

SILENCING THE SUPEREGO: From Psychological Defenses to Offenses

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Defense mechanisms are psychic protective methods used by the ego to ward off unpleasant thoughts, thereby reducing conscious struggles and anxiety. Sigmund Freud first introduced these concepts that integrate with his structural model of the mind, which includes an id, ego, and superego. Psychoanalytic theories can become quite complex but simple models are sufficient for the points being made in this essay. For a more complete introduction to defenses, *Wikipedia* and, its offshoot, the *New World Encyclopedia* are decent additional sources.

Anna Freud followed up on her father's work and elaborated ten defense mechanisms: reaction formation, regression, sublimation, rationalizing, intellectualization, repression, suppression, projection, displacement, and denial. Others have added more defenses and there is no agreement on an exact number. As their category name implies, they all play *defense* and not *offense*.

The system described by the structural theory holds that the *id* is the source of uninhibited drives or desires that give pleasure; it does not exercise social or moral constraints. The *superego* is the depository of parental and societal prohibitions and goals, thereby constraining "improper" actions; succinctly, it is a conscience and ego ideal. Discrepancies between unbridled wants and limits on actions result in "conflicts." The *ego* often resists the resultant displeasure by using defense mechanisms.

The *id* is essentially a constant source of natural wants, so the intensity of conflicts depends upon the strength and purview of the superego. Freud was a product of the Victorian era, when the restrictions on behavior were very oppressive, particularly about sex. In 1900, superegos were restrictive and punitive. Symptoms were often related to frustration of sexual desires.

Changing Mores

Freud started developing his theories at the end of the 19th century and continued evolving psychoanalysis until 1939, just before World War II. As I was born in 1941, ten months before Pearl Harbor, my early familial and cultural memories began after the war. I grew up at a time when parents and other authorities were obeyed and not questioned. This continued through my Pratt Institute undergraduate engineering education (1958–1963).

While art students at my school protested during the Cuban Missile Crisis, in October 1962, major college demonstrations were not yet commonplace. By 1965, the Viet Nam peace movement was in full force. The year of my graduation, 1963, the FDA approved birth-control pills and Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*.

Mores changed! My personal history indicates that I was an alumnus observer, rather than a student participant, in the cultural shifts that occurred over the last half-century. By the mid-1960s there was a rebellion against authority and the beginning of feminism expanded options for both women and men, because both had more opportunities for sex outside marriage. These societal shifts *abated* the superego.

Direct assault on the superego

In the above examples, the superego responded to societal changes that emanated from anti-war and feminist movements. This controlling agency of the mind is responsive to both parental and social influences. So, as the *Zeitgeist* shifted, the superego adjusted. It was responding to overall cultural movements and *not* a parochial group or individual's *offensive* (not a pun) assault on this judgmental mental function.

During the last 50 years, however, direct assaults on the utterances of others began to rise in human discourse. Discussing disagreements with civility waned. People often interrupted others while they were speaking. It was common to talk down the opposition, dismiss opposing views, and derisively laugh at an opponent's statements. While brouhaha has become popular radio and television shtick, there seems to be an impulsive and anxious nature to many erratic outside-of-theater interchanges. Essentially, attempts are made to aggressively prevent an opponent from verbalizing a contrary position on an issue. Thus, disagreements are not rationally discussed when they are worrisome and a threat to one's ego.

What I am calling offenses may be an unconscious attempt to protect our ego by *stifling* threatening alternative viewpoints. Much like *intrapsychic* psychological defenses, the offense is an *interpsychic* mental process that counteracts the threat of another person's (or one's own?) superego. (Note, censorship and courtroom restrictions on evidence is different because it is a conscious effort to sway opinions.)

Without a difference of opinion there is no need to consider alternative viewpoints and self-righteous peace prevails. People are more courteous when there is agreement. Thus, offenders tend to associate with like-minded people. Offenses are only needed when faced with alternative options.

Beyond mere verbal aggression, legal cases are being filed to remove religious symbols from public areas. Relics that had existed for many years now seem to be offensive to some people. The Ten Commandments is a particularly noteworthy adversary because it represents a time-honored projection of the superego, by elaborating "thou shalt" (the ego ideal) and "thou shalt not" (the conscience).

In conclusion, adequate *defenses* protect the ego when it has to deal with conflict between the *id*'s wants and the superego's prohibitions. *Offenses* directly attack conflicts by overwhelming the superego. This can be considered psychic anarchy because it smother (not resists) the judgmental component of Freud's tripartite structural model of the mind.