

## IMPACTS OF EMPLOYMENT DURATION AND WORK PERFORMANCE ON JOB MISMATCHED GRADUATES' USE OF DEFENCE MECHANISMS

**Getrude Cosmas**

*Faculty of Psychology and Education, University Malaysia Sabah (Malaysia)*

### Abstract

One of the employability challenges that most graduates face at present is securing jobs that are in line with their educational levels and fields (i.e., job mismatch). To overcome this challenge, graduates may use various types of defense mechanism (i.e., mature, immature & neurotic). Graduates who use mature defense mechanism tends to use or transform their negative feelings and thoughts into something that are less harmful and risky compared to those who use immature and neurotic defence mechanism. However, the use of defense mechanisms may be affected by employment duration and work performance. The present study was conducted to determine the impacts of employment duration and work performance on the use of each type of defence mechanisms. Of the 231 employed graduates who participated in the present study, 117 were job mismatched. Longer employment duration decreased their use of mature defence mechanisms. As for work performance, more graduates who perceived themselves as having higher work performance used neurotic defence mechanisms (undoing, pseudo-altruism, idealisation, and reaction formation), but the factor did not have any impact on their use of mature defence mechanisms (suppression, sublimation, humour, and anticipation) and immature defence mechanisms (projection, passive aggression, acting out, devaluation, autistic fantasy, and denial). The study findings can help make job-mismatched graduates aware of the impacts of their employment duration and work performance on their use of psychological coping strategies and can help employers understand the defence mechanisms used by their job-mismatched employees and the job factors that may drive them to adopt these strategies. The understanding from both parties may lead to a better productivity in the industry.

**Keywords:** *Job mismatches, self-defence mechanisms, graduates, work performance.*

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### 1. Introduction

Today's highly competitive job market has put a strain on some graduates' employability and has led them to accept jobs that are not in line with the educational levels they have reached and their academic fields. These graduates need more time to adapt and adjust their skills to their new jobs, which is compounded by the challenge of transitioning from university life to work life. In a study by Molinsky and Pisman (2019), 54 graduates who experienced transitioning from college to the professional world stated in interviews that they felt disoriented, confused, dissatisfied and, in many cases, overwhelmed with the real world. The workplace can push individuals to their emotional thresholds as they receive critical feedback, interact with abrasive colleagues, and are sometimes micromanaged by their supervisors. In addition, the workplace consists of people with different personalities who have different ways of dealing with situations (Omol, 2019). Defence mechanisms are used particularly during crises or in unwanted and undesirable situations (Fatima & Mahour, 2021), such as in dealing with work stressors and unexpected demands from one's employers. A basic concept in psychoanalytical theory, they are defined as strategies employed to protect one's ego (Fatima & Mahour, 2021).

Graduates tend to use various types of defence mechanisms (i.e. mature defence mechanisms, defined as adaptive, normal and effective confrontation strategies, and neurotic and immature defence mechanisms, defined as nonadaptive and ineffective confrontation strategies (Sepidehdam et al., 2012) to adapt to their work demands and challenges and to cope with the psychological tensions caused by these, but their use of defence mechanisms may be influenced by their employment duration and work performance. For instance, Sepidehdam et al. (2012) found that people who utilise grown defence mechanisms experience less affective burnout and greater success. In a study by Cosmas et al. (2023a) involving 116 employed graduates, mature self-defence mechanisms were found to have a positive effect on their work performance, while immature defence mechanisms did not show any significant effect on the same. It was also found that

there was no difference between the job-matched and job-mismatched graduates in terms of their use of mature and immature defence mechanisms; both groups used these two types of defence mechanisms in dealing with their job tasks. Gronningsaeter et al. (1991) found that highly active workers (i.e., those who exercised for at least 45 minutes on three or more days in a week) were likelier to use the mature defence mechanism of compensation (i.e., making up for a task that one is not good at by performing other job tasks that one excels in) than less active workers and inactive groups (i.e. those who had no exercise at all), and that less inactive workers were likelier to use the immature defence mechanism of projection.

The present study was conducted to determine the effects of employment duration and work performance on job-mismatched graduates' use of mature, immature, and neurotic defence mechanisms.

## 2. Objectives

Based on the preceding discussion on the challenges faced by job-mismatched graduates, the present study sought to determine the effects of their employment duration and work performance on their use of mature, immature, and neurotic defence mechanisms.

## 3. Methods

A survey was conducted to collect data from the study participants, who were employed graduates whose jobs were not in line either with their academic fields (horizontal job mismatch) or with the educational levels they had reached (vertical job mismatch). The participants were graduates of either public or private universities. A questionnaire divided into three sections was used to collect data from the participants. Section A gathered the participants' demographic profiles (i.e. gender, ethnicity, religion, university attended, academic programme taken, educational level reached, current job and employment duration). Section B measured the participants' vertical job mismatches (educational level reached versus educational level required for the job) and horizontal job mismatches (the participant's academic field and the academic field required for the job). Vertical job mismatches based on educational level reached focus on overeducation. Overeducation was measured by comparing the educational level reached by a participant with the educational level required for their job. That is, a participant was categorised as overeducated if the educational level they had reached was higher than the educational level required for their job. Each participant had to indicate the minimum educational level required for their current job and to state whether they were overeducated based on their perceptions and understanding of their job. The educational level they had reached was then compared with the minimum educational level required for their job. Horizontal job mismatches, on the other hand, were measured by comparing the academic field of a participant with the academic field or background required for their job. Some examples of the questions asked in Section B were 'What educational level have you reached?' 'What is the minimum educational level required for your current job?' and 'Does your current job match your academic field/programme at your university?' Section C of the questionnaire used in the present study measured each participant's defence mechanisms using the Defence Style Questionnaire (Andrew et al., 1993). This questionnaire consists of 40 items that measure the mature defence mechanisms (suppression, sublimation, humour, and anticipation), immature defence mechanisms (projection, passive aggression, acting out, devaluation, autistic fantasy, and denial) and neurotic defence mechanisms (undoing, pseudo-altruism, idealisation, and reaction formation) used by the respondent. The response scale ranges from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 9 ('strongly agree'). The following are some examples of the questionnaire items: for mature defence mechanisms, 'I work out my anxiety by doing something constructive and creative, such as painting or woodwork' (sublimation) and 'I'm able to keep a problem out of my mind until I have time to deal with it' (suppression); for immature defence mechanisms, 'I work out more things in my daydreams than in real life' (autistic fantasy) and 'When I'm depressed or anxious, eating makes me feel better' (displacement); And for neurotic defence mechanisms, 'After I fight for my rights, I tend to apologise for my assertiveness' (undoing) and 'I often find myself being very nice to people whom I should be angry at' (reaction formation). Finally, Section D (designed by Koopmans, 2015) of the questionnaire used in the present study measured work performance. It consisted of 18 items that measured three main dimensions of job performance: task performance, contextual performance, and counterproductive performance. The response scale ranged from 0 ('seldom') to 5 ('always').

#### 4. Results

Before the data were analysed, they were screened, and their reliability and validity were checked. A total of 231 graduates participated in the present study, but due to the study's objectives, only 117 job-mismatched graduates were included. Most of them were female (78, 66.70%), and only 39 (33.30%) were male. The study results showed that employment duration had negative effects on the participants' use of mature defence mechanisms, contributing 4% to the variance in the use of such defence mechanisms (Beta [1,114]=-0.20;  $t=-2.18$ ;  $p<.05$ ). The mean employment duration was 8.89 months (SD = 15.34). This showed that the longer the employment duration, the less frequent the use of mature defence mechanisms (see Table 1).

*Table 1. Simple Regression Value of the Effect of Employment Duration on Each Type of Defence Mechanism.*

Defence mechanism	R-square	Employment duration		
		Beta	t-value	P-value
Mature	.040	-.20	-2.18	.03
Immature	.003	.05	0.56	.05
Neurotic	.020	-.13	-1.43	.15

Note:  $k < .05$

Employment duration did not show any significant impact on the use of immature and neurotic defence mechanisms, but work performance showed positive effects on the use of neurotic defence mechanisms (Beta = [1,111] = .32;  $t = 3.53$ ;  $p<.05$ ), contributing 10% to the variance in the use of such defence mechanisms. This indicated that the higher the work performance perceived by graduates, the more frequent they use of neurotic defence mechanisms (see Table 2).

*Table 2. Simple Regression Value of the Effect of Work Performance on Each Type of Defence Mechanism.*

Defence mechanism	R-square	Work performance		
		Beta	t-value	P-value
Mature	.007	.083	0.83	.380
Immature	.003	.050	0.56	.050
Neurotic	.100	.32	3.53	.001

Note:  $p < .05$

#### 5. Discussion

The study results indicated that employment duration could affect job-mismatched graduates' use of mature defence mechanisms, defined as adaptive, normal, and effective confrontation strategies. They are based on a healthy and conscious relationship with reality. Other defence mechanisms can be primitive, immature, or maladaptive (Ohwovoriolè, 2022). Individuals who use mature defence mechanisms tend to transform their negative feelings and thoughts into less harmful and risky feelings and thoughts. According to Ohwovoriolè (2022), defence mechanisms are strategies that people use to manage their stress or anxiety. These coping skills can be varied and unconscious. They have likely evolved to protect and promote the integrity of our psychological architecture, our sense of self and our identity and esteem (Psychology Today, n.d.). The results of the present study showed that the longer the job-mismatched graduates' employment duration was, the less often they used mature defence mechanisms. This could have been influenced by several factors, such as their work environments and employment duration. Graduates who succeed in obtaining a job may tend to use mature defence mechanisms in the early stages of their employment. Cosmas et al. (2023a) found that graduates who obtained jobs sooner after graduating were likelier to use mature defence mechanisms than those who obtained jobs later. However, due to the unpleasant work environments they found themselves in, they could use other unhealthy defence mechanisms, such as projection, passive aggression, acting out, devaluation, autistic fantasy, and denial. Cosmas et al. (2023b) also found that graduates who secured a job sooner after graduating might be more concerned about their respective work environments, such as their senior workers' and employers' expectations of their productivity. Although they performed excellently at the university, it did not necessarily follow that they would also perform excellently in the workplace. This is because the work environment could be more challenging than the study environment. Raziqa and Maulabakhsha (2015) found that employees from three sectors (i.e. banking, university and telecommunication) believed that conducive and friendly work environments could help increase employees' job satisfaction. The employees who participated in the study

showed work environment concerns, such as working hours, job safety and security, relationships with co-workers, esteem needs and top management.

Regarding the second finding that work performance had positive effects on neurotic defence mechanisms, it was shown that the higher the graduates' perceived work performance, the more often they used neurotic defence mechanisms, such as undoing, pseudo-altruism, idealisation, and reaction formation. Wagas et al. (2018) found that high achievers scored higher in the use of mature and neurotic defence mechanisms, such as pseudo-altruism, idealisation, and reaction formation. According to Di Giuseppe and Perry (2021), people who use high neurotic defence mechanisms can deal with either the emotional or cognitive side of internal and external stressors, which can be handled one at a time. However, neurotic defence mechanisms have short-term advantages in coping, although they are used as crucial ways of dealing with problems (Fatima & Mahour, 2021). For instance, workers who use neurotic defence mechanisms, such as reaction formation, may find themselves being very nice to their co-workers even though they have a right to be angry at them, and workers who use the undoing defence mechanism may ask forgiveness for their assertiveness after fighting for their rights in the workplace.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, employment duration and work performance can affect the defence mechanisms used by job-mismatched graduates. Defence mechanisms can significantly help these graduates deal with the anxiety and stress they experience in the workplace. However, according to Walker and McGabe (2021), the continual use of defence mechanisms may lead to maladaptive behaviour, which may have negative effects on an individual's social functioning and physical and mental health. This assertion was supported by Fatima and Mahour (2021), who stated that defence mechanisms could be both constructive and destructive, based on the nature and degree of their use. Therefore, it is important for job-mismatched workers to understand the external factors that may affect their use of defence mechanisms, such as those explored in the present study. It is hoped that the present study's findings will drive future researchers to examine each type of defence mechanism (i.e. mature, immature, and neurotic). For instance, it would be interesting to examine the effects of employment duration and work performance on the use of different types of mature defence mechanisms, such as suppression, sublimation, humour, and anticipation, and to examine their contributions.

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