

## Special Features of Defence Mechanisms in Persons Deprived of Liberty

Zoriana Kisel<sup>1</sup>, Halyna Katolyk<sup>2</sup>, Olena Tsilmak<sup>3</sup>,  
Vadym V. Barko<sup>4</sup> & Vadym I. Barko<sup>5</sup>

### Abstract

The purpose of the article is to explore the characteristics of defence mechanisms in persons deprived of liberty during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on theoretical analysis and empirical research. This study analyses the literature to define the concept of defence mechanism in prisoners, and investigates, compares, and presents its different features. The investigation was conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Psyche, Mental States, Person Deprived of Liberty, Place of Deprivation of Liberty, COVID-19, Pandemic.

### Introduction

The concept of the defence mechanism was and remains one of the most important contributions of psychoanalysis to the theory of personality and the theory of psychological adaptation. People are constantly under the influence of external mental pressure, while defence mechanisms reduce the potential for emotional experiences that can cause mental trauma. Defence mechanisms are manifested not only in emergency situations but also in everyday life. They can be considered as a means of dealing with anxiety until the person finds a more rational response to the problem or conflict. Defence mechanisms have antagonistic consequences on the human psyche and vital activity: 1) *positive*, because they remove or relieve the pressure of negative emotional experiences; 2) *negative*, because the very problem that provoked the manifestation of the defence mechanism remains unresolved and is often even more difficult to solve (Dashkovska, 2022; Sakovskyi & Bilozorov, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup>Deputy Director, Institute of Management, Psychology and Security, Lviv State University of Internal Affairs, Lviv, Ukraine. [zor.kisel@ukr.net](mailto:zor.kisel@ukr.net)

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of Practical Psychology, Institute of Management, Psychology and Security, Lviv State University of Internal Affairs, Lviv, Ukraine. [katolyk\\_h@outlook.com](mailto:katolyk_h@outlook.com)

<sup>3</sup>Professor, Department of Psychology, National University "Odessa Law Academy", Odesa, Ukraine. [tsilmak@proton.me](mailto:tsilmak@proton.me)

<sup>4</sup>Chief Researcher, Laboratory of Psychological Support, State Research Institute of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. [vbarko66@protonmail.com](mailto:vbarko66@protonmail.com)

<sup>5</sup>Senior researcher, Laboratory of Psychological Support, State Research Institute of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. [barko.va@hotmail.com](mailto:barko.va@hotmail.com)

The problematics of the defence mechanism are reflected in the study of Yu.V. Zakharov. The term "defence mechanism" was first introduced by Sigmund Freud ("The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence" (1894)). He believed that defence was a common name for any technique that the "Ego" could use in a conflict. Freud had in mind the following "techniques": regression; regression; identification; isolation; introjection; displacement; denial; projection and sublimation (Zakharov, 2011, p. 12). In an investigation on the specifics of defence mechanisms, it is worth paying attention to the mental states of a person deprived of liberty, which are essential for organising the rehabilitation process of the offender. A deep study of the inner world of the prisoner, their personal experiences that arose under the influence of the very fact of deprivation of liberty, and their state before sentencing allows to develop psychologically justified measures to eliminate some negative and the formation of new positive mental states, and thereby make the process of socialisation and rehabilitation the most effective (Trykhlil, 2019; Yaremchuk, 2019).

People react differently to their "inner difficulties": they suppress their inclinations, deny their existence, "forget" about a traumatic event, look for a way out in self-justification, try to distort reality, engage in self-deception, and so on. Using various defence mechanisms, they protect their psyche from overexertion (Burlachuk, 2003). The expansion of the concept of defence mechanisms is associated with the name of Anna Freud. The scientist made an attempt to generalise and systematise the knowledge about the defence mechanisms accumulated by the mid-40s. She notes the preserving nature of defence mechanisms, pointing out that these, in turn, prevent disorganisation and behavioural decline, and maintain the normal mental status of the individual.

Developments in the theory of defence mechanisms allowed E. Bibring and S. Lagash to put forward the idea of the existence of a coping mechanism as opposed to a defence mechanism: the aim of defence mechanisms is the urgent easing of internal tension on the principle of satisfaction - dissatisfaction; the aim of coping mechanisms is the realisation of existing possibilities, at least at the cost of great effort. Thus, they believed that it is possible to distinguish protective actions from the performance of protective actions of the Self (Aghyppoet al., 2021; Chekalenko, 2022).

The scientist made certain adjustments to the basic concept of S. Freud: the role of defence mechanisms in resolving external (sociogenic) conflicts was emphasised, and the mechanisms themselves were considered not only as manifestations of Innate inclinations but also as products of individual experience and involuntary learning. The concept that a set of protective mechanisms is individual and characterises an individual's level of adaptation has emerged. A.

Freud gave the first detailed definition of defence mechanisms: "defence mechanisms are the activity of the self that begins when the Self is under the influence of overly active drives or corresponding effects that pose a threat to it. They work automatically, not according to consciousness" (Kirschbaum & Eremeeva, 2005). The scientist grouped the defence mechanisms and identified perceptual, intellectual, and motor automatism. They provide a constant distortion of the image of the real situation to relieve traumatic emotional stress. At the same time, the representation of the environment is minimally distorted, i.e., it corresponds to reality. As a result, unwanted information can be ignored (not perceived), perceived – forgotten, and in the case of access to the memorisation system – interpreted in a way. In these forms of information transformation, traumatising the individual, the group of perceptual defences raised the most questions (Tatsiy et al., 2019; Kazak & Hotsuliak, 2020).

However, this was later confirmed by experimental studies of E. Kirschbaum. Analysis of human reactions to not yet realised stimuli revealed the existence of a special sensory mechanism that, based on not yet perceived information, can assess the emotional significance of a stimulus using the limbic system, if necessary, increase the threshold of susceptibility and thereby cause its overestimation (Kirschbaum & Eremeeva, 2005).

In modern science certain directions are defined in the study of defence mechanisms:

- 1) depending on the object of protection (internal-personal goals, individual or social subjects are protected);
- 2) depending on the nature of threatening factors (from which it is protected – disappointing factors, interpersonal manipulations, informational and psychological influence of mass media);
- 3) depending on the subject of protection (who protects the internal structures of the individual concepts of self, self-esteem, self-awareness of the individual, social community).

The purpose of the article is to explore the characteristics of defence mechanisms in persons deprived of liberty during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on theoretical analysis and empirical research.

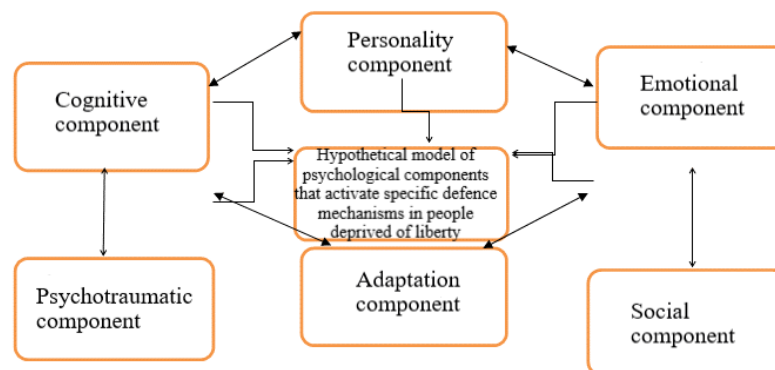
### **Materials and Methods**

Researchers interpret the types of psychological protection differently. F. B. Besin notes that all attempts to classify the types of psychological protection are associated with the process of psychological processing of deep emotional experiences. Modern researcher T. S. Yatsenko believes that psychological defence violates the universal security of the self, as it distances the subject from

reality by distorting the cause of the conflict. The most common types of denial, suppression, rationalisation, regression, projection, depersonalisation, alienation, identification, compensation, sublimation, catharsis, and regression are considered varieties of psychological protection (Kisil, 2016; Kukharuk, 2021).

To understand the causes of psychological defences in incarcerated people burdened with the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on the analysed theoretical material was created a hypothetical model of the psychological components that activate specific defence mechanisms in people deprived of liberty (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Hypothetical model of psychological components that activate specific defence mechanisms in people deprived of liberty**



The hypothetical model suggests that one of the main components influencing and determining features of defence mechanisms is the personality component. The personal component is a phenomenon that includes all characteristics of an individual, such as the features of the nervous system, which are manifested in the ability to quickly change two opposite processes - arousal and inhibition and mobility of nervous processes, strength and balance, type of temperament, features of the cognitive sphere, the ability to analyse and critically comprehend information, stress tolerance, self-concept, etc. (Catholic & Formella, 2018, p. 147). The personal component directly affects the cognitive and emotional components (although the reverse processes are also in dynamics). This is manifested itself in the individual's willingness to acquire new skills in responding to critical situations, understanding, and analysing these situations, readiness to confront and resolve conflicts, understanding of psychological state and emotional colouring. Since a person is a social being, and according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where the third component of a self-actualised person is the need for belonging, that is, the need for communication and social inclusion is a social component. Defence mechanisms are activated under the

influence of the psychotraumatic component and help to adapt to the realities of life when the consciousness of the individual is unable to do this independently (Maksymova, 2018; Catholic, 2020).

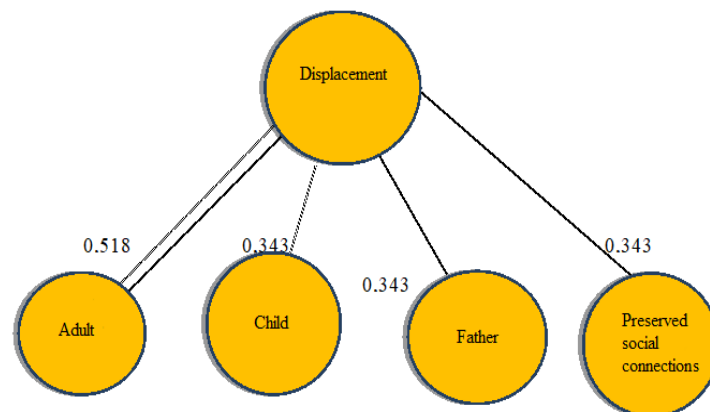
This study involved 40 respondents, of whom 20 were deprived of liberty, and 20 – were not. In the empirical study, the following methods were used: Life Style Index (LSI) by R. Plutchik, H. Kellerman, H. R. Conte, Transactional analysis by E. Berne and the author's survey (Graulet al., 2021, p. 1215).

Life Style Index (LSI) by R. Plutchik, H. Kellerman, H.R. Conte includes 92 questions that measure 8 types of DM: denial, displacement, substitution, compensation, reaction formation ('hypercompensation'), projection, rationalisation and regression. Transactional analysis by E. Berne consists of 21 questions and three scales, such as Ego-States "Father", "Adult", and "Child".

### Results and Discussion

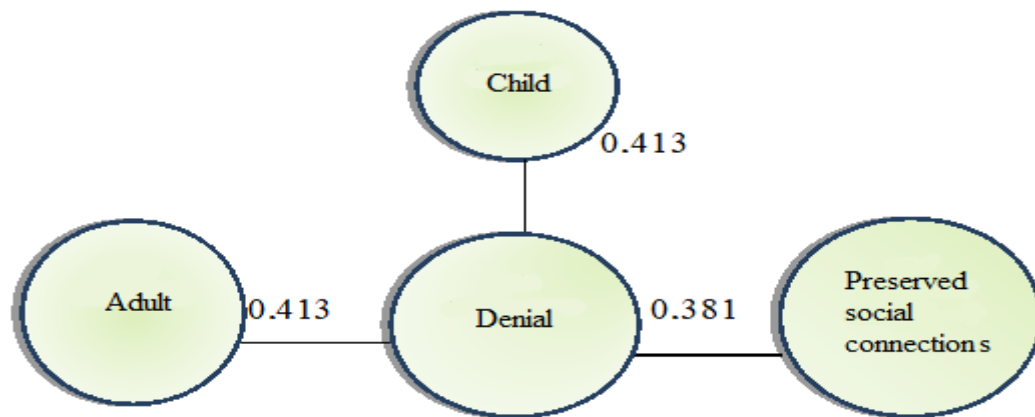
Based on the results of correlation analysis, it was found that displacement, regression, substitution, denial, projection, compensation, hyper compensation, and rationalisation have different statistically significant relationships with the scales of other methods in the two groups studied (Schmidt et al., 2021). In the group of people deprived of liberty (DL), direct correlations were found between displacement (DS) and the scales "Adult" ( $r = 0.518$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), "Child" ( $r = 0.343$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), "Father" ( $r = 0.343$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), "Preserved social connections" ( $r = 0.343$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). This indicates that the higher the displacement rate, the higher the indicators of "Adult", "Child", "Father", "Preserved social connections". This correlation shows that the artificial forgetting of traumatic memories by the individual, due to their transfer to the unconscious, depends on the social environment and affects the individual's sense of responsibility, rationality, and impulsivity (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Correlation graph on the "Displacement" Scale (DL)**



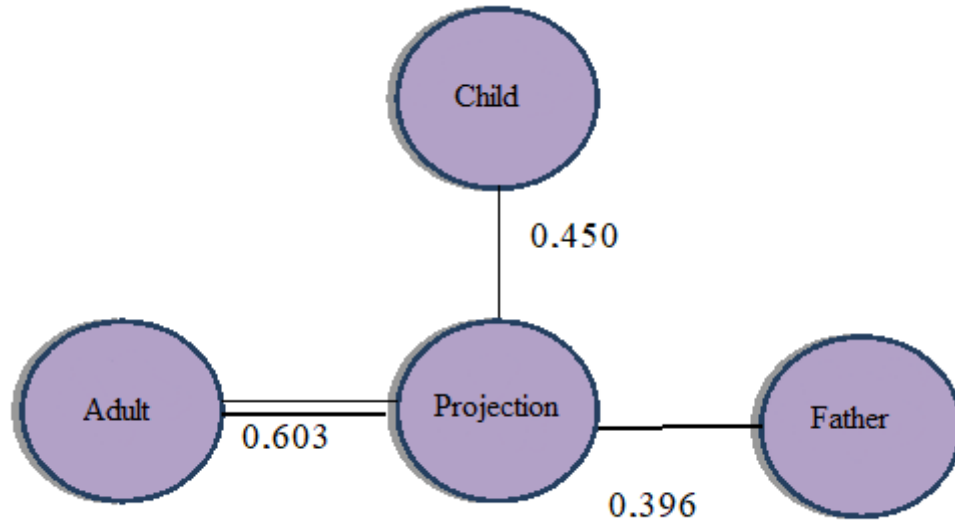
A direct correlation was also found between denial and the scales "Adult" ( $r = 0.413$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), "Child" ( $r = 0.413$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) and "Preserved social connections" ( $r = 0.381$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). This presumably indicates that the higher the denial rate, the higher the score on the Adult, Child, and Retained Social Connections scales. It is a mechanism for denying thoughts, feelings, desires, needs, or realities that are unacceptable on a conscious level. The individual's behaviour demonstrates that it is as if the problem does not exist (Šolcová et al., 2021, p. 83). Such patterns are inherent in the "Child" and "Adult" Ego-States because it is in such Ego-states that people tend to change their perception in accordance with the stressful situation and social affiliation. (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Correlation graph on the "Denial" Scale (DL)**

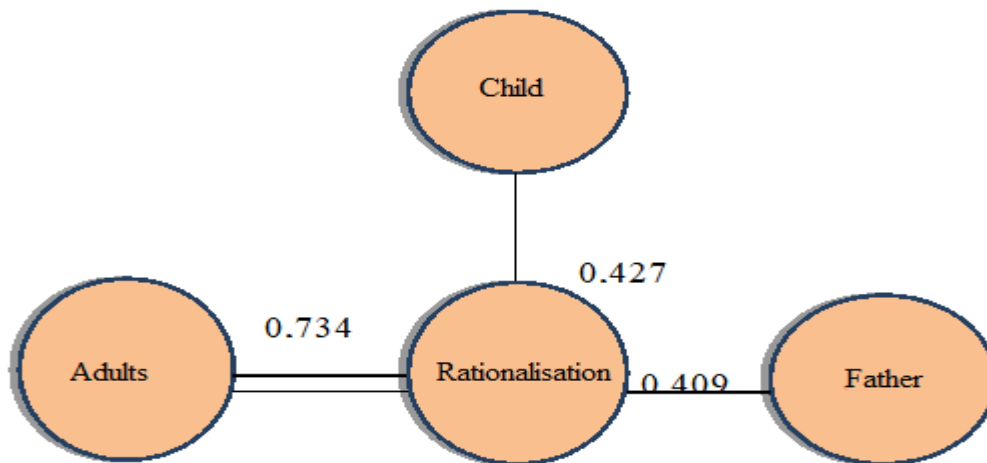


A direct correlation was also found between the projection scale and the "Adult" ( $r = 0.603$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), "Child" ( $r = 0.450$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), and "Father" ( $r = 0.396$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) scales. This suggests that the higher the projection score, the higher the Adult, Child, and Father scale. This is presumably associated with the unconscious transference of unacceptable feelings, desires, and aspirations to others. It can be understood as unconsciously rejecting one's unacceptable thoughts, instructions, or desires and endowing them on other people to shift responsibility for what is happening inside the Self to the environment. A person starts to blame others for being irritated, while experiencing irritation themselves, claiming to be unloved when in fact it is them who does not love, blaming others for their mistakes (Honcharenko & Shyhal, 2021). When undesirable qualities are discovered in others, guilt is alleviated, and this provides relief. Projection by-products – irony, sarcasm, hostility (Figure 4).

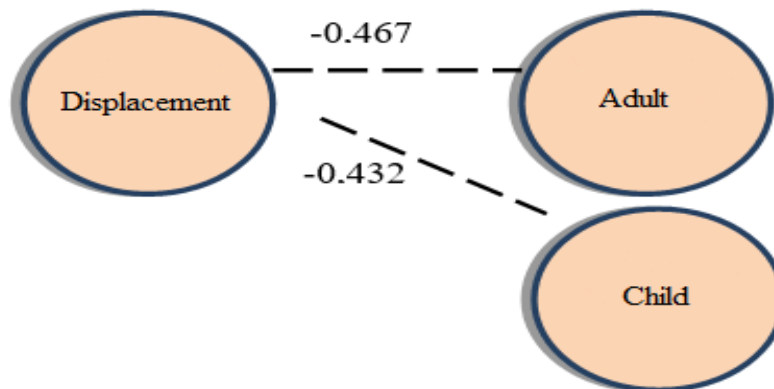
Figure 4: Correlation graph on the "Projection" Scale (DL)



There are also direct correlations between the rationalisation scale and the "Adult" ( $r = 0.734$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), "Child" ( $r = 0.427$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), and "Father" ( $r = 0.409$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) scales. This is manifested in the recognition and application in the reasoning of only that part of the information that is allowed to be perceived, through which one's behaviour is presented as well-controlled and not contradictory to objective circumstances. The unacceptable part of the situation is removed from consciousness, transformed in a special way and then recognised, but in an altered form. The main feature of **rationalisation** is the post-factum attempt to create harmony between the desired and the real situation and thus prevent the loss of self-esteem (Slinko&Uvarova,2019). This is an attempt to explain behaviour that is not confirmed by objective analysis, or an attempt to justify failure and underachievement. Thus, the passive individual rationalises that their excessive compliant behaviour – is a consequence of mental delicacy; the aggressive individual rationalises that, as a strong person, they cannot allow anyone to "live off them"; the indifferent individual rationalises that they are independent and self-reliant (Kunzler et al., 2021, p. 23). In these situations, a person decides on what to do subconsciously and does not realise what is really behind this decision (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Correlation graph on the "Rationalisation" Scale (DL)**

An inverse correlation of displacement with the "Adult" ( $r = -0.467$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), and the "Child" scale ( $r = -0.432$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) was found in people who were not deprived of liberty, indicating that the higher the displacement rate, the lower the indicator on the "Adult" and "Child" scales. Consequently, it can be assumed that in overcoming internal conflicts through an active withdrawal from consciousness, by forgetting information about what happened, the ability to soberly assess the situation, information, one's patterns and creativity decreases. Such traits as frivolity, self-centeredness, stubbornness, and aggressiveness can also be manifested (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Correlation graph on the "Displacement" Scale (NDL)**

A direct correlation was also found between the regression scale and the "Child" scale ( $r = 0.664$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). This indicates that the higher the regression value, the higher the value on the "Child" scale. It can be assumed that when the



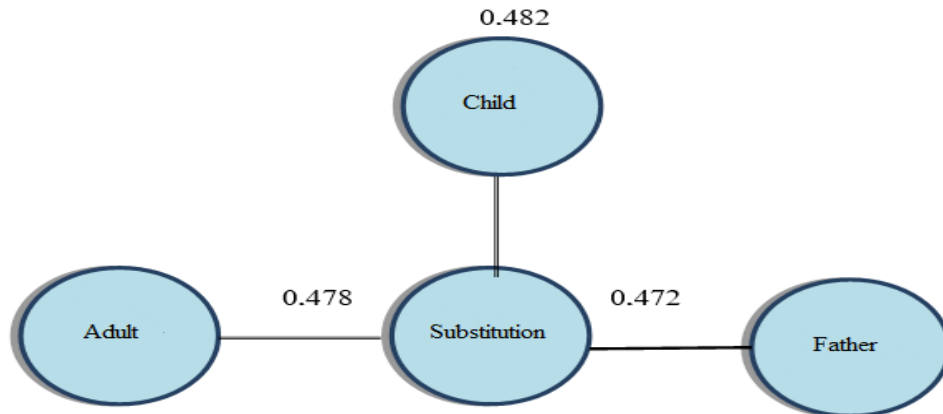
regression score and the "Child" scale are high in stressful situations, the person returns to a previous or less mature stage in the development of feelings and behaviour (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Correlation graph on the "Regression" Scale (NDL)**



There is also a direct correlation between the substitution scale and the "Adult" ( $r = 0.478$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), "Child" ( $r = 0.482$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) and "Father" scale ( $r = 0.472$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). This indicates that the higher the level of substitution, the higher the indicator on the scales "Adult", "Child", "Father" is. As a defence against an intolerable situation, there is a transfer of reaction from an "inaccessible" object to an "accessible" one, or by replacing an unacceptable action with an acceptable one. Through this transference, the tension generated by an unsatisfied need is created and during this process, all of the individual's Ego states are activated (Figure 8).

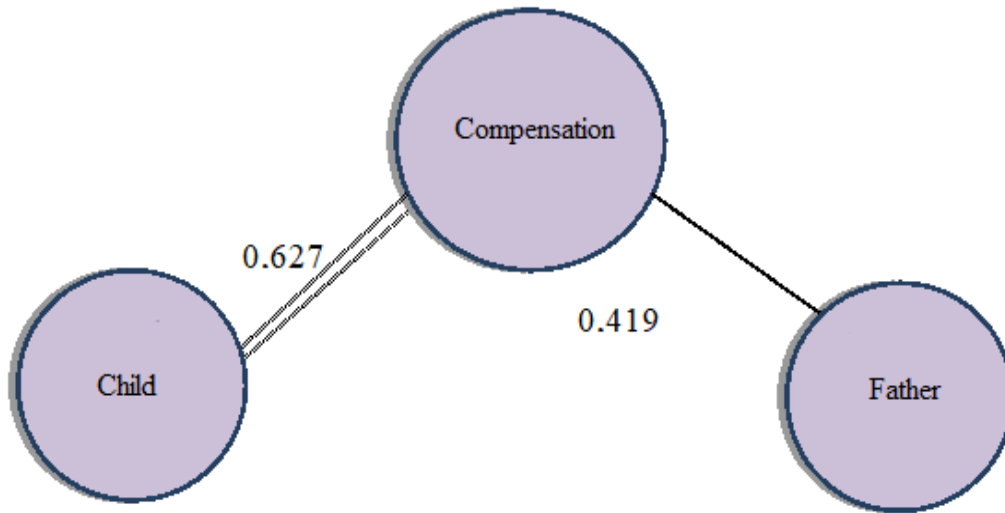
**Figure 8: Correlation graph on the "Substitution" scale (NDL)**



There is also a direct correlation between the defence mechanism "compensation" and the "Father" ( $r = 0.419$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), and the "Child" ( $r = 0.627$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) Ego-States scale. This indicates that when a person achieves alternative success in another field to maintain positive self-esteem, the individual navigates standard situations, "triggers" useful stereotypical behaviour, freeing the mind

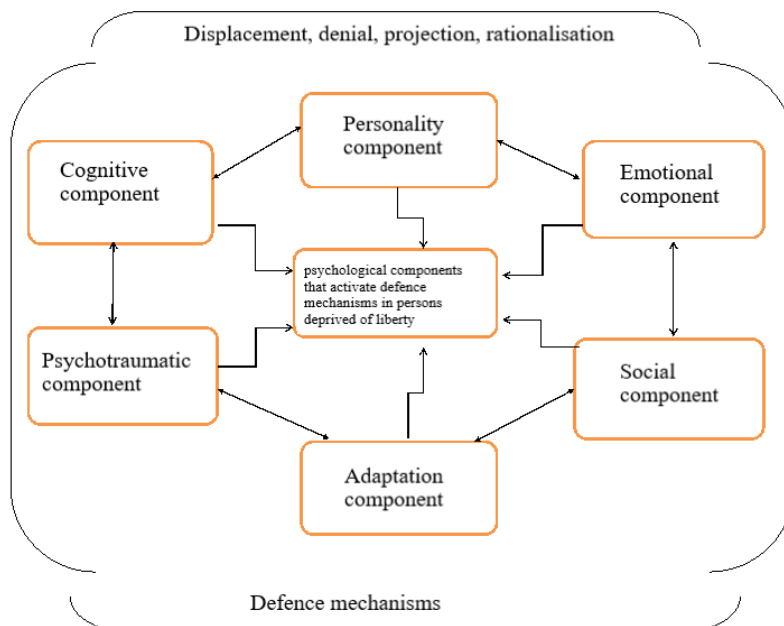
from being burdened by simple, everyday tasks, activating creativity, impulsivity, and interest (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Correlation graph on the "Compensation" scale (NDL)**



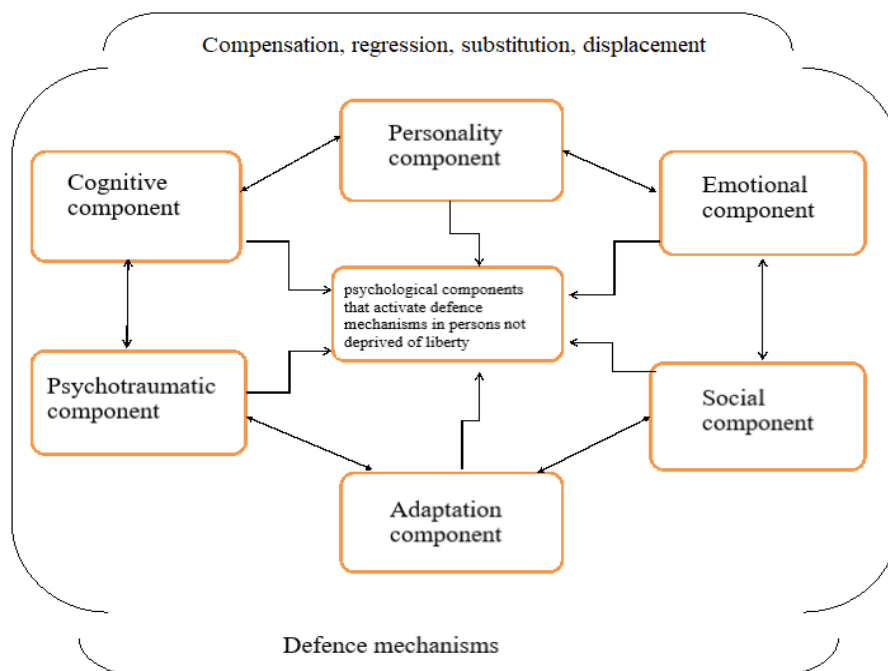
The unconscious mechanism of rationalisation should not be confused with deliberate lies and deception. Rationalisation helps to maintain self-esteem and avoid responsibility and guilt. There is at least a minimal amount of truth in any rationalisation, but there is more self-deception in it, which is why it is dangerous (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: A hypothetical model of the psychological components that activate specific defence mechanisms in persons deprived of liberty during the COVID-19 pandemic**



In the case of people *not deprived of liberty*, however, compensation predominates. This is an unconscious attempt to overcome real and imaginary shortcomings. Compensatory behaviour is universal, as achieving status is an important need for almost all people (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: A hypothetical model of the psychological components that activate specific defence mechanisms in persons not deprived of liberty during the COVID-19 pandemic**



The results of the empirical study can be summarised as follows: the leading mechanism of psychological defence in *persons deprived of liberty* is rationalisation. This is a defence mechanism that justifies thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that are unacceptable. The rationalisation is the most common mechanism of psychological defence because human behaviour is determined by many factors and by rationalisation it can be explained in terms of the motives that are most acceptable to the individual (Montanari et al., 2021, p. 228; Kotsur, 2022).

### Conclusions

Psychological defence mechanisms - are mechanisms that protect against various forms and nature of negative experiences and influences; they help to maintain psychological stability and equilibrium. This term was introduced by S. Freud. However, the concept was developed more fully by A. Freud. All defence

mechanisms operate on an unconscious level and deny, distort, and transform the perception of real situations. The main mechanisms are denial, displacement, regression, compensation, projection, substitution, intellectualisation, reaction formation, primitive isolation, rationalisation, moralisation, sublimation, undoing, introjection, auto aggression, splitting, sexualisation and projective identification. Although, these mechanisms have been studied for quite some time, their unique specificity in people deprived of liberty under the additional stressful conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic remains under-researched.

Consequently, defence mechanisms, in any case, help to avoid suffering, contribute to the elimination of an unpleasant state, the denial of traumatic experiences, the achievement of inner peace coherence, a realistic adjustment to the environment, provide an opportunity to feel a certain comfort in the particular situation, allow to overcome anxiety and tension, contribute to a more effective means of experiencing and being able to navigate through the challenges the world presents. While this is necessary in various life situations, the activation of defence mechanisms leads to an inadequate perception of reality, pathological activity.

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