

## The Influence of Resistance on Coaching Efficacy: The Obstacle is the Way

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**[Abstract]** This article explores the influence of resistance on coaching efficacy. Resistance is a key psychodynamic construct that can inhibit coaching efficacy. Coaches and a coaching alliance to achieve stated personal and professional goals. Thus, examining the applicability of key concepts in psychoanalytic theory and the influence of resistance in coaching could lead to a greater understanding of its role in the coaching relationship and strategies enabling the advancement of this increasingly utilized developmental process. This paper explores four areas: 1) a review of associated psychological literature, 2) resistance and defense, 3) categories and levels of defense mechanisms, and 4) classifications of defense mechanisms, and 5) applications of psychoanalytic theory and strategies in coaching.

**[keyword]** resistance, defense mechanisms, coaching, psychodynamics

### **Coaching: A Contemporary Context**

Coaching has grown exponentially over the past decade. Zhou (2024) estimates that the coaching industry has grown 62% from 2019, with approximately a 54% increase in revenue to over \$4.5 billion globally" (p. 1). Waite (2024) projects that the 2024 coaching market will reach around \$6.25 billion, anticipating the number of active coaches to reach approximately 145,500 (p. 1). Williams (2023) estimates that over twenty different types of coaching exist (p. 4).

Despite coaching's dynamic growth as an industry, its popularity as a career choice, and the proliferation of types of coaching, it remains enigmatic, resulting in resistance to acceptance and use. Reasons central to this resistance include a lack of viable research demonstrating coaching efficacy, unorganized theoretical approaches and applied standards, the lack of formalized standards defining the types of coaching (e.g., life coach, performance coach, spiritual coach), and the absence of approved training and supervised field experiences. As Bozer, Sarros, & Santora (2014) state, "Coaching continues to explode in popularity as a development approach without more analytical confirmation of return on investment, which represents a puzzling quirk begging further investigation" (pp. 881-897). McCarthy & Milner (2020) indicate, "In terms of demonstrable links between coaching and financial performance, empirically substantiated claims are scarce at best and raising the level of analytical rigor assessing business impact should represent a top priority (p. 732)." Lastly, Kim, S., Egan, Kim, W., & Kim, J. (2013) offer, "While coaching interventions result in largely positive self-perceptions among coachees, discernible

improvements in leadership effectiveness, job performance or organizational advancement remain constrained without further research" (pp. 315-330).

However, while acknowledging coaching's enigmatic context, dearth of research, especially evidence-based research, and questionable viability as an effective development process, coaching remains popular and in use. Authors writing about the benefits and positive outcomes of coaching indicate that there may be "numerous individual and organizational benefits stemming from coaching, including improvements in self-awareness, leadership competencies, organizational commitment, and financial performance (Jones, Woods, & Guillame, 2016, p. 252)." In a meta-analysis of contemporary psychologically informed coaching approaches Wang, Lai, Xu, and McDowall (2021), offer a summarized perspective that "taking part in coaching activities has positive effects on individual-level outcomes" (p. 77-101). Finally, Lawrence (2022) concludes that, "While more research is warranted, evidence increasingly suggests coaching can be an impactful intervention enhancing learning agility, leadership strategy, and fostering positive challenge-seeking mindsets among executives."

One foundational issue fueling resistance to accepting coaching is its unorganized theoretical approach and the absence of established standards and accepted practices. While there is minimal consensus on a recognized body of theory, literature, and practice that governs coaching activities, there is significant evidence that the psychological and psychoanalytic literature and methods are viewed as the cornerstone of contemporary coaching practice. The application of key psychoanalytic concepts and practices may provide a sound and effective approach to advancing and understanding coaching as a profession. This psychodynamic approach serves as a foundation for exploring the resistance to coaching efficacy.

By examining the influence of resistance on coaching efficacy, coaching as a profession may gain broader acceptance as a research-based, standardized professional development activity. Passmore & McGoldrick (2009) write, "The coaching literature is still in its adolescence. Claims about its efficacy and impact must be evaluated critically before we can make definitive statements about its influence" (pp. 145-161).

### **Psychodynamics: Cornerstone of Coaching**

A psychodynamic approach to coaching is widely accepted and used in practice, and this paper posits that this approach is highly applicable to understanding the coaching processes and efficacy. Authors writing about the role of psychodynamics in interpersonal engagement (Freud, A., 1936; Spontitz, 1985 and Margolis, 1994) have provided a trove of psychological and psychoanalytic literature and methodologies on which contemporary coaching approaches and practices are based. Fraher (2004) writes, "systems psychodynamics is an interdisciplinary field that integrates three disciplines – the practice of psychoanalysis, the theories and methods of group relations, and a systems perspective." Bornstein (2010) offers that "psychodynamic theory (sometimes called psychoanalytic theory) explains personality in terms of unconscious psychological processes and contends that childhood experiences are crucial in shaping adult personality exploring unconscious thoughts and emotions so that the person is better able to understand him - or herself" (p. 2). Lastly, McWilliams (2022) considers the central role of psychodynamic theory as a theoretical foundation for coaching, as "Early experiences shape an individual's behavior and attitudes, influencing their current functioning." Coaches can use this understanding to explore how past experiences impact present behavior, facilitating deeper self-awareness in clients."

Kilburg (2010), citing Westins (1998), summarizes the research associated with psychodynamics theory using five key postulates aligned with the writings of Sigmund Freud. Those postulates are: (p. 39).

1. Much of human mental life, including thoughts, emotions, and motives, are unconscious and can produce behavior in people that is inexplicable to them.
2. Conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings operate simultaneously and can conflict with each other in ways that require compromised resolutions.
3. Stable patterns of personality and social behavior are formed in childhood and can significantly impact the types and effectiveness of social relationships in adult life.
4. Stable internal mental representations of the human self are formed gradually in childhood, adolescence, and guide both social relationships and how individuals may become psychologically symptomatic.
5. Personality development involves learning how to regulate emotions, thoughts, and social relationships and moves from an immature, dependent state in childhood to a mature and independent state in adulthood.

Using these five postulates as a generalizable theoretical frame, Billingham (2021) concluded, "systemic psychodynamic coaching looks to discover "what is really going on," impacting performance, disruption, or lack of performance." The author continues, "With [coaching's] foundations in psychodynamics, the unconscious and what is out of awareness is central to the approach and builds on the principles of Freud and Klein" (p. 1). Emphasizing the importance and use of psychodynamic theory and practice in coaching, Hart (2021) indicates, "Uncovering complex emotional triggers through meticulous inquiry and interpretation fosters insight into maladaptive patterns that inhibit a leader's potential" (pp. 77-92).

Coaches employing a psychodynamic approach in the coaching alliance can be well-positioned to facilitate client development. McWilliams (2011) offers, "It provides a framework for understanding emotions as meaningful messages to be explored rather than dismissed." These orientations toward employing psychodynamics as a foundation approach to enabling individual growth, increasing organizational productivity, and advancing the acceptance of coaching as a development process. While Billingham (2021) concludes that using the psychodynamic approach "helps individuals look at themselves and investigate their "inner theatre," being self-reflective in order to understand themselves before they move forward addressing the impact and influence on behavior, functional or dysfunctional" (p. 1).

### **Freud in Reflection as Psychodynamic Theoretical Frame**

Freud. S. (1911, 1915, 1923) presented his theoretical map of a differentiated system of the mind, creating a topography of the mind. He identified a three-tier structure of the mind with initial attributions to the purpose and function of each structure. Freud posited that the "mental apparatus can be broadly understood in terms of three mental systems: unconscious, preconscious, and conscious" (Bornstein, 2010, p. 2). This topography evolved into his model of personality, including the Superego, Ego, and Id. This psychological construct provides the essential theoretical frame for originating psychodynamics, as well as a platform for employing analytic power and potential inherent psychodynamic structures. (Williams & Moser, 2021) assessed that "Freud's mental schema viewed the Superego as framing the moral and ethical consciousness generating value-driven thoughts and behaviors. The Ego, the conscious mind, manages the executive

functions of living, and the Id comprised of instincts and drives, is timeless, structureless, and chaotic" (p. 7).

Bornstein (2010) writes from a contemporary perspective, stating that "It is most accurate to think of psychodynamic theory as a set of interrelated models that complement and build upon each other"(p. 1). To be effective in achieving clients' goals and objectives in the coaching alliance, the coaching engagement is predicated on constant and resistance free communication between the coach and client. Spotnitz (1985) indicates that the modern psychoanalytic approach to unfettered verbal interaction is a simple, yet nearly impossible idea and action to "say everything" (p. 105)." For clients, an expectation to "say everything" and to put all thoughts and feelings into words may be more intimidating and daunting than the concept of being "coached" (Sharon, 2024 p. 1).

Advancing an effective coaching alliance requires courage and a willingness to forge a unique relationship with the coach, given the vulnerabilities associated with revealing personal and intimate details. Barriers to coaching efficacy might be particularly pronounced when individuals are mandated to work with a coach. All parties should anticipate resistance to these risk-oriented conditions: clients, coach, and the referring executive. Shedler (2018) indicates that the coaching alliance must be nurtured and strengthened (p. 56). "Approaching resistances with empathy rather than frustration preserves trust, psychological safety, and willingness to explore charged topics." McWilliams (2022) reminds coaches that recognizing and "respecting defenses as coping strategies prevents overwhelming clients through moving too fast beyond developmental readiness prematurely."

In the context of Freud's three-tier structure of the mind, resistance and defense mechanisms operate, protecting both the client and coach from resident anxiety, frustration, and pain associated with life events that could hinder and negatively influence progress in the coaching relationship. In the next section, the paper explores three constructs influencing coaching efficacy within the coaching alliance: 1) roles of resistance and defense theories relative to coaching, 2) categories and levels of defense mechanisms, 3) select defense mechanism and repetition compulsion, and 4) and a summary contextualizing the psychological literature, and applications in coaching practice.

## **Resistance and Defense**

### ***Resistance***

The psychological constructs of resistance and defense are foundational to Freud's theorization of the structure of the mind. In his writings, Freud considered psychological resistance as a phenomenon in which patients unconsciously "cling to their disease" through "tenacious" and "critical objections" to repress distressing thoughts, emotions, and experiences (Freud. S., 1904, 1920, 1940). Spotnitz (1985) indicates that in 1897, Freud briefly referred to resistance as "nothing but the child's character" (p. 226)." Using a more contemporary perspective toward resistance, Margolis (1994) writes, "Resistance is a part of the analysis as well as a counterforce operating against progress in the analysis. Resistances are defenses, often condensed in character traits, which have been developed to ward off experiencing certain painful feelings."

Similarly, Lafarge (2012) states, "Defense and resistance are closely allied concepts. Defense refers to how the mind unconsciously protects itself from danger from within and without. Resistance refers to the operation of defense within the analytic situation" (pp. 93-104).

While the coaching alliance is not a "psychoanalytic situation," the interplay between psychodynamic theory and coaching interventions cannot go unrecognized. The structures of defense are vigilant, protecting the Ego from real or perceived incursions that may destabilize a person, rendering them vulnerable to anxiety and pain. Turner (2010) indicates, "An explicit psychodynamic approach plays a major role in psychotherapeutic treatment but is not commonplace in coaching. However, that psychodynamics and the role of the unconscious in coaching conversations is not only pervasive but relevant" (pp. 243-272). Similarly, in Book 5 of *Meditations*, Roman emperor and stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius considered external obstacles and hardships to provide opportunities to act with virtue and wisdom: "The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way" (Section 5). For Marcus Aurelius and arguably for the Stoic philosophers, resistance was as an "impediment to action" was to be anticipated and accepted, perceiving it as an opportunity for mastery of self and ascendance making way for advancement.

### ***Resistance to Coaching***

Resistance to coaching is fueled by resistance to change. Change can be destabilizing and disruptive. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920) considered that change could be disruptive and, in turn, upset an individual's equilibrium, enabling anxiety and stressors to emerge residing in the unconscious. From a psychoanalytic perspective, resisting change, real, perceived, or imaginary is common. Eagle (1999) offers, "From a psychoanalytic perspective, a central reason people do not easily change is their fear of the dangers that they believe, at some level, change entails" (pp 3-33). Spontitz (1985) concludes, "In whatever way resistance manifests itself, it always denotes opposition – conscience or unconscious – to the analytic process" (p. 144). Furthermore, the author continues citing Menninger's (1958) definition of resistance, in extension, "the trend of forces within individuals which oppose the process of ameliorative changes" (p. 104).

There are numerous hypotheses concerning an individual's resistance to being coached. For example, Fillery-Travis & Lane (2006) conclude that the "[individuals] skepticism towards executive coaching likely stems in part from underlying tensions it surfaces regarding power dynamics, organizational politics, role clarity, and self-efficacy" (p. 24-36). van Nieuwerburgh, Knight & Campsall (2022) add, "The destabilization of the familiar required with coaching risks awakening past relationship trauma or attachment injuries." Relatedly, Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh (2021) indicate, "Leaders often enter coaching clinging to projected certitudes that veil interior doubts, with the sense of exposure in acknowledging growth areas kindling self-protective defenses undermining transparency" (pp. 151-166).

These orientations toward resistance to coaching are rooted in and examined through psychological and psychoanalytic literature and practices. Individuals entering a coaching alliance invite the coach to engage and explore their beliefs, motivations, and rationales for action. By design and default, clients are expected to relinquish control over proprietary personal materials of intimate, nuanced, and secret quality about themselves to a stranger. Baron & Morin (2022) consider that "The depth of self-reflection and vulnerability expected within coaching connections can overwhelm executives, provoking tension given minimal experience with emotional intimacy professionally" (pp. 33-44).

The physical structuring of coaching experience, dyadic or group, closely resembles individual and group therapy models. While not therapy, coaches must acquire formal psychological education, training, and supervision to understand, recognize, and effectively manage resistance in the coaching relationship. Coaches must understand the roles and goals

framing each setting relative to their education, training, and ability to segregate topics, determine direction, and calculate the depth of the coaching interaction. Also, they must effectively manage resistance, recognize defenses, and engage appropriate levels of engagement. Bartz (2016) recommends, "Intensive instruction in core psychoanalytic, systems and social psychology theories provides vital scaffolding for practice complexities handling transference and resistance" (pp. 567-589). Coutu & Kaufman (2009) state, "Mastery of theories equipping nuanced decoding of unconscious forces shaping behavior and navigating transference projections requires intensive graduate work...short certificate courses breed dilettantes dangerously exceeding comprehension depth" (p. 94). Lastly, Spotnitz (1985) provides a thematic transition from resistance to defense, writing, "Resistance is now associated with defenses mobilizing the Ego in the interests of mastery of the environment and psychic survival. These protective devices, activated in the analysis [coaching] situation by transference, are recognized as characteristic expressions of the living personality" (p. 105).

### *Defense*

The experience of being "defensive" is common. Individuals become defensive when unprepared for a task, feel challenged on issues, or believe they have been wrongly accused. In these situations, people often protect or defend themselves so as not to experience unwanted emotional states. Authors writing about defense (Freud, A., 1936 and Spotnitz, 1985) indicate that being [defensive] represents involuntary reactions protecting self-concept when aroused by uncomfortable insights. They serve an avoidant function, enabling one to repress troublesome realizations and eschew constructive discomfort. With the development of the theory of the mind structure, the role and function of defense became associated with the Ego. Anna Freud (1936), building on her father's work, codified a systematic schema of the development, function, and varieties of defenses and defensive mechanisms. Importantly, owing to the work of father and daughter, two conceptions of the functions of defenses were generated: 1) to avoid painful feelings and 2) to repel the instinctual drives" (Cramer, 2015, p. 525).

Coaches focusing on defense and defensiveness during the coaching experience can help minimize resistance to engagement, diminish client anxiety, and maximize the benefits of the coaching alliance. Again, coaches who are untrained in psychodynamic theory and practice will, at best, be ineffective and potentially damaging to the client through ignorance of content and method and instead fostering anxiety, frustration, and dissatisfaction with the coaching process.

The cultural context in which coaching occurs can influence the client's presence and degrees of defensiveness. Clients must be willing to engage, reveal, and be truthful about themselves to achieve desired coaching outcomes. Coaches need to consider the degrees of vulnerability and anxiety that may be produced by engaging in organizationally sanctioned or mandated coaching. To ameliorate anxiety and stress, coaches need to employ psychodynamic strategies and methods for minimizing the effects of these negative emotional constructs. Edmondson (1999) indicates that "psychological forces present in organizational culture exert high levels of mental and emotional pressure on stakeholders. Environments where people fear embarrassment, marginalization or retaliation for transparency undermine engagement, learning, and innovation, can [minimize safety and productivity]" (pp. 350-383).

Importantly, McWilliams (2011) indicates that "defenses are essential coping strategies. Rather than contemptibly obstructive tactics, they represent ingenious methods honed over time for managing intense distress." Historically, Horney (1937) identifies that "maintaining self-image

is essential in fortifying ego strength. People build ego defenses to align experiences with idealized self-narratives and avoid confronting painful contradictions that undermine identity security."

Lastly, Schein (1985) indicates that organizational culture is a dynamic and powerful influence on psychological, emotional, and behavioral balance and well-being. The author indicates, "Resistance to change in organizations is especially [powerful] as it provides meaning, predictability, and security for members" (p. 20). As organizational cultures evolve, so do personal plans and performance requirements. In this context, unpredictability and uncertainty emerge, undermining organizational and personal equilibria. Schein (2009) asserts that because of cultural instability, three psychological states are introduced into the environment: disconfirmation, survival anxiety, and learning anxiety" (p. 47).

These psychological constructs are essential considerations when involved in organization-based coaching. In brief, Schein writes, "If the disconfirming data get through an individual defensiveness and denial, they will feel either survival anxiety or guilt, followed by learning anxiety, the fear that new behaviors and requirements for performance may be challenging to acquire and learn to meet new organizational standards" (p. 111). As a result, the interaction among the three states creates a complex and nuanced conundrum for organizational members.

In addition to the independently established coaching relationship, coaches must be prepared to coach within organizations. In these environments, coaching efficacy will be significantly influenced by coaches understanding of organizational culture and change. As Edgar Schein (1985) famously stated, "If you do not manage culture, it manages you, and you may not even be aware of the extent to which this is happening" (p. 12).

### **Defense Mechanisms**

Cramer (2015) writes that the concept of defense mechanism is at the core of psychoanalysis" (p. 525). The theories of defense and defense mechanisms share a close and causal relationship. Authors writing about these psychological constructs (Freud, S., 1920; Freud, A., 1936; and Margolis, 1994) indicate that they play a significant role in maturation and productivity. In his early clinical practice and writings (1896), Freud recognized communication and behaviors that served to defend individuals against memories of traumatic events in childhood; initially denial and projection. Freud determined that defense mechanisms serve a "mental function," and these characteristics of the mind made it possible for any type of mental material to "screen" or conceal other materials.

Freud's topography of the mind, Superego, Ego, and Id serve as the theoretical frame for defensive stimulation and mobilization of defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms protect the Ego by reducing anxiety and stressors that occur unconsciously. "Defenses are basically mental strategies that we use automatically and unconsciously when we feel threatened" (Cramer, 2015, pp. 525-529). While protective for a period, defense mechanisms "involve ignoring or distorting the reality of a situation to avoid anxiety involve some distortion of reality" (Cherry, 2023). In contrast, Lowenstein (1967) argues that defense mechanisms are a part of normal psychological functioning and facilitate positive adjustment – the normal part of the mind" (pp. 795-809).

Vaillant (1971, 1992, & 1994) developed a four-level classification schema that organized eighteen defense mechanisms. The hierarchical model identifies the lower-level defense mechanisms (Level I - Pathological) - maladaptive functioning to higher-level defense mechanisms (Level IV) - adaptive functioning.

**Table 1***Vaillant's Categories and Levels of Defense Mechanisms*

Category (Levels)	Defense and definitions*
Level I - Psychotic Defenses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Distortion</li> </ul>	Level I - The most primitive and pathological mechanisms. Reliance on these pervasively distorts reality and profoundly disrupts functioning across relationships, work, and well-being.
Level II - Immature <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passive aggression</li> <li>• Acting out</li> <li>• Dissociation</li> <li>• Projection</li> <li>• Autistic Fantasy: Devaluation, Idealization, and Splitting</li> </ul>	Level II - Immature - While temporarily relieving distress, frequent use of these defenses notably disrupts relationships and daily functioning.
Level III - Neurotic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intellectualization</li> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• Repression</li> <li>• Reaction Formation</li> <li>• Displacement</li> <li>• Somatization</li> <li>• Undoing</li> <li>• Rationalization</li> </ul>	Level III - Neurotic - Involves some unconscious distortion of reality, but still enables adaptive daily functioning without significant subjective distress. People relying on these mechanisms can regulate emotions and navigate workplace/social demands.
Level IV - Mature <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suppression</li> <li>• Altruism</li> <li>• Humor</li> <li>• Sublimation</li> </ul>	Level IV - Mature - These represent integrative coping strategies that flexibly balance inner/outer reality distortions to relieve psychological pain without dysfunction in relationships or daily activities.

Table 1. Cramer (2015). Vaillant's Level of Defense.

Cramer, P. (2015). *Understanding Defense Mechanisms: A Psychodynamic Perspective for Coaches*. In *The Psychology of Executive Coaching: Theory and Application* (2nd ed., pp. 243–268). Wiley-Blackwell.

Vaillant, G. E. (1992). *Ego mechanisms of defense and personality psychopathology*. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 101(1), 44–50. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.101.1.44>

Table 1 provides Vaillant's defense classification. For coaches and clients, this material is a guide for understanding defense mechanisms and their potential influence on coaching efficacy and the success of the coaching alliance. Moreover, coaches must thoroughly understand psychology theories associated with defense and defensiveness and practical, in vivo experience to properly and effectively manage defense mechanisms. As Di Giuseppe and Perry (2012) write, "The psychodynamic concept of defense mechanisms is nowadays considered by professionals with various theoretical orientations of great importance in the understanding of human development and psychological functioning" (pp. 71-84).



This paper does not present an exhaustive study of defense mechanisms. Instead, it has two purposes: 1) to present the classifications of defense mechanisms for coaches' edification, and 2) to examine one defense mechanism from each of the four classifications, provide a summary, define it via the psychoanalytic literature, and apply it in coaching practice.

### **Classification of Defense Mechanisms:**

#### **Summary Definition, Psychological Literature Reference, and Application in Coaching**

##### ***Level I - Psychotic Defenses - Denial***

Denial is a pernicious, primitive, and pathological defense mechanism. Individuals can distort reality, destabilizing and disrupting interpersonal and organizational operations. Through denial, clients are attempting to maintain and preserve a viable self-image. When coaches recognize the presence and patterns of denial during the coaching session, they can identify it with the client but challenge and attempt to disarm this protective psychological shield. Instead, they can cultivate a context of psychological safety, enabling decreased distortion and presentness.

**Context in Psychological Literature.** Margolis (1994) summarizes, "Through denying reality and exempting intolerably painful facts or self-concepts from conscious recognition, individuals preserve their psychic equilibrium, despite evidence contradicting the denial. This requires maintaining delusional thinking to cope with the truth" (pp. 179-186). In support, Spitz (1985) writes, "Denial is a profoundly unconscious, ego defense mechanism where an individual refuses to acknowledge or perceive external reality or internal thoughts, feelings or experiences that are overwhelmingly distressing or anxiety-provoking (p. 110)."

**Applications in Coaching Practice.** In coaching sessions associated with relationship issues in the workplace, coaches may witness strong emotional and/or physical responses from clients when discussing their relationship with authority figures in the workplace or considering examples of workplace harassment or violence. This type of material may overstimulate clients, eliciting the denial of any understanding of experience with or exposure to these topics. Hart (2021) offers, "The coach needs high attunement skills to recognize denial defenses manifesting in the alliance. Careful exploration of the coachee's feelings can create psychological safety for the distortions to lower, allowing authentic change towards raised self-awareness" (pp. 77-92).

##### ***Level II - Immature - Projection***

Projection enables individuals to direct uncomfortable, unconscious thoughts, themes, and feelings outward and attribute them to another person. Self-esteem is maintained by projecting or discharging these unconscious materials, and emotional destabilization is avoided. Similar to denial, projection distorts reality by associating unconscious, uncomfortable material with an external source, in turn creating a distorted perception of the other and the world.

**Context in the Psychological Literature.** Freud, A. (1936) offers, "This serves to protect self-esteem by expelling unwanted aspects outward rather than acknowledging them as one's own." In support, McWilliams (2011) writes "Projection is an immature ego defense mechanism whereby an individual unconsciously attributes or externalizes uncomfortable thoughts, affect, impulses, or qualities within themselves onto another person or entity." Lastly, Bion (1959) considers "Locating shortcomings in others that actually reside within themselves, projection blocks self-awareness, preserving the desired self-image."

**Applications in Coaching Practice.** In coaching sessions, clients may experience an emotional reaction to the coaching experience and may attribute elements of their own issues to

the coach. This transference, not examined in this paper, is tantamount to projecting the client's uncomfortable and unwanted states onto the coach. A more conscious example is a client (manager) who has received feedback suggesting that their impatience, arrogance, and aggressive behaviors are disruptive. In response, the client projects (blames) these characteristics on the "ignorant, lazy, and incompetent staff. Here, Hannush & Ogden (1982) offer "Approach projections with curiosity and care. Explore the meaning behind distortions without confronting or demanding change. Gently unpack the suitcase through inquisitive reflection" (246-250). Bloomgarden & Menutti (2015) offer "Explore origins of projections over time. As safety permits, carefully unpack childhood wounds or developmental deficits that may underlie chronic projections as defenses." Bright (2018) writes, "Increase reflective capacity through inquisitive dialogue. Ask probing yet empathetic questions about what is being projected and why, which enables perspective taking" (pp. 45-58).

### ***Level III - Neurotic - Rationalization***

Rationalization is common in everyday life. Individuals rationalize occurrences to protect their self-esteem and identity. The construction of reasonable explanations, or other conditions, for an event that unconsciously conceals the underlying true motives or conditions, creates a rationale for the self and reduces inner tension and anxiety. However, this deception has a psychological price: it perpetuates an individuals' ability to maintain an illusion, to avoid pain and frustration, and live with diminished self-awareness and authenticity to an external source, creating a distorted perception of the other and the world.

**Context in the Psychological Literature.** McWilliams (2011) states, "Rationalizations minimize distress by providing socially acceptable motives to cover up those that are not." While Cramer (2015) indicates, "Rationalization involves constructing plausible explanations for attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and motivations that are not based on reality. It protects against threats to self-esteem and identity" (pp. 243-268). The author continues, "The [coach] must act as a 'beacon of reality' when distortions emerge such as client rationalizations, gently confronting denial while retaining empathy."

**Applications in Coaching Practice.** In coaching sessions, clients claiming to be employee-supportive often struggle with delivering negative performance management conversations with underperforming employees. As a result, they avoid these conversations by offering seemingly reasonable excuses for their avoidance. Similarly, when the coaching discussion turns to their role as an authority figure, clients frequently avoid discussing the harsh and negatively charged criticism received from her parents. Spotnitz (1985) offers, "Rationalizations conceal from ourselves and other motivations that conflict with the ego ideal by inventing stories that justify unacceptable behavior (p. 117)." Townley & Kiemle (2021) suggest, "Gently highlighting discrepancies between a client's rationalized justifications and their stated values or previous actions can increase accountability if done with empathy rather than criticism" (p. 76-82). Also, (Freud, A. (1936) offers, "Rationalization is a defense mechanism in which controversial behaviors or feelings are justified and explained in a seemingly rational or logical manner to avoid the true explanation."

### ***Level IV - Mature Defense - Sublimation***

Sublimation is a useful defense mechanism that enables individuals to redirect aggressive and socially unacceptable impulses, ideas, and behaviors into accepted and potentially beneficial outcomes. As a mature defense mechanism, sublimation is adaptive, enabling individuals to

translate the more primitive and disruptive expressions and actions into productive and fulfilling results.

**Context in the Psychological Literature.** Vaillant (1992) writes, "Contemporary views on sublimation emphasize its role in coping with stress and anxiety by channeling potentially harmful impulses into constructive outlets." McWilliams (2011) indicates, "Sublimation is considered a hallmark of psychological health, as it enables individuals to convert their primitive drives into creative and constructive endeavors." Lastly, Kernberg (2020) states, "Sublimation involves the transformation of socially unacceptable impulses into socially acceptable actions or behavior. It is a key mechanism in developing creativity and pursuing excellence in various fields, including art, science, and leadership."

**Applications in Coaching Practice.** In coaching sessions, coaches may become aware of client orientations and statements focused on adapting current ideas, impulses, or behaviors that may interfere with their productivity and social engagement. An example could be that a client starts taking boxing lessons in order to discharge aggressive feelings in a socially acceptable manner – through sport. As a result of the training, the clients' confidence increases in physical strength. Another example is a client stating they are awkward and feel inadequate in many social situations. To explore these states, the client engages in volunteer work to discover ways to build connections with others and gain self-confidence.

As a result, negative ideation and feelings diminish, productivity increases, and more meaningful relationships and satisfying social engagements exist. To McWilliams (2011), "Sublimation is a process by which socially unacceptable impulses are transformed into socially acceptable actions or behavior. This transformation often results in long-term satisfaction and personal growth."

To conclude the topic of defense mechanisms, it is essential to consider repetition compulsion. Repetition compulsion, a trauma reenactment process, is not included in Vaillant's classifications of defense mechanisms. Instead, its classification as a defense mechanism is debated in psychoanalytic literature. Briefly, Levy (2000) offers, "The concept of the repetition compulsion remains an enigma. Its etiology is not fully understood, and the purpose it serves continues to be a mystery. Although it is theorized that the compulsion to repeat may function to facilitate mastery of past trauma, mastery is rarely achieved" (pp. 45-53).

In contrast, Bollas (2021) states, "Repetition compulsion can function as an unconscious defense mechanism, allowing individuals to revisit and attempt to cope with unresolved trauma or conflicts." While there is debate concerning its classification and function, it would be prudent to review the associated literature, theory, function, and practice as it may present in the coaching alliance.

In Freud's (1914a) seminal paper "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," he wrote, "Repetition is only the transference of the forgotten past" (p. 149). While transference is not directly treated in this paper, it is present in the topic and coaching materials presented.

Theoretically and functionally, Corradi (2009) indicates that repetition compulsion is a maladaptive need to repeat thoughts and behaviors to feel safe compulsively. The author continues, it has "Three orientations toward repetition compulsion are: "reparative, retributive and restorative—reparative to correct a failed experience; retributive to get even or being punished and restorative returning to an earlier experience or time to be nurtured through positive association" (pp. 477-500).

In a coaching context, repetition compulsion may manifest as a client who complains that a past mentor's insults concerning workplace performance continue to negatively influence his [or

her] ability to further his or her career. If appropriate and fully trained to explore this type of statement, Viorst (2020) states, "Repetition compulsion is a defense mechanism that involves the unconscious reenactment of past traumas. It serves as a way for individuals to try to master or make sense of these experiences."

### Closing

While there is minimal consensus on a recognized body of theory, literature, and practice that governs coaching activities, this paper demonstrates that there is significant evidence that the psychological and psychoanalytic literature and methods are viewed as the cornerstone of contemporary coaching practice. The application of key psychoanalytic concepts and practices may provide a sound and effective approach to advancing and understanding coaching as a profession. This psychodynamic approach serves as a foundation for exploring the resistance to coaching efficacy and provides context for how coaching as a profession should be grounded in established psychological concepts and practices. In so doing, professionals utilizing this approach may help to advance a psychodynamic-based coaching orientation that may gain broader acceptance as a research-based standard for professional development. By drawing parallels between established psychological concepts and practices to coaching methodologies, this paper initiates the development of a more theoretically established and empirically bound model for the future of coaching.

The *dichotomy of control* is a foundational tenant of Stoic philosophy. This approach bifurcates the world into two states: things that can be controlled and those that cannot. Within this context, the stoics believed that resistance was related to internal struggles versus external circumstances. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, in his *Enchiridion*, wrote, "It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters." This orientation applied to resistance and defense in the coaching process can enable coaches to help clients' reflective capabilities to identify what they can control, as well as unconscious and conscious resistances and defenses that inhibit personal and professional advancement.

The American poet T.S. Eliot provides a psychoanalytic orientation toward self-exploration and symbolic language associated with becoming the transformed self.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
(Four Quartets, T. S. Eliot)

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