska, Współzależność kontekstu rozwoju, stylu życia i struktury Ja. [w:] J. Kmita, I. Kotowa, J. Sojka (red.), *Nauka. Humanistyka. Człowiek. Prace dedykowane Profesor Krystynie Zamiarze w czterdziestolecie pracy naukowej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2005, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> A. Stefańczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

Table No. 3. Examples of consequences of the influence of neurotic defence mechanisms on the soldiers psyche

Name of the defence	The effects of the influence of defence mechanisms on the soldiers psyche observed in behaviours
Repression	A young man beginning his duty in the army can because of the conservative upbringing taken out from his home, have difficulties expressing his doubts concerning being treated by senior soldiers. Aggression directed against older friends, is repressed because of the superego strength and in similar situations it will be suppressed, however it will return in other relations, for example during a fight. Again, the defence mechanism brings benefits to workers of Ministry of National Defence, improving their motivation for fight by heightening aggression towards the enemy as well as disciplinary dimension of the army. In war situations soldiers are exposed to experiencing trauma. Not everyone deals with events they witnessed during the mission. Then a PTSD disorder most often develops, and its elements are problems with memory and conscience connected with the repression mechanism <sup>22</sup> . Destructive character of repression appears while weakening of the defence and it manifests itself in: „the converting intrusive and depressing memories associated with the traumatic event (...) which constituted the basic feature of war neurosis” <sup>23</sup> .
Isolation	Each of specified defence mechanisms can be on two opposite poles of mental health. About isolation is the same, although specialists working with soldiers often highlight its adaptive dimension <sup>24</sup> . The statement of one soldier attracted particular attention of defence mechanisms researchers: “You know, doc, it wasn’t until and of you hit that and realized those bastards were out it kill me. And of you just worried about doing we job” <sup>25</sup> . This Marine dealt with mortar fire and with crossing a minefield, but he had never been conscious of the threat, until he was injured. He was calm going through the firing line and he led his branch at the target dealing with it by unaware psychological mechanism.
Displacement	A set of emotions experienced by people in the organization, it is worth using the conception of collective emotions associated with the organizational environment. Identical emotions felt by the entire group are: „something more than only an account of emotions experienced by individual members of the organization” <sup>26</sup> . A group of soldiers during the mission growing fear. Analyzing the situation backwards, it is possible, that the lieutenant received a message from the captain about a high threat while performing a task. Feeling strong emotions the lieutenant induced them subconsciously, by using the defence mechanism- displacement. As a result of the described mechanism it is possible to expect even a psychosis of the crowd (the appearance of some similar physical symptoms in the group of people without any physical cause) <sup>27</sup> which won’t be mobilizing for fearful soldiers, and displacement itself can be a non- adaptive mechanism.

Source: own study

<sup>22</sup> M. Gawinecka, I. Łucka, A. Cebella., *Pamięć zdarzeń traumatycznych*, Psychiatria, Tom 5, nr 2, Via Medica, Gdańsk 2008, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> J. H. Shale, C. M. Shale, J. D. Shale, *op. cit.*, p. 728.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 728.

<sup>26</sup> A. Barabasz, *op. cit.*, p. 593.

<sup>27</sup> E. Aronson, T.D. Wilson, M.R. Akert, *Psychologia Społeczna. Serce i umysł*, Wydawnictwo Zysk i Spółka, Poznań 1997, p. 274.

Table No. 4. Examples of consequences of the of immature defence mechanisms on the soldiers psyche

Name of the defence	The effects of the influence of defence mechanisms on the soldiers psyche observed in behaviours
Projection	Barabasz often observes appearing projection mechanism in organizations in the situations, when employees of one company transfer not-accepted features, or views on people working in the competing company <sup>28</sup> . In the army it is easy to do the same, during conflict, transfer features not-accepted by oneself to enemies, to describe opponents in black, belittling their value. It is possible to categorize described defensive tendencies to adaptive mechanisms, however at the same time they can become a cause of the progressing dehumanization towards the enemy causing difficulty describing consequences. Statistically there are more men than women in the army, and as the results of Kramer's research show projection is noted more frequently at the male part of the population mechanism <sup>29</sup> . Outside the battlefield, in times of peace, the projection can cause disruption. A soldier away from work, in family, or in friendly relations can still accuse others of his own failures and lose the awareness of himself and the scope of perpetration. Another research on the connection of the sex and defence mechanisms application <sup>30</sup> , which does not give a positive perspective for servicemen, because in the situation of conflict, systematic projection application would be rather useful.

Above situations may suggest using defence mechanisms by soldier's psyche and they are only a sample of human behaviours observed in the army. You can make more of quoted examples depending on the person applying the given defence. The influence of a commander on his people is also considerable. The way he is trained and the quality of his communication will affect soldiers' readiness to fight (Schale, Schale, Schale, 2003, p. 726). An official order must be understandable, and the person giving it must guarantee all means for it<sup>31</sup>.

Repeatedly the military environment turns out to be stressogenic which can be a source of sensory efficiency disorders or exaggerated application of defence mechanisms. In case when the commander is satisfying the needs of his people and he/she is supporting them, the appearing inner conflicts will be reduced by implementing adaptive defences. A morally unexpected order will be rationalized, and the victim's difficult experienced of military initiation most often evolve into the identification with the aggressor.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 598.

<sup>29</sup> U. Kramer, *Coping and defence mechanisms: What's the difference? Second act*, Psychology and psychotherapy. Theory, research and practice, 83, Lausanne 2010, p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> A. Tokarczyk, *op. cit.*, [www.redakcjawojkowska.pl](http://www.redakcjawojkowska.pl)

## Resume

The probability of applying psychological defences appears when a person is exposed to long-term stress and having traumatic experiences in their past or simply coming across information about themselves which does not match their own worked out image. Defence mechanisms can appear at different intensity and in different proportions. Judging from the above reflections military climate supports applying defences and it helps young soldiers with the adaptation to new conditions because all methods of coping with stress don't include only deliberate ways of reacting. Unconscious operations are also falling within the scope of self-aid, and the described mechanisms are recognized as them<sup>32</sup>. However it is important to remember that a too intense influence on soldiers' psyche can be destructive and lead to psychological disorders. Examining the intensity, amount and their possible forms can allow for the preliminary orientation about the readiness to carry out the task by the soldier, but above all might be one of examinations pointing at the pathological dimension or the dimension of health in the area of the soldier's psyche.

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<sup>32</sup> U. Kramer, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

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**Recenzent: Elżbieta Perzycka**