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### **THE ISOMORPHISM OF MOTHER-CHILD DEFENSES**

*SUMMARY.* The article deals with the formation of psychological defenses in the ontogeny of the child in conjunction with the system of the mother's psychological defenses. The results of an empirical study on the relationship of psychological protection of mother and child are described.

*KEY WORDS.* Prototype situation, psychological defense, learning, self-regulation.

The increase of interest in the subject of the development of psychological defenses happens not only because of constant inclusion of defensive processes in all fields of life activity, but also because of the general social situation in modern society. The activity of psychological defenses is directed at the stabilization of the mental condition of a person, preservation of a habitual "I" image and ideas of the world. In the last decades, the growth of interest of researchers in the problem of the psychological safety of the person, protection against the negative influence of mass media, manipulation at interpersonal level has been noted. In modern conditions of sharp changes, information and manipulative impacts on the person, there is an especially current public request for formation of an adequately functioning system of psychological defenses of the person.

A scientific and practical *problem* of studying the ontogeny of psychological defenses is insufficient understanding of how psychological defenses of parents find reflection in the defensive system of the child, where particular features of his defensive style come from and how it is possible to influence the formation of an adequate and mature system of psychological defenses of the child in ontogeny. The lack of such knowledge considerably reduces the predictive opportunities of the psychologist during correction of the defensive system of the child. As in most cases the main educational functions are carried out by the mother, spending with the child the most time, the child is actively involved in patterns of her behavior, including defensive ones. Inclusion in the diagnostic process of the mother is an indispensable condition of detection of onto-genetic regularities of development of psychological defenses.

The modern approach consists in consideration of the system of psychological defenses as one of the levels of the system of self-regulation of the person along with other processes providing adaptation and self-regulation: psychosomatic level, coping

behavior and the highest personal resource [1], [2]. Consecutive development of these levels in ontogeny goes from the psychosomatic level, as the earliest, to the highest personal resource. A. Freud [3] notes that even before the development of a resistant “I” the defenses already exist, and they are directed at external objects, respectively, and are initially interpersonal. In psychoanalysis rather much attention is paid to the relations of mother and child.

The modern approach also reflects ideas of the interpersonal nature of psychological defenses. For the analysis of psychological protection it is convenient to use concepts: defensive subject, threat, damage, means of defense. E.L. Dotsenko notes that prototypes of primary and secondary psychological defenses can be observed in interpersonal interaction [4].

Involuntarily, and quite often intentionally forcing a mother to test negative emotions, the child becomes the witness and the participant of her defensive behavior. *The subject of defense* can be the emotional condition, the system of the principles of education, parental authority as a certain integrity. *The threat* is posed by the child and his behavior regarded as negative, as it causes *damage*—causes negative emotions, undermines the parental position and threatens the integrity of the “I” image. The reactions of the mother to the negativity proceeding from the child are often shown in the form of spontaneous reactions or means of punishment accepted in a family and act as the interpersonal defense of the parent. Thus, defensive strategies are broadcast from the parent to the child unconsciously at the level of interpersonal behavioral manifestations.

The child regularly meets his own difficulties posing threats for his identity. Meeting such situations for the first time, without having ready options to hand, the child solves a problem by searching for solutions in conditions of deficiency of time. These situations are *prototypes\**, and this or that type of reaction is made exactly in them. The prototype situation arises for the first time as a task in interpersonal communication, solving which the child is involved in certain patterns of interaction, learns to overcome difficulties, at first at an interpersonal level, then, internalizing means of defense, can apply them to the internal contents.

Thus, from the point of view of structure, *psychological defense can be defined as the implicit scheme of response to basic difficulties, for the first time applied as a solution in a prototype situation, and furthermore unconsciously postponed for the similar situations arising in ontogeny.*

According to E.L. Dotsenko, in a prototype situation it is not compulsory that techniques which solve a problem ideally or that most suit the child are fixed, but the first acceptable decisions—those which in the current mode and with the available resources are able (though marginally) to solve a vital problem for the child [5]. It explains the low efficiency of psychological defense, and often an illogicality, inflexibility and incorrectness of defensive actions. Fixing and

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\* *The prototype situation*—is a real situation within which the child for the first time faces a certain vital task for which he hasn't had a solution yet [5; 161].

generalization of a defensive means provides non-selective, "rough" adaptation which doesn't consider the changeable conditions of the environment and is sometimes not approved by the person, occurring automatically without participation of the will.

For the solution of tasks in a prototype situation, the child takes resources from a microsocial environment. Observing or learning about the difficulties of the child, a mother can participate in the solution of children's difficulties: to assist, advise, train. As a rule, such conversation happens at a more conscious, analytical level, unlike the difficulty demanding immediate solving. Therefore the parent, without being included in a situation, is less inclined to update the defensive level and has the conditions promoting the updating of higher levels of self-control, such as coping and the highest personal resources. Looking for the way out from a difficult situation is in that case aimed at a search for an optimum, desirable way of coping with a situation, and it is speculative and verbally presented. Respectively at the level of parental behavior, the child deals with the defenses forming spontaneously in conditions of deficiency of time, and when learning, with higher levels of self-control which set the space for further development of the defensive system.

**The objective of our research:** detection of similarity between systems of psychological defenses of the mother and the child.

**The hypothesis of our research:** updating of the defenses in the inner world of the child happens isomorphically in light of parental ways of interpersonal defenses. The defensive repertoire of the child, shown in his real behavior, is quite autonomous from the verbally presented system of knowledge of defensive means and relatively is not dependent on what the child is taught verbally by his mother.

**The methods of research** were chosen to cover the widest range of information and conduct the most versatile search for psychological defenses both in the mother's and child's behavior.

*For research into the psychological defenses of the mother* the structured interview and "An index of vital style" (R. Plutchik, G. Kellerman (1985), E.S. Romanova and L.R. Grebennikova's adaptation) was used.

*For research into the psychological defenses of the child* serial drawings (I.M. Nikolskaya) and the projective game "Finish the story" were used.

Correlation analysis (Spirmen) was applied to the data.

120 mothers from Tyumen and 120 children aged 5-12 years took part in the research (among whom 57 mothers with children aged 5-6 years, 31 with children aged 7-9 years, 32 with children aged 10-12 years).

#### **The results of the research**

Four matrixes of data were exposed to comparison:

1. Defensive behavior of the mother.
2. Training of the child by his mother in defensive behavior by means of verbal instructions.
3. Defensive behavior of the child in a situation of real threat.
4. Defenses on the verbal level, presented in a projective game.

In each matrix the frequency of occurrence of each of 8 protective mechanisms (denial, replacement, regression, compensation, projection, substitution, intellectualization, reactive education) is presented in numerical expression. The significant links received by means of the correlation analysis of Spirmen are presented in table 1.

Table 1

## The results of correlation analysis

| Correlation   | Displacement                         |         | Regression                           |         |
|---|--------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|---------|
|   | Coefficient of Spirmen's correlation | P-level | Coefficient of Spirmen's correlation | P-level |
| Defensive mother's behavior — defensive child's behavior        | 0,262                                | 0,004   | 0,206                                | 0,024   |
| Mother's learning—defensive behavior                            | 0,213                                | 0,019   | —                                    | —       |
| Mother's learning—the result of child's learning                | 0,266                                | 0,003   | —                                    | —       |
| Defensive mother's behavior—mother's learning                   | —                                    | —       | 0,206                                | 0,024   |
| Defensive child's behavior—defense of child at the verbal level | —                                    | —       | 0,216                                | 0,018   |

Statistically significant links were revealed on two of eight studied defensive mechanisms—replacement and regression.

**Replacement** in the mother's defensive behavior is directly connected with replacement in the child's defensive behavior. The more often the mother uses replacement, the more the child is inclined to use it as psychological defense in real behavior. Considering as manifestations of replacement any aspiration to avoid an unpleasant situation, to leave, to be forgotten, to distract, it is possible to interpret this link as repetition by the child of those of the mother's strategies which lead to avoiding threatening situations.

As replacement is a rather infantile mechanism, we are inclined to consider that the child can easily copy it from his mother, and the habit can be fixed in prototype situations at an automatic level, without being realized.

Replacement in the mother's advice and replacement in the child's defensive behavior are statistically authentically connected. Training the child in replacement, the mother uses the following commands: "forget", "leave", "switch over", "leave it". The frequency of the use of replacement in advice by the mother finds reflection both in the real behavior of the child, and at the verbal level.

Thus, if the mother often teaches the child to exclude, and thus herself shows replacement, with high probability this defensive strategy will be seen both in the child's real behavior and at the verbal level.

Speaking about **regression**, the special role of this defensive mechanism should be noted. Frequent use of regression indicates lines of infantilism and inability of the mother to perform adult functions in relation to the child. Using regression negatively affects the emotional link between mother and child [6].

In our research it is revealed that a mother inclined to regression with lines of infantilism in her system of psychological defenses, not only spontaneously reacts to a problem like a child, but also obviously trains the child in infantile ways that promotes limitation and fixing of non-adaptive strategies of blocking in childhood. Regression both in behavior and at the verbal level reduces the possibility of the child at least ideally to be taught more mature defenses and even reduces the probability of using them in real behavior. The combination of unconscious and conscious channels leads to the formation of a steady, rigid system of psychological defenses fixed on regression. These features of the defensive system can only negatively affect personal growth and personality development.

Use by children of regression in behavior correlates with use of regression by them also in the projective game, that is in conditions when the child has an opportunity to choose desirable ways of behavior he accepts. Regression in behavior of the child is shown both at the automatic level of defenses, and at the conscious level. These results clear up the peculiarities of this defensive mechanism: if shown in behavior, with high probability regression will be also shown at the conscious level, pointing to the infantilism of the adult's and child's defensive system as a whole.

**The practical importance** of the results of this research consists of opportunities to work with the repertoire of maternal defensive strategies, forecasting the peculiarities of children's defensive system, setting correctional goals directed on overcoming the regression in the mother's behavior and teaching the child, and also to expand the repertoire of defenses and coping-strategies.

### **Conclusion**

1. Psychological defenses of the child considered in interrelation with psychological defenses of the mother possess lines of isomorphism, in particular in terms of replacement.

2. In our research the hypotheses about the existence of the links between the system of psychological defenses of the mother and system of psychological defenses of the child were confirmed.

3. Replacement in maternal behavior is acquired by the child as a psychological defense. Replacement in conscious learning is acquired by the child on the verbal level.

4. Regression in maternal behavior is connected with the application of regression while teaching the child, and it promotes fixing infantile ways of response to difficulties. Using regression by the child at the level of behavior is connected with its conscious application.

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