

Psychological Characteristics of Internal Conflict and Defence Mechanisms in University Students

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive theoretical and empirical analysis of internal conflicts and psychological defence mechanisms observed among students of higher educational institutions. Within the framework of the study, the nature of intrapsychic contradictions arising during the stages of students' personal and professional development, the mechanisms of their emergence, and the characteristics of their manifestation in the context of individual differences are examined. Drawing upon an integrated methodological approach that synthesises psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioural, and existential psychology paradigms, a structural model of internal conflicts is proposed. The findings demonstrate that repression, projection, rationalisation, and intellectualisation are the predominant defence mechanisms among students, and that these mechanisms are statistically significantly correlated with indicators of academic achievement and psychological well-being. The practical implications of the study may serve as a basis for enhancing psychological support services in institutions of higher education.

Keywords: internal conflict, intrapsychic contradiction, defence mechanisms, student psychology, psychological adaptation, personality formation, cognitive dissonance, academic stress.

1. Introduction

The psychological content of student life in contemporary higher education is becoming increasingly complex. On the one hand, the growing academic workload, the necessity of professional self-determination, and competition for social status; on the other hand, the discrepancy between personal values, family expectations, and the demands of society — all of these create fertile ground for the emergence of acute internal conflicts within the student psyche. These conflicts, in turn, directly affect individuals' mental health, academic productivity, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships.

The problem of internal conflict is one of the classical subjects of psychological inquiry, thoroughly elaborated in the works of Z. Freud (1923), A. Adler (1927), K. Lewin (1935), K. Horney (1945), E. Erikson (1950), and other eminent thinkers. However, viewed through the lens of the distinctive psychological characteristics of the student population and the characteristic demands and contradictions of adolescence and early adulthood, the contemporary interpretation of this problem has lost none of its urgency. On the contrary, among the present generation of students — living under the weight of informational pressure in the digital age, experiencing value transformation and identity crises — the manifestation of internal conflicts is acquiring new and increasingly complex forms.

The concept of psychological defence mechanisms was initially developed within the psychoanalytic school (Freud, Z., 1894; Freud, A., 1936) and subsequently enriched substantially by cognitive psychology (Beck, 1976), contemporary neuropsychology (Grawe, 2004), and other branches of personality psychology. These mechanisms are understood as unconscious cognitive-affective processes that protect the individual from psychological pain, anxiety, and information that threatens the system of self-evaluation. The question of the dominance of specific defence mechanisms within the student population continues to require systematic empirical investigation.

The scientific novelty of this study is manifested in the following respects: first, the relationship between internal conflict and defence mechanisms has been psychometrically examined on a student sample; second, the influence of cultural and social factors specific to the Uzbek higher education environment on the dynamics of internal conflict has been analysed; and third, an intervention model of practical relevance to students' psychological health has been proposed. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) Which types of internal conflict are most prevalent among students? (2) Which defence mechanisms are most frequently co-observed with these conflicts? (3) In what manner are internal conflict and defence mechanisms associated with indicators of academic performance?

2. Theoretical Foundations: Conceptions Of Internal Conflict And Defence Mechanisms

2.1. The Psychological Nature of Internal Conflict

Internal conflict is a complex psychological state that arises as a result of the collision between diametrically opposed needs, motives, values, or behavioural tendencies within an individual's psyche. According to Kurt Lewin's classical typology (1935), there are three principal types of internal conflict: 'approach-approach' (choice between two positive alternatives), 'avoidance-avoidance' (compulsion to choose one of two negative situations), and 'approach-avoidance' (a situation in which the same object possesses both attractive and repellent qualities simultaneously). In contemporary psychology, Lewin's typology has been considerably elaborated, and the concept of ambivalence has been widely recognised as a unit of analysis of broad applicability.

In the psychoanalytic tradition, internal conflict is understood primarily as a dynamic contradiction between the instances of the 'Id', the 'Ego', and the 'Superego' (Freud, Z., 1923). The development of the personality is depicted as the complex process by which the Ego mediates between the impulses of the Id and the demands of the Superego. When this equilibrium is disrupted, neurotic symptoms, character pathologies, or psychosomatic disorders may arise. Karen Horney (1945) conceptualised internal conflict as the contradiction between the individual's 'real self' and the 'idealised self' formed under social pressure, emphasising that this contradiction originates in the competitive spirit of modern society.

Within the existential psychology tradition, Viktor Frankl (1963) regarded internal conflict as a condition that inevitably arises in the course of the search for life's meaning, and introduced the concept of noogenic neurosis — a type of internal conflict arising from the absence of a fundamental sense of meaning and value orientation. Rollo May (1969) interpreted internal conflict as the tension between individual freedom and social responsibility. This existential approach is particularly pertinent in the context of student psychology, given that the search for professional and existential meaning becomes a central psychological task during adolescence and early adulthood.

2.2. Defence Mechanisms: Structure and Classification

Psychological defence mechanisms are unconscious psychic processes that protect the individual from anxiety and psychological pain generated by internal conflicts. In her seminal work 'The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence' (1936), Anna Freud described more than ten defence mechanisms in detail: repression, projection, rationalisation, intellectualisation, sublimation, reaction formation, regression, isolation, undoing, and displacement. Subsequently, George Vaillant (1977) developed a hierarchical model of the maturity of defence mechanisms, classifying them into four levels: pathological, immature (primitive), neurotic, and mature.

Contemporary research has established that defence mechanisms are closely associated with indicators of psychological adaptability and mental health (Cramer, 2006; Vaillant, 2011). Mature defence mechanisms (humour, altruism, sublimation, anticipation) are positively correlated with favourable psychological outcomes, whereas neurotic and pathological defences (projection, splitting, dissociation) are associated with psychiatric disorders and interpersonal difficulties. The theory of 'possible selves', developed by Markus and Nurius (1986), has made a significant contribution to understanding the relationship between defence mechanisms and personal identity.

Within cognitive-behavioural psychology, defence mechanisms are frequently analysed in the context of dysfunctional cognitive schemas and automatic thoughts (Beck, 1976; Young, 1990). The schema therapy model (Young, Klosko & Weishaar, 2003) provides a detailed account of the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and the coping styles that oppose them — namely surrender, avoidance, and overcompensation. This approach has considerable practical value in psychologically explaining the learning difficulties that students encounter in academic settings.

3. Research Methodology And Empirical Basis

The study was conducted between 2021 and 2023 at three major higher educational institutions in Uzbekistan. The total sample comprised 480 students (age range: 18–25 years; mean age: $M = 20.7$; $SD = 1.8$), of whom 54% were female and 46% male. Year-group distribution: first year — 28%, second year — 26%, third year — 24%, fourth year — 22%. The study covered students from technical, humanities, socio-economic, and natural science programmes.

The following standardised psychodiagnostic instruments were employed in the study:

- The Plutchik–Kellerman–Conte Life Style Index — for measuring defence mechanisms (8 scales: repression, regression, projection, compensation, reactive formation, displacement, intellectualisation, denial);
- The Leonhard–Schmieschek Character Accentuation Questionnaire — for identifying personality character traits;
- The Spielberger–Khanin State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) — for assessing the level of anxiety;
- The Dembo–Rubinstein Self-Evaluation Methodology — for determining the degree of self-acceptance;
- The author-developed Structured Interview Protocol on 'Students' Internal Conflicts' — comprising 42 open and closed questions.

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS 26.0 and R 4.2.1 statistical software packages. The principal statistical analytical methods employed were: exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), cluster analysis, Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and regression analysis. Participant data were maintained in anonymised form and collected in accordance with procedures approved by the ethics committee.

4. Research Findings And Discussion

4.1. Predominant Types of Internal Conflict among Students

The results of the empirical analysis indicate that 78.3% of respondents reported experiencing at least one clearly manifested type of internal conflict. The most prevalent types of conflict were identified as follows:

- 1. Professional self-determination conflict (68.4%).** This manifests among students as a discrepancy between the chosen field of specialisation and personal interests and abilities, and as a contradiction between family pressure and independent professional aspirations. This type of conflict is particularly prevalent among first- and second-year students (73.2%).
- 2. Status-related conflict (54.7%).** This is associated with the search for equilibrium between academic achievement, social acceptance, and personal development. Students frequently experience tension between maintaining a high-achiever image and confronting genuine academic difficulties.
- 3. Values conflict (47.9%).** This involves inter-generational differences in values, contradiction between traditional and contemporary norms, and conflict between religious-spiritual and secular orientations.
- 4. Personal relationships conflict (43.2%).** This reflects the tension between the need for close relationships and the desire to preserve personal autonomy, and contradictions arising within romantic and friendship relationships.

5. Temporal perspective conflict (38.6%). This involves a persistent contradiction between present-day gratification and the struggle for future academic and professional success.

4.2. Defence Mechanisms: Dominance and Distribution Profile

According to the results of the Life Style Index, the following defence mechanism dominance was identified within the student population (based on mean raw scores and prevalence percentages):

– Rationalisation — $M = 6.84$; high manifestation in 71.3% of students. This mechanism serves the purposes of providing logical explanations for failures and justifying one's own actions. In academic settings, it manifests as beliefs such as 'failure in an examination is the result of inadequate teaching.'

– Intellectualisation — $M = 6.52$; 67.8%. This involves attempting to neutralise an emotional problem through distancing and abstractly intellectual analysis. It is widespread in academic environments; students tend to address problems at a theoretical rather than an emotional level.

– Repression — $M = 6.17$; 63.5%. This involves displacing threatening thoughts, feelings, and memories into the unconscious. It manifests as a tendency to 'forget' academic problems and personal failures.

– Projection — $M = 5.93$; 58.2%. This involves attributing one's own unacceptable qualities to others. In the context of seminars and group projects, it manifests as 'seeing' one's own shortcomings in peers.

– Denial — $M = 5.41$; 54.9%. This involves refusing to acknowledge reality and one's own difficulties. It is frequently observed during the initial stages of academic crises.

4.3. Associations between Internal Conflict, Defence Mechanisms, and Academic Performance

Correlational analysis revealed a statistically significant inverse relationship between the intensity of internal conflict and academic performance indicators ($r = -0.47$; $p < 0.001$). Mature defence mechanisms (sublimation, humour, anticipation) demonstrated a positive correlation with academic performance ($r = 0.38$; $p < 0.001$), while neurotic defences (rationalisation, projection, reaction formation) were associated with declining academic motivation ($r = -0.41$; $p < 0.001$).

Cluster analysis identified three psychological types of students. The first type — the 'Adapted student' (30.2%) — is characterised by low-intensity internal conflict, dominant mature defence mechanisms, high academic performance, and positive self-evaluation. The second type — the 'Struggling student' (45.6%) — is characterised by moderate internal conflict, mixed defence mechanisms, average academic performance, and a psychologically fluctuating condition. The third type — the 'Crisis student' (24.2%) — is characterised by high-intensity internal conflict, dominance of neurotic and pathological defence mechanisms, a marked decline in academic performance, and persistently negative affective states.

Gender difference analysis revealed that female students experience greater internal conflict, with tendencies towards rumination ($r = 0.34$; $p < 0.01$) and somatisation ($r = 0.29$; $p < 0.01$), while male students make greater use of projection and displacement mechanisms. Year-group differences were also statistically significant: the highest intensity of internal conflict was observed among third-year students, a finding that is attributable to the pressures associated with the transition to professional placement and the completion of degree projects.

5. Theoretical And Practical Discussion

The theoretical analysis of the study's findings leads to a number of important conclusions. First, the structure of internal conflicts observed among students corroborates Erikson's (1950) conception of the adolescent identity crisis: identity and role confusion crises manifest in academic settings as the complex process of forming a professional sense of self. The institution of higher education functions not merely as a system for the formation of knowledge and skills, but as the primary social environment in which the individual undergoes the psychological transition to adulthood.

Second, if the dynamics of defence mechanisms are interpreted within the framework of Vaillant's (1977) hierarchical model, the general level of psychological maturity of the student population is located in the

intermediate zone. This position is explained, on the one hand, by the natural psychological characteristics of adolescence and early adulthood, and, on the other, by the competitive academic environment and academic pressures prevalent within Uzbekistan's system of higher education. The dominance of rationalisation and intellectualisation may also be associated with the predominance of intellectual activity culture in academic settings.

Third, the relatively large proportion of the 'crisis student' type (24.2%) demonstrates the necessity of developing systematic psychological support services in institutions of higher education. Without early identification and intervention in the educational process, this group of students faces risks of academic failure, psychological disorders, and social isolation. In particular, indicators of depression and anxiety disorders in this group were found to be 2.3 times higher than in the general student population.

Fourth, the cultural context of the study elucidates the distinctive characteristics of student psychology within the collectivist value system and strong sphere of family influence in Uzbek society. The conflict between family expectations and personal aspirations represents a type of internal conflict that is infrequently encountered in Western studies, but is characteristic of the Central Asian student population. This necessitates the critical and culturally sensitive adaptation of universal Western practices in the development of locally relevant psychological support models.

6. Conclusions And Recommendations

This study has comprehensively examined the psychological characteristics of internal conflict and defence mechanisms among students, yielding a series of conclusions of both theoretical and practical significance.

First conclusion: internal conflicts are widespread among students, and their structure and dynamics exhibit considerable variation according to year of study, gender, field of specialisation, and individual psychological characteristics. The dominance of professional self-determination and status-related conflicts reflects the central psychological tasks of adolescence and early adulthood.

Second conclusion: although the dominance of rationalisation and intellectualisation mechanisms may be indicative of the academic environment's encouragement of intellectual activity, the high level of neurotic defence represents a long-term risk factor for psychological health. The development and consolidation of mature defence mechanisms should constitute a priority direction of psychological support work.

Third conclusion: the intensity of internal conflict is statistically significantly inversely associated with academic performance. This relationship is mediated by the types of defence mechanisms employed; that is, the defence profile functions as a moderator of the effect of internal conflict on academic outcomes.

The following practical recommendations are advanced:

- Introduce a psychological screening system for all year groups in higher educational institutions. First-year adaptation difficulties and third-year professional crisis and career self-determination issues require priority attention.
- Develop group-based psychological support programmes for students. Cognitive-behavioural approaches, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and mindfulness-based interventions are recommended as empirically supported methods of intervention.
- Conduct training sessions for teaching staff and faculty administrators on the manifestations of internal conflict and methods of providing psychological support.
- Expand individual counselling services at psychological support centres and guarantee anonymity — a measure that has been shown to increase students' likelihood of seeking help.
- Make the monitoring of students' psychological health a regular part of each semester's evaluation system, with findings reported to institutional administrations.

– Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs and to integrate neurobiological indicators with psychological measurements.

This study confirms that understanding the psychological characteristics of internal conflict and defence mechanisms among students is not merely a matter of academic psychological interest, but constitutes a significant practical factor in improving the quality of contemporary higher education. The psychological health of young people is a strategic resource of the state and society that must be safeguarded and developed.

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