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The Defense Mechanism Manual

In this chapter, a new approach to the assessment of defense mechanisms is described. The choice of this approach was based on several considerations. A defense mechanism is a thought process that may take different forms and be expressed through a variety of content. For these reasons, the assessment method should allow for thought processes to be revealed in an unhampered and undirected fashion, in an open-ended format where no stereotyped response is readily available. Although these thought processes may not be observed directly, they can be inferred from verbal behavior. Because defense mechanisms are rather complex mental processes, they are more likely to be revealed in relatively extensive samples of verbal behavior than in single-word responses. Finally, some means must be available for two or more independent observers to decide whether or not a defense was used. The method that most closely approximates these various requirements is the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), for which a manual designed to score defenses was especially developed.¹ The manual may also be used with the Children's Apperception Test (CAT).

In earlier chapters, the components of the defenses of denial, projection, and identification were discussed from a theoretical and developmental point of view (see Chapters 3, 4, and 5). In this chapter, we use the components of the defenses as the basis for assessing defense mechanisms in TAT stories, and formulate the components in a way that they may be identified in the thematic productions of children and adults. These formulations provide the basis for the Defense Mechanism Manual (DMM); (see Appendix).

For each defense, the components have been arranged into seven scoring categories. Each of these categories is discussed and illustrated in the remainder of the chapter. An attempt is made to provide the reader with the kind of thinking and rationale that formed the basis for the development of the scoring categories. In the Defense Mechanism Manual, numerous examples from various TAT and CAT cards are given. Also, specific rules for scoring or not scoring a category, and for differentiating between similar categories, are provided.

Assessment of Denial with the DMM

In Chapter 3, we saw that the defense of denial can be manifest in different components. Some of these components, such as failure to perceive, avoidance of perception, perceptual errors, reversal, and negation, are closely tied to perception and were grouped together in the previous discussion as constituting aspects of perceptual denial. Other components, such as unfounded optimism, idealized goodness, maximization and minimization of an idealized object's qualities, and daydreams (fantasied or enacted) were discussed as contributing to the establishment of an alternative reality—the imposition of a personal fantasy onto experience.

In this section, we examine these components as they may appear in stories told to the TAT. Seven scoring categories have been developed to help locate them. In most cases, a single component is represented by a single category. However, the components of avoidance of perception and of daydreams have been combined into a single category called *denial of reality*.

Scoring Categories for Denial

The seven categories for scoring Denial are as follows:

1. Omission of major characters of objects
2. Misperception
3. Reversal
4. Negation
5. Denial of reality
6. Overly maximizing the positive or minimizing the negative
7. Unexpected goodness, optimism, positiveness, gentleness

Using the Scoring Categories for Denial

For each of the scoring categories for Denial, an example is given from stories told about TAT Card 1, which depicts a young boy seated in front of a table, on which a violin lies.²

1. *Omission of major characters or objects.* This category represents the most primitive component of denial—the failure to perceive what is there to be seen. Scores in this category refer to the failure to perceive salient stimuli that are seen by nearly all one's peers. The category applies only to the major or obvious objects; these are specified for each card. Omission of any of these objects in the story told is scored according to a prescribed plan.

For example, in TAT 1, the omission of either the boy or the violin from the story is given a score of 1. However, if perception of the object is implied in the story by including a reference to the function of the critical object, an omission is not scored.