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# NIGERIANS COPING WITH STRESS: AGE, SEX AND RELIGIOUS VARIATIONS

by

E. Adenike Emeke

Many factors may cause stress or predispose a person to stress. Poverty may be a factor of stress for some people, while for others the ills in the society such as corruption may set off psychological problems in them, thus leading to stress (Carew, 1984). Other causative and/or predisposing factors of stress include low self concept and poor self esteem (Erikson, 1968; Vonger, 1977; Siann & Ugwuegbu, 1980); reduction in power, poor memory and inability to concentrate (Ogwudire 1987); constant failure at tasks (Hargreaves, 1975); academic and career related problems (Ojo, 1977, Emeke, 1984). It can safely be said that stress is a by-product of psychological, economical and social problems and circumstances inherent in modern society.

## *Background to the problem*

The individual is constantly faced with problems, stress and strain. He makes effort to adjust and achieve mental health and avoid mental illness or breakdown. Mental health can be defined as successful adjustment while mental illness represents failure to adjust.

The failure of an individual to adapt to and contain stress inducing factors may result in emotional and mental breakdown. Early warning physical

signs of stress include chest pain, headache, insomnia, palpitation and tiredness which may result from insomnia. Early mental signs indicating stress include: (1) inability to relax properly, (2) intolerance of noise or other such stimuli, (3) irritability and short temper, (4) poor memory and inability to concentrate, (5) impulsive behaviour or uncontrollable emotions, (6) reduction in will power, (7) inability to complete tasks started, (8) over-reaction to trivial things.

Stress may elicit some psychosomatic illness such as: (1) alcoholism and drug addiction, (2) anorexia (loss of appetite), (3) baldness and grey hair, (4) diabetes, hypertension, heart attack and ulcer, (5) sexual problems like impotence, less of libido, premature ejaculation in the male, frigidity, infertility, and menstrual disorders in the female.

In response to the stress imposed by various threats and conflicts, psychological or organic reactions usually occur in the individual. Naturally, the individual develops various feelings and attitudes which assist him to adapt to the situation and thereby protect his well-being. To achieve this homeostasis or mental equilibrium, therefore, individuals have been known to seek ways of coping with the stresses of their lives. Three major ways are known to be ways of coping with stress, namely: (i) pharmacotherapy or drug treatment - this involves the use of tranquilizers, sedatives and hypnotics; (ii) surgical intervention - this involves operation on the anatomical site affected by stress; and (iii) psychotherapy or the use of psychological methods - this involves the use of emotional defence mechanism.

The focus of this paper is more on the third method of coping i.e. - the use of defence mechanisms. Workers in the field of psychotherapy, such as Singer, (1976), Hilgardetal (1975) Conger (1977), Hamachek, 1978, Burns (1979) and Ogwudire, 1987), agree that there are at least nine basic defence mechanisms employed by people from time to time,

and even in some cases, one after the other in a row of incidences in a day. The type a person employs at a particular time and or in a particular case is a function of age, experience, background, perception of the issue at hand and the type of person(s) involved in the situation making necessary the use of the defence mechanism.

One factor which determines how an individual reacts to stress inducing circumstances is personality. No two individuals have identical personality. For the generality of stressful circumstances, therefore, susceptibility varies in degree with individuals. So in the management of stress or resolution of stress, the following defence mechanisms are usually employed - namely: (1) sublimation, (2) regression (3) displacement, (4) compensation, (5) apathy, (6) repression, (7) fantasy, (8) projection, and (9) rationalization.

### Methodology

This paper sought answers to two research questions and tested three related hypotheses. The research questions are:

- (1) To what extent do Nigerian adults make use of defence mechanisms in coping with their stress?
- (2) Which defence mechanism(s) is (are) most commonly employed by the males and which by the females?

The three hypotheses tested are:

- (1) There will be no difference in the coping patterns of males and females.
- (2) There will be no difference in the coping pattern of Christians and Muslims.
- (3) There will be no difference in the coping pattern of young and middle-age adults.

The subjects of this study were 308 Associateship in Education (ACE) students of the Institute of Education, University of Ibadan, consisting of 95 males and 213 females. The sample constituted a class taught by this researcher. The fact of the sample being a captive one explains the great difference in the number of males and females. All the subjects are literate adults. Their ages ranged between 25 years and 45 years, with the mean age coming to 35 years.

This study was conceived of as a pilot survey study, hence the instrument was made up of the written responses of the subjects to the assignment: "Write down one defence mechanism you often employ in coping with your stress and the situation(s) that lead you to using it". The list of the nine defence mechanisms earlier mentioned was presented to the subjects, after two lectures had been given to the subjects on defence mechanisms.

No restriction was made on the length of the write-up or the time to be taken to do it. Each subject submitted the write-up after completion and was allowed to leave the room.

#### Data analysis and results

Data analysis was done on the basis of frequency of each of the defence mechanisms, on means, and on a T-test of the difference between the means. The mean ranking of the males and the females were compared. So also were the mean rankings of Muslims and Christians, as well as the young and middle-aged adults.

The results are presented in the tables below. The tables give descriptive data of the relationship between stress coping mechanisms and the sex, religion and age of the respondents involved in the study.

Table 1 results show that all the range of coping mechanisms are employed by all the adults in the

study. This Table helps to answer research question one in the positive, that is to say that Nigerian adults make use of defence mechanisms in coping with their stress. Research Question two is also answered by Table 1. From here, it can be seen that fantasy, apathy, rationalization and displacement are the most commonly employed coping mechanisms amongst females, while males have fantasy and apathy as two clearly distinct coping mechanisms they employ. Four other coping mechanisms rank same as can be seen from the Table. The possible implication of this is touched upon in the "Discussion of Results".

TABLE 1  
Frequency of different defence mechanisms according to sex

Mechanism	F'	M	M%	F%
Apathy	14	39	14.73	18.3
Compensation	6	15	6.31	7.04
Displacement	12	27	12.63	12.67
Fantasy	20	42	21.05	19.71
Projection	7	-	7.36	-
Rationalization	12	36	12.63	16.9
Regression	-	18	-	8.45
Repression	12	12	12.63	5.63
Sublimation	12	24	12.63	11.26
Total	95	213		

To test hypothesis 1, we again turn to Table 1. The Table shows that both fantasy and apathy are commonly high ranking among both males and the females. But for the other seven mechanisms considered, the pattern is different. With only 22.22% commonality of pattern (2 out of 9 considered mechanisms) it can safely be said that there is indeed a

difference in the coping patterns of males and females. Hypothesis 1 is thus rejected.

To test hypothesis 2, which states that there will be no difference in the coping pattern of Christians and Muslims, we turn to Table 2. This table shows that while fantasy ranked highest among Christians, it ranked third among Muslims. Rationalization, displacement and apathy, which ranked 2nd, 3rd and 4th for Christians, ranked 4th, 2nd and 1st respectively for Muslims. It is only projection that tends to rank the same (8th) for both Christians and Muslims. With this scenario, made clearer in Table 2, it can safely be said that there is a difference in the coping pattern of Christians and Muslims. Thus Hypothesis 2 is rejected.

A look at Table 3 shows that hypothesis 3 is not confirmed. This hypothesis states that there will be no difference in the coping pattern of young and middle-age adults. An explanation of the result obtained is attempted in the next section of this paper.

TABLE 2

Frequency of different defence mechanisms according to religion

(C = Christians, M = Muslims)

Mechanism	C	M	C%	M%
Apathy	24	25	12.44	21.74
Compensation	12	10	6.22	8.7
Displacement	30	20	15.54	17.39
Fantasy	40	18	20.73	15.65
Projection	10	5	5.18	3.48
Rationalization	33	15	17.1	13.04
Regression	8	11	4.15	9.57
Repression	15	8	7.77	6.96
Sublimation	21	34	10.88	3.48
Total	193	115		



TABLE 3

Frequency of different defence mechanisms according to age

Mechanism	25-34	35-44	45+
Apathy	24	17	20
Compensation	10	14	-
Displacement	20	22	13
Fantasy	24	10	12
Projection	6	-	-
Rationalization	24	9	-
Regression	17	-	-
Repression	11	18	-
Sublimation	15	10	-
Total	151	102	55

### Discussion of findings

Freud used the term "defense mechanism" to refer to unconscious processes that defend a person against anxiety, that protect him against external threats or against internal anxiety by arousing impulses that distort reality in some way. Defense mechanisms do not alter the objective conditions of danger; they simply change the way the person thinks about it. They all involve an element of self-deception.

The first obvious result of this study is that all the adults involved employ the use of defense mechanisms to protect against external threats and/or internal anxiety-arousing impulses. The second obvious fact is that all the nine range of defense mechanisms are used by the sample. These observations answer our research questions. The results continue to point to the fact that there is so

uch stress both within the individual and in his external environment that avoidance of the use of defense mechanisms is almost impossible. Because anxiety is a very uncomfortable emotion that threatens man's weak being, it cannot be tolerated for long. Man is strongly motivated to do something to alleviate the discomfort. Though the attempt to deal directly with an anxiety-producing situation by appraising it and then doing something to change or avoid it (i.e. the direct coping method) is about the best, as advocated by some (Hilgard et al. 1975; Coleman, 1972; Singer, 1976) and supported by this writer, the reality is that other methods focusing on defense against anxious feelings without trying to deal directly with the anxiety-producing situation are used with some measure of success and with the same result of coping with the situation. In fact, if defense mechanisms were not partially successful, they would not persist in use as they do.

Males and females cannot be pitched against each other as to who does or does not use the "element of self-deception" (Hilgard et al., 1975). As can be seen from Table 1, both males and females have the use of fantasy high up on the list of defense mechanisms employed. This is corroborated by Singer's (1976) *work who found that there is substantial evidence to suggest that fantasizing and daydreaming is not only normal, but an almost universal activity among people of both sexes.* Though fantasy is stimulated by frustrating desires and grows primarily out of mental images associated with need gratification, it can be both productive and non-productive. Productivity of fantasy can be used constructively in problem solving, as in creative imagination, and it will be readily agreed that both males and females are capable of exercising creative imagination to about equally the same degree. There are in fact examples in history that point out this assertion. Albert Einstein had mental pictures, or "fantasies", and creative imagination. The capacity to remove ourselves temporarily from unpleasant reality into a

more affable world of fantasy has considerable therapeutic value, adding the dash of excitement and interest we need to motivate us to greater efforts towards our goals in real life. Both males and females desire this.

However, the individual who consistently turns to fantasy as his solution to a troublesome reality is in danger psychologically. It is in this regard that the high percentage of both males and females in the sample (24.14% and 21.88% respectively) need some form of counselling. And when it is realized that both sexes also couple this with the use of apathy, which is high up in their range of defense, then the need for this counselling becomes very necessary. For it must be remembered that under conditions of extreme frustration and deprivation fantasies are likely to get out of hand and, as Bettelheim (1943) rightly points out, hopes and expectations at this time often only take the form of eschatological and messianic hopes, full of apathy and depression with little progressive move forward in the realization of life's ambitions, goals, aspirations and a coping with life's seeming threats.

Table 1 presents an interesting picture with males. They have repression, rationalization, displacement and sublimation taking equal ranking. A seeming pattern which develops among these four coping mechanisms can somewhat be explained away. The male in order to protect his he-ego, and not be looked upon or called a "sissy" represses dangerous thoughts and desires by excluding them from consciousness. This probably succeeds only for a while. With the age long conflict between the Id, the Ego, and the Super ego still alive as ever, the subconscious soon throws out the repressed thoughts. With the consciousness (memory) not being able to carry all the details of the repressed thoughts or the circumstances that led to the very reaction, then rationalization may be resorted to as a means of dealing with the rather strange resulting thoughts

or actions. Rationalization, if it does not succeed, may lead to displacement of the emotion to a more neutral or less dangerous person or object. Though displacement has a valuable aspect, since it enables one to vent dangerous emotional impulses without risking loss of love and possible retaliation, it may become so much and so frequent that the very object of displacement abhors the individual, and this may set him to find some other ways of dealing with the anger and actions that still gnaw at him. He may finally arrive at sublimation which substitutes a goal for a drive whose normal channel of expression is blocked or unacceptable.

A higher percentage of females (7.82%) than males (6.90%) employ compensation as a defense mechanism. Compensation is an attempt to disguise the existence of weak or undesirable characteristics by emphasizing a more positive one. Females can be good at cosmeticizing and disguising.

Table 1 also reveals that, while no female was found adopting projection as defense measure, no male was found adopting regression as a coping mechanism. These results present a very interesting and rather unbelieving picture that especially concerns females vis-a-vis projection. Projection basically is a means by which we relegate the blame for our own shortcomings, mistakes, and transgressions to others, and attribute to others our own unacceptable impulses, thoughts, and desires. It is perhaps most commonly apparent in our tendency to blame others for our own mistakes. The experiences of this writer points to the fact that females and almost everybody blame their shortcomings on others. Thus to find no females employing projection as a defence mechanism is really very interesting. However, empirical revelations are more authentic than non-empirically backed experiences, hence, the need to abide by the result of this study. One would only suggest a further study in this regard, and possible explanations should the pattern persist.

Table 2 presents a scenario where, for the Christian sample in the study, fantasy ranked highest as a defense mechanism, followed by rationalization and displacement. Regression ranked lowest. At first glance, this scenario may not be too surprising. The average Christian is constantly called upon to prepare for heaven - a paradise, and a place where "there is no more sorrow", a place of everlasting joy", a place with "streets of gold". This is a situation that starts early in this life. He has got to imagine what this heaven will be like, and escape from time to time to be living in heaven, even while still here on earth. In a situation like this, it is not surprising that the Christian's employ of fantasy is high in coping with his everyday "trials and temptations" or stresses produced by the realities of living. For this writer, fantasy and rationalization can easily be used to find acceptable reasons for one's past present or future behaviour. For example the adherent of a Christian denomination where the wearing of jewelry is forbidden, on questioning, will tell you that use of jewelry will detract him from getting to heaven, while the one who dresses flamboyantly will tell you that his God "is a rich God, the owner of the whole universe".

It is noteworthy that regression has little place with the Christians in the samples, since the average Christian is constantly looking forward to inherit a heaven of bliss and has little concern for retreating to lower standards.

In discussing the scenario presented in Table 2 for the Muslim sample, it is found that both apathy and displacement are the highest employed defence mechanisms. The experience in Nigeria is that the average Muslim is taught to believe that "God brings and God takes away". He is thus fairly indifferent to the crises that may happen to him (such as loss of child or job). But it is not easy to bottle up emotions after taking things as "God sent". There often will be a transfer of emotional feelings from

the actual object to a substitute. It is therefore not surprising to find apathy and displacement taking the positions they take on Table 2. That fantasy ranks next in order of defense mechanisms employed by Muslims is not unexpected. Since Islam, like Christianity, also preaches an eternal beautiful place of abode (al-janna), an occasional escape from the realities of stress in this world so as to cope is rather inevitable.

In Table 3, the younger subjects (25 - 34 yrs.) have apathy, fantasy and rationalization ranking the same first position. These "younger subjects" seem to be oscillating in the use of their most preferred defense mechanism. What the result seems to suggest is that at one time they employ the use of apathy, at another time fantasy and yet another time rationalization, all with about equal degree of success. Sometimes the young adults are apathetic, indifferent, or non-challant. They are idealistic and look out for perfection. But when they find that these traits are in fact absent in the reality of the world they are in, they become disappointed and apathetic. We should not forget that this group of people is not too many steps out of the adolescence period where apathy and other traits mentioned above are common, as is borne out by works of authors such as Hamachek (1978), Coleman et al (1977), Siann and Ugwuegbu (1980) and Ogwudire (1987). Probably in a bid not to be too disappointed, they escape into a world of fantasy, dreaming up the ideal, where everything is perfect and orderly. In this way they may be able to cope with the disappointments presented by the external world. The conflicts which are known to be attendant to the stage of life of young adults may explain why their rate of rationalization is high. If they who advocate for perfection and ideals now find themselves compulsively and impulsively falling below expectation, they may resort to rationalization in order to cope with the apparent conflict.

The middle-aged subjects (35 - 44 yrs.) displace their aggression most of the time. This result is surprising, for the writer's expectation was that this set of subjects by virtue of their age range would have achieved more measure of maturity so as to face issues more objectively and not displace their anger and frustration on substitute objects who may be their children at home and school or subordinates at work. It should be noted that we are on the whole, psychologically better off when we learn to express and discuss our feelings with the persons at whom the feelings are intended in the first place, rather than aim them at someone who does not even know what they are all about. However, when it is remembered that stress threatens the well-being of an organism and blocks reasoning, then the writer need not be surprised at the result under discussion.

Equally interesting is the fact that about 1/5th of the sample use regression as a coping mechanism. They retreat to the use of behavioural patterns appropriate at earlier levels of development. Could it be that the high rate use of this mechanism relates to onset of old age with its attendant senility dispositions? A more detailed research may help clarify this relationship.

### ***Defense Mechanisms in Retrospect***

The use of defense mechanisms helps individuals to preserve the self and cope with stress and conflicts. Defense mechanisms are learned adjustive behaviours that function on relatively unconscious levels, involving a certain amount of reality distortions and self-deception. In spite of this, defense mechanisms serve the aim of adjustment by reducing conflict and frustration and, because they stand on guard of the self, they function as a bulwark against more serious disturbances. But for the use of defense mechanisms, probably many more psychotics would have been around the corner. To this end, defense

mechanisms can be considered quite normal and desirable when used appropriately. However, when used to an excessive degree, they can operate at the expense of a person's ultimate efficiency and continued personal progress toward greater maturity.

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