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# **Exploring Gender Differences in Defense Mechanisms: A Systematic Review**

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# CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>CHAPTER I: THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS FROM SIGMUND FREUD TO PHEBE CRAMER.....</b>	<b>4</b>
I.I ORIGINS OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS: FROM THE TOPOGRAPHIC TO THE STRUCTURAL MODEL OF THE MIND .....	5
I.I.I THE FIRST DIVISION OF THE HUMAN MIND .....	5
I.I.II A REVISED MODEL OF THE MIND .....	7
I.I.III DEFENSE MECHANISMS ACCORDING TO FREUD .....	8
I.II DEFENSE MECHANISMS AFTER FREUD: ANNA FREUD .....	10
I.I.I: MELANIE KLEIN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF OBJECT RELATIONS .....	11
I.I.II: DONALD WINNICOTT: THE EXPLORATIONS OF TRUE AND FALSE SELF .....	12
I.I.III: OTTO KERNBERG AND DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER.....	13
I.I.IV TODAY'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS .....	14
I.III AIM OF THE PRESENT LITERATURE REVIEW .....	14
<b>CHAPTER II: ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>16</b>
II.I MATERIALS AND METHODS .....	16
II.II RESULTS .....	17
II.II.I OVERALL RESULTS: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DEFENSE MECHANISMS .....	24
II.II.II GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF INTERNALIZING AND EXTERNALIZING DEFENSES .....	24
II.II.III GENDER DIFFERENCES IN GUILT- AND SHAME- PRONENESS .....	25
II.II.IV GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF MATURE AND IMMATURE DEFENSES .....	26
II.III TOOLS USED TO ASSESS DEFENSE MECHANISMS AND TYPE OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS INVESTIGATED.....	30
II.IV DISCUSSION.....	36
<b>CHAPTER III: CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>38</b>
III.I LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	39
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>40</b>

## **ABSTRACT**

Defense mechanisms are mental processes aimed at avoiding stressful situations and negative feelings (Cramer, 2008). The present literature review intends to investigate the correlation between gender and defense mechanisms use. Currently, psychoanalytic theory postulates that females have the tendency to use internalizing defenses, for instance *turning against the self*. On the other hand, men are generally directed outwards, as it can be seen in *projection* or *turning against the object*. Therefore, this dissertation aims to review the literature in order to explore and identify whether there are gender differences in the use of defense mechanisms in adults, with a particular focus on the differences due to gender roles. Specifically, the present systematic review deepens in the history of the formation of defense mechanisms and subsequently, reports on the progression these have, with a specific focus on the different consequences produced on the social development and character formation of men and women. After analyzing the available research papers and texts, an analysis and discussion of the results of this review are made. Lastly, suggestions for future research and works on the subject are provided.

**Keywords:** defense mechanisms, gender differences, literature review.

# INTRODUCTION

The present work aims to examine the evolution of defense mechanisms and the differences between males and females in their usage.

The importance of defense mechanisms stems from the fact that they evolve and develop within the personality of an individual, they become an integrant part of how they experience the world around them and how they make sense of the events they live throughout their lives. These modes of operating and functioning have been the subject of extensive research and studies starting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the works of Freud (1900). These studies are still continuing nowadays, mainly because they are greatly influenced by the immediate environment they were developed and therefore are always changing and adapting to keep up with the evolving societal transformation. Defense mechanisms are context-dependent and thus can be influenced by various factors, such as stereotypes and gender roles, leading to variations based on the gender individuals identify with.

“Defenses are a central part of personality structure” (Kernberg, 1967, p. 833); growing up children are raised to fit in a specific category, either men or women, depending on their birth sex, and according to Lengua, and Stormshak (2000), “gender roles are important predictors of personality, coping, and symptoms” (p.810). Young boys are pushed to be strong and externalize their feelings with conviction and certainty. On the other hand, young girls are taught to be submissive and not to externalize their emotions with too much emphasis (Lengua & Stormshak, 2000), since it can be seen as undesirable and ultimately counterproductive in society. Both the current era and the historical period when the concept of defense mechanisms was first developed share a common thread: in the past, women’s emotions and reactions were often viewed negatively. They were frequently dismissed as hysterical, suppressed, and deemed in need of cure (Gilman, King, Porter, Rousseau, & Showalter, 2022). This current view of how men and women should behave is slowly changing nowadays, although it is still considered more acceptable for men to be more assertive than women in order to prevail on others and, more in general, to have a dominant role, while women are not encouraged to aspire at having more powerful positions in any aspect of their lives. These gender roles shape the character of men and women and therefore have an impact on the creation of their defense mechanisms as well (Bullitt, & Farber, 2002).

Chapter I focuses on the historical evolution of defense mechanisms, starting with an analysis of the Models of the Mind proposed by Freud (1900, 1923) and the concept

of repression and compromise formation, which are the foundation for the formation of defense mechanisms. It then proceeds to examine the subsequent work of Anna Freud (1936) and Melanie Klein (1932, 1945, 1975a, 1975b), both key figures in the evolution of the concept of defense mechanisms. The chapter ends with a discussion of the more recent views about defense mechanisms, with Donald Winnicott (1965), Otto Kernberg (1976), and Phebe Cramer (2008).

Chapter II analyzes the papers included during the screening process, which are conforming to the inclusion criteria. It compares the studies and analyzes their results according to gender differences in the use of *turning against the self* and *turning against the object*, in the organization of guilt and shame, and lastly in the prevalence of *immature* or *mature* defense mechanisms. This section ends with a critical discussion of the studies' results.

Chapter III provides the conclusion of the present dissertation, with a list of its limitations and lastly, it offers suggestions for future research.

# **CHAPTER I: THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS FROM SIGMUND FREUD TO PHEBE CRAMER**

This chapter is aimed at clarifying what defense mechanisms are and discussing how this concept was first created, the modifications that it underwent throughout history, and defining the different existing types of defensive strategies used daily.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the definition attributed to the concept of “defense mechanism” varied and evolved according to the new reconfigurations of the mind and the insights on how to explore the unconscious processes that seemed to affect men’s and women’s lives. The American clinical psychologist, Cramer (2008) defined defense mechanisms as “cognitive processes that function to protect the individual from excessive anxiety or other negative emotions” (Cramer, 2008, p. 1). From this description, it can be understood that these defensive strategies’ primary usage is against wishes and mental activities that might in some way give rise to any unpleasant feeling, thought, memory, or action. More specifically, defense mechanisms are instrumental when it comes to the loss of an important object, loss of an object’s love, castration anxiety (the name given to the fear of being physically punished), and ultimately superego disapproval, or the feeling of guilt (Freud 1926/1962). Other reasons for which individuals adopt them can be separation anxiety (Bowlby, 1960), stranger anxiety (Spitz, 1950), and persecutory and depressive anxiety (Klein 1940). Lastly, defense mechanisms are involved in self-esteem issues (Kohut, 1980).

The aforementioned definition stems from one of the earliest conceptualizations of defense mechanisms made by Freud (1900), who understood defense mechanisms as having the purpose of avoiding the experience of any painful feelings and affect (Freud, 1894). It is with Freud’s work that the importance of defense mechanisms was discovered, even though the understanding psychologists gained of them has greatly improved ever since. Today’s view of defenses used by individuals’ minds is more structured and implies a more categorized interpretation, thanks to the work of A. Freud (1936), who created a division to distinguish their adaptive or maladaptive nature, and Cramer (2008), with the identification of their main characteristics. S. Freud (1923) focused more on the underlying processes used by the human mind to avoid painful feelings. More

specifically, <sup>1</sup>Freud (1923), in his book *The Ego and the Id*, published in 1923, started exploring the possibility of the human mind adopting defensive strategies as a way of dealing with internal and external stressors.

## **I.I ORIGINS OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS: FROM THE TOPOGRAPHIC TO THE STRUCTURAL MODEL OF THE MIND**

According to Auchincloss (2015), a model is conceived as an “imaginary construction designed to represent a complex system that cannot be observed directly in its entirety” (Auchincloss, 2015, p. 5). The upcoming paragraphs will focus on the models that S. Freud developed. In particular, the topographic model of the mind (1900) and subsequently the structural model of the mind (1923).

### **I.I.I THE FIRST DIVISION OF THE HUMAN MIND**

Interestingly, a way to understand what this model is based on is to focus on its name. In particular, the word *topographic* is derived from the Greek word *topo*, meaning "place". This wording choice represents how Freud (1915/1962) view the mind in this first model, namely as if made of structures, each of which occupies a particular psychical locality and functions in a particular spatial relation to the others (Freud 1900/1962). In his view, the regions, places in the brain, should not be thought of as existing anatomical parts within in, but on the contrary as of modeling a mental iceberg in which the unconscious lies much deeper that consciousness and preconsciousness, which are regions that can be found either at the top of the iceberg or immediately above it. While the human mind is fully aware of conscious experiences and can access preconscious thoughts with deliberate effort, the unconscious operates outside awareness and cannot be easily brought to the surface through concentration alone.

The *topographic model of the mind* (1900) is considered to be the one that created the main foundation for the discovery of defense mechanisms, and more specifically, the unconscious region described in it. The unconscious in the topographic model of the mind is described as being made of wishes, mainly of either a sexual nature or an aggressive

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<sup>1</sup> S. Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), represented the pillar upon which the Structural Model of the mind was built.

one, that serve as motivation to act and are “actively denied access to consciousness by the force of repression” (Auchincloss, 2015, p.73). This new type of unconscious can thus be described as “dynamic” in that it is constantly working and influencing our drives and motivations. Through this first division of the mind, it can be seen that Freud (1900) was already hypothesizing the possibility of the human mind having ways to prevent the individual from experiencing painful feelings and spare him/her from painful memories deriving from the urge to satisfy these wishes through the use of repression (Freud, 2018). The wishes that have been mentioned so far refer to libidinal wishes, which according to Freud (1920) were mainly related to sex; other than this type of wishes, in individuals’ minds there are “self-preservative drives” as well, also called “ego drives”, which represent the repressive forces protecting the consciousness from being overwhelmed (Sandler, Dare & Holder, 1978).

The importance of Freud’s (1900) work does not rely solely on this categorization of the mind’s regions; the revolutionary aspect of this first model is centered in the role of repression, which is embodied by a  *censor*. This censor is thought of as having the power to decide which of the human mind’s desires are morally acceptable or not, therefore settling the constant and ongoing struggle between the preconscious and unconscious. This struggle is rooted in the separation of the mind into two different levels: above the censor and below it. The former consists of all the rational thoughts and actions purposely carried out to conform to societal rules and imposed moral standards. The latter is dominated by all the unconscious drives, wishes, and irrational thoughts that cannot be revealed to others or society (Auchincloss, 2015). The problem with this first Model of the mind was that the unconscious domain of the mind was seen as made of a single bundle of wishes, combined with the fact that both the defenses against the emergence of these unconscious wishes and the censor are both operating unconsciously (Freud, 2018). Furthermore, the concept of “unconscious” was used in descriptive terms to represent processes occurring outside of awareness, but it was also used as a system or topographical location in the mind and ultimately in a dynamic sense with the censor. Other than the views about the unconscious, the Topographic model did not accommodate the need to have a sense of guilt at an unconscious level (Freud, 1923), which is fundamental for many defense mechanisms and their development. The problems with the topographic model stem from the confusion surrounding the unconscious, namely the censorships. The censorship was identified by Freud (1915a) as not only belonging between conscious and unconscious but between preconscious and conscious as well, a



concept that he named “second censorship”. This second censorship includes the properties of the dynamic unconscious to the preconscious.

## **I.I.II A REVISED MODEL OF THE MIND**

Mindful of the above, Freud (1923) elaborated a new model, namely the *structural model of the mind*, which was based on the ongoing struggle not between conscious and unconscious mind but among three agencies.

Specifically, building on the conscious and unconscious division of the mind, Freud (1923) elaborated on the existence of three forces governing individuals’ mind. The first one, namely the *Id*, is governed by drives and the pleasure-seeking principle and it can be understood as being the most similar element of the mind to the unconscious. It is always trying to be actively expressed and fulfill its needs while been repressed by the *Superego*, the conscience of the mind, representing the second component of the mind in the structural model. The superego encompasses all the moral values and principles according to which individuals live their lives. The superego acts as a moral compass based on societal rules and according to which individuals measure themselves, and often this is the mechanism responsible for creating feelings of guilt and shame for actions and thoughts, deemed to be inappropriate. This model of the mind is particularly important for the understanding of defense mechanisms as it introduces the concept of the *Ego*, described by Freud as “a coherent organization of mental processes” (Freud 1923/1962, p. 9). The ego operates mainly at the unconscious level, like the id and the superego, although it has implications also in the preconscious and conscious ones. It is not merely an unconscious component, it is responsible for the executive functions of the mind, including censorship and defense mechanisms, reasoning, logic and judgment (Auchincloss, 2015).

The most important role of the ego is to forge compromises between conscious and unconscious domains of the mind, therefore generating a compromise between external and societal demands and the desires and wishes the unconscious minds want. These conflicts can be either *intersystemic* when they appear between the id and the superego, or *intrasystemic*, meaning within the id or within the superego (Auchincloss, 2015). Compromises are thus generated by the ego as a way of defending the mind from impulses that would be deemed undesirable in a modern society; it is at this moment that defenses are created. In the structural model of the mind, defenses can be seen as an adaptation including the “fit between an individual and the environment and the

psychological processes that enhance this fit by changing, controlling, and/or accommodating to the environment” (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012, p. 6). Conflict mediation is at the core of the structural model, and it is made of two main processes: appraisal and defense.

Defense mechanisms develop during childhood and evolve throughout individuals’ lives. The defenses implicated in the individuals’ developed are called *immature* and appear in the early years, while the ones used later in life as named *mature* (Cramer & Cramer, 1991).

### **I.I.III DEFENSE MECHANISMS ACCORDING TO FREUD**

Freud’s (1894) work led to the conceptualization of some of the most known types of defense mechanisms, among which there are *repression*, *reaction formation*, *sublimation*, *conversion*, *displacement*, *projection*, *isolation*, *undoing*, *denial*, *splitting*, and *turning against the self*. These mechanisms occur in specific situations and have distinct consequences for the individual. The subsequent paragraphs will provide a description of each defense mechanism, based on the hierarchy introduced by the Defense Functioning Scale (DFS; American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Perry et al., 1998; Skodol & Perry, 1993).

Due to the lack of adequate measures, there has always been confusion on how to assess the findings regarding defense mechanisms (Di Giuseppe et al., 2018). Due to this issue, the Defense Functioning Scale was created (DFS; American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Perry et al., 1998; Skodol & Perry, 1993), which is based on the Defense Mechanisms Rating Scale-Self-Reported-30 (DMRS-SR-30; Di Giuseppe et al., 2020). In this axis, defense mechanisms are organized into three defensive categories: immature defensive category, neurotic defensive category, and mature defensive category. These categories are further divided into seven levels, going from ones with the less adaptiveness to the higher adaptiveness. The immature defenses include for instance *denial*, *splitting*, and *acting out*; among the neurotic defenses there are *intellectualization*, *repression*, and *reaction formation*. Lastly, *sublimation*, *suppression*, and *humor* are examples of mature defenses (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021).

*Reaction formation*, also named reactive alteration of the ego, is a defense mechanism where an individual unconsciously converts unwanted thoughts, feelings, impulses into their opposites. For instance, a man with latent homosexual tendencies might cope with these feelings by actively engaging in homophobic behavior. This

mechanism originates within the individual and provides a permanent way of dealing with the unacceptable wish that caused it to emerge (Freud, 1936).

*Sublimation* concerns wish of a sexual and/or aggressive nature, and it acts by turning them into morally acceptable values; since it is based on what is deemed to be moral and pure, sublimation implies the existence of the superego.

Another defense that works by disguising wishes into more acceptable forms is *conversion*. In this mechanism, unconscious drives are redirected to a different part of the body, which becomes a secondary erogenous zone (Freud, 1936).

*Displacement* affects the instinctual aim by moving the feelings attached to an idea or wish to another associated idea or wish (Auchincloss, 2015).

In *projection*, the repulsed idea is displaced into the external world or to another individual. In Freud's (1894) view, projection was understood to be concerned only with negative emotions and wishes, which are transferred to avoid the shame and guilt brought up by them, while for Anna Freud (1936/1966), projection can also take the form of "altruistic surrender", which will be discussed below.

*Isolation* differs significantly from the previously discussed mechanisms in that it does not substitute wishful content but instead it removes it from its original context. Despite this, the content remains present at the conscious level (Freud, 1936).

As for the previous defense mechanism, isolation was further developed by Anna Freud (1936/1966) who created a subcategory called *intellectualization*. Moreover, by using *undoing* as a defense mechanism, the individual suppresses their drives by saying or doing the opposite of what they truly mean (Auchincloss, 2015).

Another defense mechanism is *denial*, which allows the individual to not perceive painful feelings by refusing to acknowledge their existence in the first place. Denial can be also referred to as disavowal and it can appear in different forms: it can be present for example in either reality or fantasy (Freud, 1936).

*Splitting* involves dividing contradictory experiences and their associated feelings to prevent their integration, thereby maintaining the individual's sense of internal coherence.

The last defense mechanism derived from Freud's (1894) work is *turning against the self*, through which the unacceptable wishes and aggressive drive for another person are redirected toward the self instead.

Following the first description and analysis of the Structural model of the mind proposed by Freud, many other well-known figures in the history of the psychodynamic field built their theories on defense mechanisms, creating the field of Ego Psychology.

## **I.II DEFENSE MECHANISMS AFTER FREUD: ANNA FREUD**

Starting from Anna Freud (1895-1982), youngest daughter of Freud (1856-1939), who extensively studied both normal and pathological ego development. Similarly to her father's definitions, she conceptualized defense mechanisms as an unconscious way of the ego to decrease internal stress stimuli (Bailey & Pico, 2023). Anna Freud (1936) was the first psychologist to create a systematic and comprehensive organization of defense mechanisms, developing a first division between *primitive or maladaptive defense mechanisms* and *higher-level or adaptive defenses*, which develop and contribute to the character formation of a person depending on the context and the severity in which they arose (Bailey, & Pico, 2023).

Based on her work, Anna Freud added a few defense mechanisms on this list, namely *introjection*, *idealization*, *asceticism*, *intellectualization*, *altruistic surrender*, and *identification with the aggressor*, to mention a few (Freud 1936/1974).

In her book, *The ego and the mechanisms of defense*, Anna Freud (1936) focuses in particular on one defensive strategy, namely *repression*, defining it as the “withholding or expulsion of an idea or affect from the conscious ego” (p. 51). Compared to the others, repression is a constant underlying process. While other defenses are triggered and activated in response to specific stressful situations and wishes, repression is always at work, continuously managing unacceptable thoughts and impulses within the ego. Therefore, even when it may not be the primary defense used, repression is always present, and it is thus at the basis of compromise formation.

For what concerns *introjection*, it is a defense used to internalize an aspect of the external world in order to avoid painful feelings, loss, or disappointment.

*Idealization* involves directing extremely positive feelings toward another individual, so as to avoid disappointment.

*Asceticism* is a prohibition of any instinctual wishes while *intellectualization* is the connection of instinctual processes to ideational contents so as to make them accessible to consciousness.

*Altruistic surrender* implies achieving gratification by living vicariously through somebody else's life and being unable to distinguish the self from others.

Lastly, *identification with the aggressor* is connected with projection of guilt and shame and involves taking the characteristics and identity of a person who poses a threat or an opponent that cannot be defeated (Freud, 1936).

### **I.II.I: MELANIE KLEIN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF OBJECT RELATIONS**

Other than Anna Freud (1936) and her father (1923), defense mechanisms have been studied extensively by Melanie Klein (1932), who focused her research on the Object Relations Theory (ORT) regarding the developmental challenge of childhood.

In ORT, the *object* is another individual and the *relation* that connects them is made of a self-representation, the object representation and the representation of these two elements' interactions (Auchincloss, 2015). Klein's theory (1932) is based on two *positions*, which are created by the child in response to experiencing both the good and the bad part of the object. These two *positions* are built on the interactions with the caregivers and the passage from the first to the second can be seen as the capacity to tolerate conflicting feelings about the *object* by the child (Auchincloss, 2015). This process of internalization of both aspects of the *object* is how the *superego* is developed.

The first *position* the child goes through during his/her development is the *paranoid position*. During this phase, the most used defense mechanism is *projection*, as the child's drives for aggression is much stronger than the libidinal ones (Klein, 1935, 1948b). Another defense strategy used during this position is *splitting*. This defense mechanism is useful to the child in order to protect the good aspects of the object, and of the *ego* (Summers, 2024); in cases in which *splitting* is not strong enough to protect the *good object* from persecutory anxiety, a more severe form of this defense can take place. *Idealization* helps the child to not acknowledge the bad parts of reality, which gives rise to another defense mechanism crucial at this stage: *denial* (Summers, 2024).

*Depressive position* comes after the *paranoid position*, and it is characterized by the acknowledgment that the *object* can hold within it both good and bad parts. The defense used in this phase is *denial*, which in this case serves as protection against the dangers to the *good object* (Klein, 1935).

She found other defense mechanisms, such as primitive idealization, projective identification, and reparation (Klein, 1932, 1945, 1975a, 1975b). *Primitive idealization*

regards experiencing only the best aspect of another individual, while leaving not considering any other so as to enhance his/her experience of self. *Projective identification*, as well as *splitting*, serves to separate and protect the good aspects of an object from the bad experiences associated with it in order to better manage it. According to Klein (1932), this mechanism involves projecting unwanted aspects of oneself onto another person, who then unconsciously embodies those projections, allowing the individual to manage internal conflicts more effectively.

Lastly, *reparation* involves trying to make up for aggressive wishes directed at an individual by repairing the imagined harm caused by these wishes. This mechanism aims to alleviate the resulting sense of guilt and anxiety (Auchincloss, 2015).

## **I.II.II: DONALD WINNICOTT: THE EXPLORATIONS OF TRUE AND FALSE SELF**

Winnicott's (1965) work on defense mechanisms relies on the presence of a *facilitating environment* and the *maturational environment*. In Winnicott's (1960) theory, defense mechanisms are used as a way to protect the *true self* from the external environment, which by doing so, becomes numb to any feeling or emotion. Therefore, living in a disguised manner is the *ego*'s defensive strategy to avoid any painful feeling.

Since the *true self* is hidden under a *false self*, another defense that the *ego* needs to use is *splitting*. In Winnicott's (1963) view, *splitting* is a necessary condition in any situation that can cause depressive anxiety because the aggressive drive must be kept separate from the *true self*.

Another defense mechanism important for the maintenance of this separated self is *reaction formation*. This defense is coupled with *denial* in that the child first used *reaction formation* to turn aggression into the opposite, thereby avoiding the negative feelings and making every relation a positive one (Summers, 2024).

Lastly, *projection* is used to defend the self because the bad aspects of the self are projected to external objects; in this sense, *projection* can be seen as a type of split (Winnicott, 1950).

As in Klein's (1935) theory, Winnicott thought that the integration of both good and bad aspect of the *object* represented the solution to the rise of psychopathology (Winnicott, 1963b). Furthermore, to be able to pursue any goal that the child might have, it is fundamental to integrate aggression into the character of the *true self*, since according to Winnicott (1936), it is a primary source of motivation.

### **I.II.III: OTTO KERNBERG AND DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER**

Kernberg was one of the main exponents of the *ego psychology*'s field, and as such he believed that the *ego* results in from the development of object relations (Kernberg, 1976). The first defense the individual uses in Kernberg's (1976) theory is *splitting*, around which their mental representation of the world is built. As for the other Object Relations theoreticians, Kernberg saw the shift from the splitting of the self to its integration with the environment as the main passage in the creation of the character, which evolves from *splitting* to *repression*.

In Kernberg's (1975) view, defense mechanisms are used as a "pathognomonic feature of the borderline personality disorder" (p. 177) and result from a failure in the integration of the good and bad parts of the *object*. In this perspective, the *ego* does not develop around *regression*, it fixates to the primitive defense mechanisms revolving around *splitting*, like *projection*, *projective identification*, and *introjection* (Summers, 2024). The result of this process is an *ego* unable to manage anxiety and impulses.

Since the individual is used to splitting the good parts of the *ego* from the bad ones, the result is an unrealistic image of the *object* (Kernberg, 1975). This *primitive idealization* is not the same as the one used in *reaction formation*, in which there is a need to protect the *self* from aggressive drives.

*Projection* in Kernberg's (1975) theory is a consequence of the use of *splitting* as the primary defense mechanism. The bad aspects of the *object* are projected onto another but then a fear of retaliation from the *bad object* arises and at this point *projective identification* is used. With this defense mechanism, the individual identifies with the *bad object* thus increasing the fear of aggressiveness.

Apart from *denial*, which in Kernberg's (1975) theory takes the role of ignoring the bad parts of the *object* as for Winnicott (1965), individuals with borderline personality disorders also adopt *omnipotence* and *devaluation*. The former involves identifying with the good parts of the *object* in order to avoid feelings of anxiety. Lastly, *devaluation of the object* is a defense through which the individual minimizes the threats posed by the object.

## **I.II.V TODAY'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS**

Today's view of defense mechanisms is not related only to the psychopathological aspect, it is instead mainly connected with maintaining self-esteem and self-coherence; in fact, using defense mechanisms can be helpful not only to avoid painful feelings, but to manage stress and disappointment as well (Cramer, 2008).

The main exponent of the studies on defense mechanisms currently is Cramer who, in her paper *Seven Pillars of Defense Mechanism Theory* (2008), posits the existence of seven pillars common to all the defense mechanisms. The first tenet is that defense mechanisms operate outside of awareness, supported by the fact that if they were to operate at the conscious level, they would be less effective. The second pillar implies that defenses mature according to a chronological predisposed order, with denial being the first mechanism to appear, followed by projection and lastly, identification. The next point has been previously described, and it is that defenses are part of normal, everyday functioning. In this case, there is a distinction between *mature* and *immature defenses*. The former is responsible for successful functioning, while the latter is related to less successful functioning (Cramer, 2008). The following characteristic attributed to defense mechanisms is that their use will increase, if individual's stress levels increase as well; this is explained by the main purpose of defensive strategies, which is to protect the individual from negative emotions (Cramer, 2008). Closely related to this concept, the next pillar states that using defense mechanisms under conditions of stress reduces the conscious experience of anxiety and negative affect.

While it is acknowledged that defense mechanisms reduce stress, the sixth pillar highlights that their activation is still linked to the autonomic nervous system. These defenses are responsible for other involuntary, unconscious processes associated with emotional arousal. Additionally, the last tenet notes that excessive use of defense mechanisms, particularly immature ones, is associated with the developing of psychopathologies (Cramer, 2008).

## **I.III AIM OF THE PRESENT LITERATURE REVIEW**

This dissertation aims at exploring how the expectations implied by gender roles put on men and women influence the adoption of specific defense mechanisms. The work done until the present day has revolved around the examination of whether defense



mechanisms are pathological, if and how they influence psychotherapy (Cramer, 2015), and their psychometric properties (Hibbard & Porcerelli, 1998).

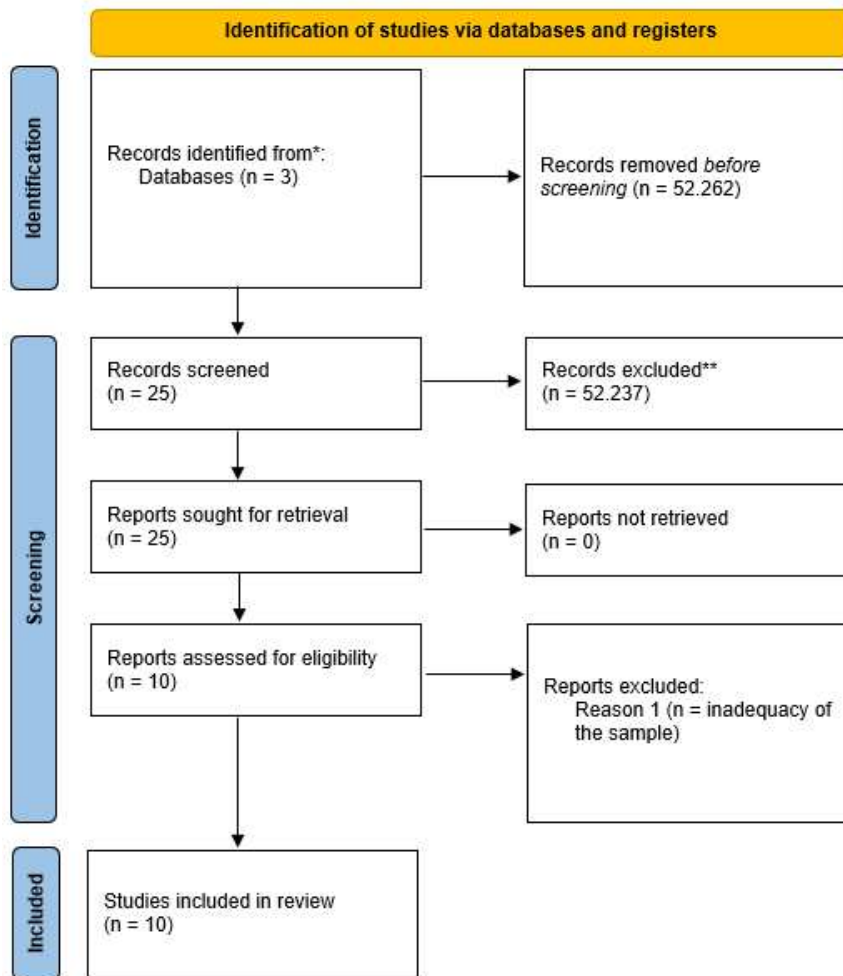
Thus, the purpose of the present literature review is to analyze the existing literature about gender differences in the use of defense mechanisms to gain a better understanding of societal implications on them. The present work aims at understanding if there are variations between men and women on their ways of coping with external stressors and if these differences can be generalizable.

# CHAPTER II: ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE

## II.I MATERIALS AND METHODS

Following the PRISMA Group workflow (Figure 1), the present literature review has been conducted through the academic databases of Google Scholar, APA and Scopus. To conduct the research, the following keywords and MeSH terms were considered, as well as their derivatives: *gender, gender identity, gender (adult population), gender differences, gender identification, sex differences, sex difference, defense mechanisms, defense styles, strategies of coping, strategy of defense, defensive functioning, acting out, denial, displacement, helplessness, identification, avoidance, projection, regression, rationalization, repression, sublimation*. The studies included in the elaboration of the systematic review had to: (i) study sex differences in the use of defense mechanisms and defense preferences; (iii) use the defense style questionnaires and (iv) be based on empirical research; (iv) be fully written in English.

Studies that met any of the following criteria were excluded from the study: (i) full text was not available; (ii) the sample consisted of adolescence, clinical adolescents and nonconforming people, namely transgender people and/ or people with gender dysphoria; (iii) the sample suffered from mental health issues.



**Figure 1.** Preferred Reported Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) chart summarizing the selection process.

## II.II RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the literature review has brought out a total of 10 studies (2 literature reviews and 8 original papers), which consider gender differences in the use and preference of defense mechanisms in an adult population sample. As reported in Table 2, the majority of the studies used a sample consisting of college students. In the majority of the studies analyzed, the number of women involved in the research was higher than men. The majority of the studies did not report the nationality of the sample used.

**Table 1.** The included studies (N = 10)

N° study	Author (Year)	Academic Database	Title	Study type	Aim of the study
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1	Cramer (2015)	Google Scholar	Understanding defense mechanisms.	Literature review	Examining defenses as unconscious mechanisms, whether defenses are pathological, the effect of psychotherapy on the use of defenses.
2	Ferguson et al., (1997)	Google Scholar	Gender differences in the organization of guilt and shame.	Original paper	Testing predictions from Lewis' model that shame-proneness in adult white females but guilt-proneness in adult white males would account for a substantial proportion of the variance in measures assessing their characteristics use of defense mechanisms and endorsement of gender roles.
3	Bullitt et al., (2002)	Google Scholar	Gender differences in defensive style.	Original paper	Examining gender differences in defensive style across the domains of work and intimate relationships.
4	Hibbard et al., (1998)	Google Scholar	Further validation for the Cramer defense mechanism manual.	Literature review	Testing the psychometric properties of the Cramer Defense Mechanism Manual (Cramer, 1991b) for the Thematic Apperception Test (Murray, 1943). Gender differences and the validity of distinguishing between “mature” and “immature” levels of defense were also investigated.

5	Furnham (2012)	Google Scholar	Lay understandings of defense mechanisms: The role of personality traits and gender.	Original paper	Exploring people's knowledge and use of the defense mechanisms. It focused on 21 of the better known "Freudian" defense mechanisms.
6	Zoccali et al., (2007)	Google Scholar	The role of defense mechanisms in the modulation of anger experience and expression: Gender differences and influence on self-report measures.	Original paper	Verifying the influence of defense mechanisms on a self-evaluation instrument for anger.
7	Diehl (1996)	APA	Age and sex differences in strategies of coping and defense across the lifespan.	Original paper	Examining age and sex differences in the use of coping and defense strategies in a lifespan.
8	Petraglia et al., (2009).	APA	Gender differences in self-reported defense mechanisms: a study using the new Defense Style	Original paper	Exploring the relationship between gender and defenses using the Defense Style Questionnaire.

			Questionnaire-60.		
9	Drapeau et al., (2011)	APA	Defense mechanisms and gender: An examination of two models of defensive functioning derived from the Defense Style Questionnaire.	Original paper	Examining the extent to which a proxy of the DFS model of defense mechanisms, and the model underlying the Defense Style Questionnaire, can be adequately applied to men and women.
10	Vadoliya, (2018)	Google Scholar	Defense Mechanism and Behavior Orientation in Male and Female.	Original paper	Finding out a defense mechanism and behavior orientation in male and female.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the included studies (N = 10).

N° study	Country of the study conducted	Sample size (N; %)	Gender (N; %)	Sample (Age range, M, SD)	Nationality
1	United States	N of studies analyzed = 6			NR
2	United States, Utah	N = 201 university students	n = 102 white females; n = 99 white males	Range: 18-24 years	NR
3	United States	N = 85 individuals from a large northeastern metropolitan business community. The majority (2/3) being in banking, business, or real estate	n = 47 women (55.3%); n = 38 men (44.7%)	Range: 25-60 years (M = 40.35 years ; SD = 9.09)	- Caucasian (89.4%) - African-American (2.4%) - Respondents not reporting their ethnic background (4.7%)
4	United States	N = 109 undergraduates	n = 49 women; n = 52 men	M = 20.5 years (SD = 4.17)	NR

5	UK	<p>N = 208 participants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some participants (42%) were from the UCL departmental subject pool.</li> <li>- The remainder of the participants were recruited from a variety of public locations including libraries, train stations and coffee bars.</li> </ul>	<p>n = 135 women; n = 73 men.</p>	<p>M = 23.09 years (SD = 6.60)</p>	<p>NR</p>
6	Italy	<p>N = 100 healthy subjects in a medium-high social-cultural level.</p>	<p>n = 56 females; n = 44 males.</p>	<p>M females = 27.39 years (SD = 4.2); M males = 29.06 years (SD = 4.1)</p>	<p>NR</p>
7	United States	<p>N = 381 individuals recruited from three suburban communities of a midwestern metropolitan</p>	<p>n = 197 women; n = 184 men</p>	<p>M = 44.1 years (SD = 20.2)</p>	<p>NR</p>



		area representing low, medium, and high socioeconomic levels.			
8	Canada	N = 473 university students. First sample: N = 305; Second sample: N = 168.	First sample: n = 247 women; n = 58 males; Second sample: n = 135 women; n = 33 men	M = 23 years (SD = 6.57)	NR
9	Canada	N = 664 participants attending two large universities in Quebec.	n = 517 women; n = 124 men.	M = 22 years (SD = 3.97)	NR
10	India	N = 100 citizens in Rajkot city (Gujarat).	n = 50 men; n = 50 women.	M females: 39.11 (SD = 5.22)  M males: 44.63 (SD = 6.79)	NR

## **II.II.I OVERALL RESULTS: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DEFENSE MECHANISMS**

As shown in Table 3, overall, men and women differ in the use of defense mechanisms in that women use more internalizing defenses and tend to project negative feelings inwards while men are more used to project them outward.

More specifically, in Table 4, three categories were identified, which will be discussed in-depth below: (i) gender differences based on the use of internalizing and externalizing defenses; (ii) gender differences based on guilt- and shame-proneness; (iii) gender differences based on mature and immature defenses. Moreover, a paragraph related to the tools used in the included studies to assess defense mechanisms have been reported and discussed.

## **II.II.II GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF INTERNALIZING AND EXTERNALIZING DEFENSES**

Several studies analyzed the differences between men and women's use of defense mechanisms based on the object they were directed at (Cramer, 2015; Ferguson & Crowley, 1997; Hibbard & Porcerelli, 1998; Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996). A 2015 literature review reported that based on the sexual identity of the individual, people identifying with a typical feminine sexual orientation are more prone to use defenses directed at the self, while men's defenses are usually directed outwards [1]. Indeed, women's defense mechanisms are focused on turning aggression and negative feelings inward to the *self*, through the use of *turning against the self* (TAS), while men rely on more "masculine" defenses, such as *turning against the object* (TAO) (e.g., Evans, 1982) and *projection* (Cramer, in press) [1]. However, findings are not homogeneous, as the studies did not employ the same questionnaires and materials.

Differences in internalizing and externalizing defenses can be due to the socialization processes differing among women and men, with the former being encouraged to inhibit aggressive behavior, and the latter being encouraged to express it [5,6]. These gender differences are seen for instance in the use of *projection*. Men relying on this defense mechanisms are anxious and depressed, causing them to be aggressive, hostile, and manipulative towards others. On the contrary, women relying on *projection*, especially externalizing anger, did not show anxious or depressive patterns, but are

considered to be more positive and extraverted [1, 10]. The use of *displacement* in women has been linked to negative psychological symptoms [1].

A study confirming these results showed that the feminine coping style takes into account other people's feelings and the tolerance of ambiguity coupled with the absence of *reaction formation*. Men showed a higher use of *intellectualization* and *reaction formation* [7].

A paper analyzed the correlation between the use of *turning against the self* and *turning against the object* and anger experience in both men and women. The results reported that relying on *turning against the object* as primary defense mechanism used by men leads to projecting anger outwards and not controlling it. Moreover, the general pattern of women relying on *turning against the self* was confirmed [6].

Another study evaluating gender differences in defense mechanisms highlighted that the differences in externalization and internalization are not clearly marked [5]. According to this study, men use *distortion* and *identification* more than women, as well as *introjection* and *idealization*. Women use more *sublimation* than men. These results showed that men as well as women use internalizing defenses [5]. On the same line, a study demonstrated that women use *altruism*, an externalizing defense, more than men (Vaillant, 1993; Watson & Sinha, 1998) [8].

### **II.II.III GENDER DIFFERENCES IN GUILT- AND SHAME-PRONENESS**

A study based on Lewis' (1971) model of guilt and shame provided supportive evidence for the defense mechanisms attributed to men and women and their respective gender roles [2]. Women tend to view the experience of anger in a shame-prone style and are pushed to internalize it and not express it. Men are encouraged to exhibit more "masculine" traits, implying a deflection of anxious feelings outwards [2]. Women use both shame and guilt as a way of coping with anxiety, in particular they tend to use *turning against the self* as their main defense mechanism, together with *principalization* and *reversal* [2]. Men exhibited more guilt-prone behaviors in that they are negatively related with *turning against the self* but positively related with *turning against the object*, while women's guilt style is more self-critical [2].

## II.II.IV GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF MATURE AND IMMATURE DEFENSES

A study using the *Defense Style Questionnaire* (DSQ; Petraglia et al., 2009) examined gender differences in the contexts of work and intimate relationships reported that defensive styles mainly vary in the context of work [3]. Moreover, the study outlined that both men and women reported using *intermediate* and *mature* defenses in the analyzed contexts, and both use the same amount of *immature* defenses in their love lives. The difference between the sexes lies in the work context, in which men are more prone to use *immature* defenses than women. *Immature* defense mechanisms are used by both sexes primarily in the love context and do not appear as frequently in the work environment.

Another study demonstrated that women use more *mature* defenses than men in general life [4]. For instance, while *projection* and *identification* are used more than *denial* by both men and women, the latter tend to use more *identification* than *projection* when dealing with anxiety and stressful situations. These findings replicate Cramer's (1987) results. Furthermore, women were found to use *mature* forms of *denial* and *identification*, but not *projection*, which is mainly used by men.

A research based on the Defense Style Questionnaire-60 (DSQ; Petraglia et al., 2009) found gender differences in the use of defense mechanisms; however, Petraglia et al., (2009), reported no gender differences in the use of *mature* defense mechanisms [8]. The main difference reported in the study was about *affiliation*, used more by women than by men when choosing a defensive style. (see Table 4)

**Table 3.** Overall results related to defense mechanisms

N_study	Overall results related to defense mechanisms
1	<p>- Males and females who have been determined to have a masculine orientation both made strong use of the “masculine” defense of <b>turning against object</b> (e.g., Evans, 1982), and of projection (Cramer, in press).</p> <p>- The “feminine” defenses of <b>turning against self</b> and <b>reversal</b> occur most frequently among people with a feminine sexual orientation, regardless of whether they are biologically male or female.</p>
2	<p>- Females scored significantly higher than males on measures for guilt- and shame-proneness, the defense mechanism of <b>turning against the self</b>,</p> <p>- Males had significantly higher scores than females on the defense of <b>turning against the object</b> and the gender-role orientation score for agency.</p>
3	<p>- Both men and women make use of mature defenses most extensively and immature defenses least extensively.</p> <p>- Men tend to make greater use of immature defenses at work than do women.</p>
4	<p>- In both genders, <b>denial</b> is significantly smaller than both projection and identification.</p> <p>- For denial and <b>identification</b>, women have significantly higher scores than men for the mature subscale, but men and women have roughly the same means for the immature subscale.</p> <p>- <b>Projection</b>: women have significantly higher scores than men on the immature form, but the genders have roughly the same means on the mature form.</p>
5	<p>- Women find it more difficult to express aggression outwardly and so are more likely to turn it on themselves and rely on defenses that modify inner thoughts and feelings.</p> <p>- Men depend more on defenses that locate conflict in the external world (e.g. <b>projection</b>).</p>

6	<p>In regard to the defense mechanisms variables, no gender differences were found at the selected level of significance (<math>p &lt; .003</math>).</p> <p>Nevertheless, the tendencies to a prevalent use of <b>turning against object</b> for males and, on the other hand, of <b>turning against self</b> and reversal for females were found.</p>
7	<p>Women used more internalizing defenses than men and used coping strategies that flexibly integrated intra- and interpersonal aspects of conflict situations.</p>
8	<p>No significant differences were found in Overall Defensive Functioning (ODF; Petraglia et al., 2009); however, men and women differed in their choice of defense style, defense level, and individual defense mechanisms.</p>
9	<p>Despite the widespread use of the DSQ-60 (Drapeau et al., 2011) and the Defensive Functioning Scale (Drapeau et al., 2011) in research and in clinical practice, neither appears to have a structure that accurately describes the defensive styles or factors of separate samples of men and women.</p>
10	<p>Result revealed that there is significant difference in defense mechanism and there is significant difference behavior orientation in male and female.</p>

**Table 4.** Gender differences related to defense mechanisms

N° study	Gender differences related to defense mechanisms
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Men’s defenses would be expected to be outwardly directed, and to externalize conflict and affect.</li> <li>- Female sexual identity includes a component of turning aggression inward, which is consistent with the use of the defense of turning against the self.</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Males who reported higher levels of guilt also refrained from endorsing both externalizing or "alloplastic" defenses, in which the other was portrayed in a negative light or was the object of aggression (projection or turning against the object).</li> <li>- Guilt-proneness in males was positively related to principalization and especially reversal but was negatively related to turning against the self.</li> <li>- The intrapunitive defense of “turning against the self” and the extra-punitive defenses of “turning against the object” and “projection” correlate positively with reports of shame in females.</li> <li>- The tendency to engage in defenses that repress or deny the painful affect in a nonpunitive fashion (principalization and reversal) are negatively related to females’ reports of shame.</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interaction effect: men are more affected by context in their use of intermediate defenses. There appears to be a far greater discrepancy between men’s use of intermediate defenses in work versus love contexts than there is for women.</li> <li>- Women use less immature defenses at work</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Men had lower identification scores than women.</li> <li>- For the women, identification is higher than projection.</li> <li>- Women have more mature defenses than men.</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Males were found to use the defenses of distortion and identification significantly more than females.</li> <li>- Male participants reported greater personal use of Introjection and idealization than females.</li> <li>- Females reported a greater usage of sublimation.</li> </ul>

6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In males, turning against object was positively correlated with trait anger reaction.</li> <li>- In men, projection positively correlated with trait anger reaction, whereas PRN was inversely correlated with trait anger, and trait anger reaction.</li> <li>- Reversal was inversely correlated with trait anger and anger expression.</li> <li>- In women, only reversal was inversely correlated with anger expression.</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Men scored higher than women in intellectualization, denial, projection, and reaction formation.</li> <li>- Women had higher mean scores than men for turning against self and doubt.</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Men scored higher in Affect-Regulating Style (intellectualization, dissociation, isolation, and fantasy), and in Adaptive Style (sublimation, self-observation, humor, anticipation, and self-assertion).</li> <li>- Women use higher affiliation than men</li> </ul>
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Research has shown that men and women not only rely on different defense mechanisms, they also often present entirely different defensive styles.</li> </ul>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Defense mechanism (projection) received male high mean score.</li> </ul>

### **II.III TOOLS USED TO ASSESS DEFENSE MECHANISMS AND TYPE OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS INVESTIGATED**

As seen in Table 5, the defense mechanisms were not analyzed based on the same scale. The Defense Mechanism Inventory (DMI, Gleser & Ihilevich, 1969) was used by four studies, namely the ones conducted by Ferguson & Crowley (1997), Zoccali et al. (2007), Diehl & Labouvie-Vief (1996), and Vadoliya (2018). The Defense Mechanism Inventory (DMI; Gleser & Ihilevich, 1969) is a measure based on scenarios depicting stressful situations and frustrating moral dilemmas (Ferguson & Crowley, 1997). The defense mechanisms analyzed with this questionnaire are *turning against the object*, *projection*, *principalization*, *reversal*, and *turning against the self*.

Three studies used the Bond's Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ; Bond, 1983). The version of the DSQ in Bullitt & Farber's (2002) research assesses *mature*, *intermediate*, and *mature* defense factors in work situations and intimate situations. Petraglia et al. (2009), used the DSQ-60 to assess *Image-Distorting Style*, *Affect-Regulating Style*, and *Adaptive Style*. Lastly, Drapeau et al. (2011), adopted a 60-item



version of the scale to assess the defenses present in the Defensive Functioning Scale (APA, 1994).

Hibbard & Porcerelli (1998) assessed the validity of Cramer Defense Mechanism Manual (CDMM; Cramer, 1991). This manual is used to assess *denial*, *projection* and *identification*, with seven levels for each of these three.

Furnham (2012) used the Defense Mechanisms Scale (Vaillant, 1977), which proposes a hierarchical organization of defense mechanisms starting from *pathological mechanisms*, followed by *immature defenses*, *neurotic defenses* and *mature defenses*.

**Table 5.** Tools used to assess defense mechanisms and defense mechanisms investigated.

N° study	Tools used to evaluate the defence mechanisms	Type of defence mechanism investigated	Other tools
1	NR	Denial, projection, identification.	
2	The Defense Mechanism Inventory (DMI; Gleser & Ihilevich, 1969).	Guilt-proneness, shame-proneness, turning against object, projection, principalization, reversal, turning against self, passivity-dependency, communal values, agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-Conscious Attribution and Affect Inventory (SCAAI; Tangney, 1990), (analyzing the adaptive manifestation of guilt)</li> <li>- The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974), (personality characteristics that are stereotypically</li> </ul>

			masculine, feminine, or neither)
3	Two version (work-related; interpersonally related) of Bond's Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ; 1983)	Immature, intermediate and mature defense styles.	
4	Cramer Defense Mechanism Manual (CDMM; Cramer, 1991)	Denial, projection, identification.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ; Bond, 1983): measure of mature and immature function with specificity to ego defense.</li> <li>- O'Brien Multiphasic Narcissism Inventory (OMNI; O'Brien, 1987): measure immature functioning.</li> <li>- Interpersonal Behavior Scale (IBS; Piper, Debbane, &amp; Garant, 1977): measures the degree to which the respondent engages in a number of positive interactions with those with</li> </ul>

			<p>whom he or she has frequent contact and the degree to which those positive behaviors are reciprocated.</p> <p>-Bell Object Relations Inventory (BORI, Bell, Billington, &amp; Becker, 1986): indicator of immune functioning.</p> <p>- Borderline Syndrome Index (BSI, Conte, Plutchik, Karasu, &amp; Jerrett, 1980): assessing symptoms of the borderline syndrome.</p>
5	<p>Defense mechanism (Vaillant, 1977).</p>	<p>Acting out, compensation, denial, displacement, distorsion, fantasy, humour, hypochondriasis, idealisation, identification, intellectualisation, introjection, isolation, passive aggression,</p>	<p>- Abbreviated 15-item Big Five Questionnaire (McManus, Smithers, Partridge, Keeling, &amp; Fleming, 2003): brief scale for assessing the Big Five personality factors.</p>

		<p>projection,  rationalisation,  reaction formation,  regression,  repression,  sublimation,  suppression</p>	
6	<p>Defense Mechanisms Inventory (DMI; Gleser &amp; Ihilevich, 1969).</p>	<p>Turning against object, projection, principalization, turning against self, reversal.</p>	<p>- State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI; Spielberg, 1988): measures anger experience and expression.</p>
7	<p>Defense Mechanisms Inventory (DMI; Gleser &amp; Ihilevich, 1969).</p>	<p>Isolation, intellectualization, rationalization, doubt, projection, regression, denial, displacement, reaction formation, repression.</p>	<p>- California Psychological Inventory (CPI; Gough, 1956): scales of coping and defense.  - Sentence Completion test (SCT; Kelson &amp; Moane, 1987): measuring ego level.  - Vocabulary test (V-3; (Ekstrom, French, Harman, &amp; Dermen, 1976): assess verbal ability.</p>

8	Defense Style Questionnaire 60 (DSQ; Bond, 1983)	Help-rejecting complaining, splitting of self/other, projection, projective identification, intellectualization, dissociation, isolation, fantasy, sublimation, self-observation, humor, anticipation, and self-assertion.	
9	Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ; (Trijsburg et al., 2003a)	Action defenses, Major Image Distorting Defenses, Disavowal Defenses, Minor Image Distorting defenses, Mental Inhibition Defenses, High Adaptive Defenses.	- Defensive Functioning Scale (APA, 1994): psychotic defenses. -DSQ-60 (Trijsburg et al., 2003a): Image Distorting Defenses, Affect Regulating Defenses, Adaptive Defenses.
10	Defense Mechanism Inventory (DMI; Gleser & Ihilevich, 1969).	Turning against object, Projection , Principalization , turning against self and reversal.	Behavior Orientation scale (Jha, 2009): tactics, views, and morality.

## II.IV DISCUSSION

This dissertation analyzed the literature regarding the differences between men and women and their gender roles in the formation and usage of defense mechanisms. Starting from this main difference, three main categories emerged from the literature review: the use of internalizing or externalizing defenses, guilt and shame proneness, and the presence of mature or immature defense mechanisms. The therapeutic approach can vary according to the defense mechanisms used by the individual, which are adopted to respond to stressful situations, as well as the individual's gender, considered as salient aspects for the clinical intervention (Petraglia, Thygesen, Lecours, & Drapeau, 2009). Therefore, understanding how gender and defense mechanisms interact between themselves becomes particularly important, by also considering the environmental and societal influences.

Men and women significantly differ in their use of defense mechanisms, and this affects not only how they react to aversive situations, but how they behave and interact in society as well (Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996). Indeed, men are more prone to use externalizing defense mechanisms while women rely on the use of internalizing ones (Petraglia et al., 2009). This behavioral pattern derives from the societal rules attributed to young boys and girls during their formative years. According to Lewis' model, women's tendency to not be reactive and to acquire a more submissive role leads them to act according to standards of behavior imposed by society, which leads them to doubting their self-esteem when they adopt externalizing defense mechanisms like *reaction formation* or *projection*, usually employed by men (Ferguson & Crowley, 1997). Other studies showed that men respond to a conflict by allocating its source to external objects, using *projection* or *turning against the object*. On the other hand, women find it difficult to externalize negative feelings, therefore they adapt their thoughts and emotions to fit in these expectations and rely more on defense mechanisms like *sublimation* or *turning against the self* (Furnham, 2012).

The differences in shame and guilt proneness further emphasize gender differences between men and women (Ferguson & Crowley, 1997). Shame proneness in men is linked to the use of externalizing defenses and turning aggression outwardly toward other individuals. As for what concerns women, their social environment as always encouraged them to be passive and revolving their lives around relationships (Lewis, 1971). These factors have led women to indulge in a behavioral pattern characterized by "self-punitive internalization" (Ferguson & Crowley, 1997, p. 38).

Men and women are greatly influenced by the surrounding context when it comes to choosing between mature or immature defense mechanisms to employ (Bullitt & Farber, 2002). Both men and women use mature defenses more than immature defenses and they tend to use the same defense mechanisms in different contexts, especially women (Chodorow, 1978). Women make greater use of mature defense mechanisms compared to men (Hibbard & Porcerelli, 1998). This result confirms previous findings by Block and Kremen (1996) who explained this main distinction in terms of the different developmental patterns young men and women go through. While women tend to abandon their maladaptive ways of coping with external and internal inconsistencies during their young adulthood period, men keep using them during the same years.

Considering these results, it is worth further analyzing the relevance of gender roles on defense mechanisms, since these are crucial factors in their formation. Defense mechanisms influence how individuals handle anger reaction and expression. Men use externalizing defense mechanisms because it is considered to be more socially desirable for a man to possess masculine traits and being anger-oriented, while for women, the social standards act in the opposite direction (Zoccali, Muscatello, Bruno, Cedro, Campolo, Pandolfo, & Meduri, 2007).

## CHAPTER III: CONCLUSIONS

The studies analyzed in this dissertation and their results have confirmed the existence of gender differences in the use of defense mechanisms, which are dependent on societal influences. Moreover, the present literature review revealed that men tend to use more immature defense mechanisms while women rely mostly on the mature ones (Bullitt, & Farber, 2002). While both men and women use more mature defenses than immature ones, women rely on more mature defenses than man. This difference is especially pronounced in the context of work. While men rely on immature defenses in their workplace and feel comfortable in expressing their emotions, both negative and positive, women do not feel free to do so (Bullitt, & Farber, 2002). Women are more prone to suppress, sublimate and internalize all emotions and reactions because it is not considered professional for them to be emotional in their workplace. While men are expected to be prone to anger and impatience, women may not feel as free to externalize feelings because it is easier for them to be deemed as incompetent in their workplace if they were to act in the same way. On the other hand, in the intimate contexts both men and women use immature defense mechanisms and women feel free and safe to express all their ranges of emotions when they are in a close relationship with their partner (Bullitt, & Farber, 2002). From these results, it can be concluded that context is a major influencing factor for the choice of which defense mechanism to employ and women feel more pressured to obey to societal standards than men do, probably because the consequences and implications if they do not are more severe for them.

Considering these conclusions, researching how to mitigate gender differences before children become adolescents and young adults could potentially allow women to be more expressive and men to be less reactive and prompt to impulsive decision making. Gender roles influence the upbringing of young children from a very early age and these thoughts of conformity to a specific category influence their conflict management skills as well as the formation of their defense mechanisms. In order for women to be more assertive and for men to not rely on anger prone behavior, it is important to not stereotype what femininity and masculinity should look like.

Defense mechanisms, both mature and immature ones, should be used in a non-pathological manner to ensure that individuals know how to act in different situations, keeping in mind that they are created and should be used as a shield against stress and negative emotions, and not as a consequence of the societal rules individuals grow up with.



### **III.I LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

A limitation of this literature review is the lack of consideration for transgender individuals and their use of defense mechanisms. The screening process did not reveal any relevant articles on this topic. Future research should explore whether transgender individuals exhibit different defensive mechanisms compared to their cisgender counterpart or if their defense mechanisms vary according to their gender identity. Another limitation concerns the sample used in the majority of the studies analyzed. These included studies recruited community sample, such as university students. It should be interesting if future systematic reviews explored the differences in defense mechanisms based on different psychopathologies. The review process involved studies based on a sample that may not be generalizable. The majority of the research involved undergraduate students doing a psychological bachelor course; therefore, the results may not be applicable to the overall population. It is worth mentioning that these studies on defense mechanisms largely overlooks gender differences in children and preadolescents.

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