Abstract

THE INFLUENCE OF ADVANCED COGNITIVE ABILITY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSES AND IN UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING AFFECT: A STUDY OF LATENCY-AGED GIFTED STUDENTS

by

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The present study examines the influence of advanced cognitive ability on the development of psychological defenses and in understanding and managing affect, using the lens of Emotional Intelligence (EI). Theories of psychological defense maturity state that defense mechanisms are influenced both by the cognitive level of the individual and by the cognitive complexity of the defense itself (Cramer, 1999; Cramer, 2009). Individuals with exceptional cognitive ability may therefore show a corresponding “match” with complex defense use. In addition to defense use, how well one is able to identify, understand, express and manage emotion, abilities often labelled Emotional Intelligence (EI), are a set of functions that have also been theorized as being related to cognitive ability (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001). The present study was therefore conducted in an effort to better understand the combined role of defense use, EI, and advanced cognitive ability during latency, a period of development that presents a myriad of affective and cognitive shifts.

A sample of 29 latency-aged gifted elementary school students completed measures assessing their crystallized and fluid reasoning skills, their EI emotion management and emotional understanding abilities, and their use of Denial, Projection and Identification using responses from the Thematic Apperception Test and Cramer’s (1991) Defense Mechanism Manual (DMM). The BRIEF-TF teacher rating scale was also examined in relation to EI
measures and DMM scores. Correlational analyses indicated that crystalized reasoning skills (verbal ability) were significantly positively related to emotional understanding. No relationship existed between fluid reasoning ability and emotion management. For the sample as a whole, the defense of Projection dominated. Results indicated that developmental parameters, including affective and cognitive maturity, are perhaps more influential in the development of defenses than superior intelligence in itself. The relative use of Identification, which was minimal in this sample, had a significant positive relationship with emotional understanding, while no relationship was found between Identification and emotion management. A significant inverse relationship was found between emotion management and the ability to inhibit, shift and display emotional control in the classroom (BRIEF-TF BRI scale). Clinical and theoretical implications of these findings were discussed, including a thematic illustration of TAT responses.