

Protecting the Self: Defense Mechanisms in Action.
Phebe Cramer. New York: Guilford Press (www.guilford.com), 2006, 384 pp., \$45.00, Hardcover.

Supposedly written to elucidate defense mechanisms in action, this volume simply reiterates a widely accepted tenet of mid-twentieth-century psychoanalysis, and somehow manages to do so without shedding any light on either “mechanisms” or “action.” The central thesis of this book is that the use of defense mechanisms changes over the lifespan, and that denial may be normal for a six-year-old but not for a sixty-year-old. This thesis is entirely non-controversial, and evidence supporting it is not particularly informative. For the reader in search of a new perspective that encourages theoretical integration, this book is not recommended.

This book disappoints on a number of counts. First, its focus is extremely limited. It does not discuss the full range of defenses, but looks at only three: denial, projection, and identification. A serious student of defenses would more likely be interested in a detailed study of repression, which has historically been considered the prototype of all defenses. No such explanation is contained in this volume. Other students of defense would be interested in learning about the complexities of some of the more elaborate forms of defense, such as projective identification. The book fails even to mention this topic.

The book also disappoints because it unnecessarily limits its evidence base. It does not consider any of the experimental evidence from cognitive science concerning defensive biases in attention, memory, and attribution. All of the fascinating work done over the last 20 years using emotional Stroop tasks, dot-probe attention tasks, and implicit/explicit memory tasks is summarily ignored. If the cognitive scientific research had been considered, we could have been treated to a very interesting picture of defense as a combination of parallel, multi-stage processes in which threat is screened, appraised, and further processing resources are allocated for both automatic and effortful responses. From Cramer’s psychoanalytic explanation, we get no mechanistic detail, just an appeal to the authority of the “intelligent” unconscious.

Another major disappointment of this book is its reliance on an antiquated psychoanalytic definition of defense. The book’s definition excludes all coping strategies that may contain some conscious component. This definition of defense should have expired in 1933 when Wilhelm Reich published his book *Character Analysis*, in which he persuasively argued that personality and defense do not operate independently. In this tradition, psychoanalysts Hellmuth Kaiser and David Shapiro have since extended the psychodynamic theory of defense to apply to most meaningful aspects of personality, including conscious cognitions, attitudes, and aims. These developments have provided a much more general theoretical basis for psychodynamic thought, allowing the application of a much wider range of scientific theory to the understanding of defense. It is a pity that this book did not take advantage of any of these obvious theoretical bridges.

The last major disappointment comes in the form of the book’s over-reaching inferences. For example the author claims to have studied “...how defenses influence personality development over time” (p. ix). Here the author is referring to data recycled from two pre-existing longitudinal studies. The interpretation of causal directionality from these correlational data sets is of course entirely fallacious and unscientific, but is unfortunately typical of the confirmation bias that permeates this book.

For readers interested in understanding defense from a wider variety of theoretical perspectives, Paul Wachtel's *Action and Insight* (1987) provides a much broader scope with much more detail. His chapter on the defensive functions of broad and narrow attention (Chapter 17) is particularly useful in understanding the importance of experimental cognitive science to the study of defense. Wachtel's predictions of experimental results, first articulated over 40 years ago, are coming eerily true in the cognitive science laboratories of today. His integrative theoretical analyses should be required reading for any student interested in a thorough understanding of defense mechanisms. Cramer's volume, by contrast, can be safely ignored.

References

- Reich, Wilhelm (1933) *Charakteranalyse*. Reproduced in *Character Analysis, Third enlarged edition*, NY: Noonday Press 1990.
- Wachtel, Paul L. (1987) *Action and Insight*. NY: Guilford Press.

Bradford C. Richards, Ph.D.
The Cognitive Behavioral Institute of Albuquerque, LLC
Albuquerque, NM