PREVENTION AS A SOCIAL DEFENSE MECHANISM

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Several behavioral patterns aiming to prevent social status/loosing face in various social situations are discussed. Some patterns (e.g. normative conformity, self-irony) are viewed as an individual's trials to reduce the potential dissonance that may arise among the attendees towards him/her as a result of his/her social status incompatible behavior.

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The discovery of ego defense mechanisms (projection, rationalization, identification etc. See i.e. Grohol, 2016) can be regarded as one of the main achievements of the psychodynamic school. The spectrum of these mechanisms was further enriched by a representative from an entirely different direction, Leon Festinger; by this I mean dissonance and its reduction, through which, similar to "traditional" defense mechanisms, a person tries to restore disrupted emotional comfort by maintaining/raising self-esteem (Festinger, 1957).

The main purpose of all these mechanisms is self-justification; accordingly, one of its main features is subjectivity. These mechanisms can be considered as "intimate" processes, where the social component (i.e. self-presentation), at least temporarily, pushed to the background. However, often in everyday life, there are moments when an individual ends up in situations that are inappropriate for social status and are dangerous to self-esteem. We can assume that these situations also require defense mechanisms, not in order to achieve internal comfort, but to minimize social and personal results of failure in the eyes of others; in other words, to justify oneself in front of others. In the English language there is an idiom for this mechanism – damage control, what the sociologist, E. Goffman called "impression management" (Goffman, 1959).

Individuals care for their own social image in any situation that involves other people, even strangers. E. Goffman (ibid.) introduced the concept of front stage and back stage. The frontstage involves social situations when an individual performs a formal role (sales person, spectator at a concert, married couple attending a party, etc.), and coordinates clothing, speech, manners etc. with this role. In other words, an individual manages the impressions of others. The behavior characteristic to the back stage unfolds "behind the scenes", when it is no longer necessary to worry about impressions, or when an individual is alone or surrounded by people close to them. In

this situation, the need for self-presentation disappears and, accordingly, the informal level of speech, dress code etc. rises to the maximum.

Thus, according to the notions of the front stage and the back stage, the individual's self-presentation changes, but the response type to the same situation changes as well. Let us imagine a middle-aged elementary school teacher who is sitting in a chair, alone at home (back stage), when, suddenly, the chair breaks and the teacher falls to the floor. It is most likely that the teacher's reaction will be annoyance, swear words, etc. We can assume that the same will happen if this incident occurs during a lesson, in front of students: the teacher's reaction will belong more to the back stage (i.e. complaining about the school administration because his/her social status is not under much threat).

Now let us imagine that the same situation occurs when the teacher is at a party with colleagues (front stage). The reaction is predictable: if the incident occurs without any physical trauma (sometimes even in case of trauma), the teacher will start laughing; most of the time, even before the witnesses show their reaction to the incident (no matter what that reaction might be: worry or laughter).

It is probable that in the last situation the individual's reaction has a preventive character, is entirely oriented at the witnesses and represents a social defense mechanism.

If we look deeper into the hypothetical situation, we will discover a similarity with the dissonance reduction mechanism, but with a difference. In our case, the goal of the behavior is the reduction of the real or imagined dissonance of others: individuals' behavior, which is inappropriate for their social status, causes dissonance in the eyes of others, potentially affects their social status and changes the attitudes towards them to the worse. The function of preventive behavior is to avoid such results.

In the given example, the preventive behavior aimed at "saving face," orients the situation towards humor. The context is clear: nothing serious happened, on the contrary, it is a funny incident and the "author" of the incident understands that. Generally, transforming the situation towards a non-serious context is one of the most common ways to deal with awkward situations. As R. Martin, (Martin, 2006), a humor psychology researcher, mentions: "in social situations individuals use humor to "save face", when they experience failure, or are somehow divulged, their masks are removed, they are caught in lying, or behave inappropriately". In all the listed situations, the attempted transfer to humor is probably preventive and aims to reduce the anticipated dissonance among the observers. An example of such behavior is the "false modesty ("I am so stupid!")", or "false self-disparagement" (the student who asks the lecturer to postpone a deadline for a paper: "I am your irresponsible student")" described by Myers (Myers, 1996). Often, an athlete tries to maneuver a situation towards a humorous angle during a poor performance or failure, by way of smiling, which clearly does not reflect his true internal condition.

If the transfer of the situation to humorous aspect is impossible, sometimes the humor is still present – a person who is disclosed in inappropriate behavior often tries to justify him or herself using a humor-based motivation: "it was a joke".

Thus, transferring a situation to a humorous aspect is one of the most important forms of prevention, which functions as a social defense.

Normative conformity, a widely researched phenomenon in social psychology, should also be attributed to social prevention: an individual behaves like others, though doesn't understand the essence of others' reactions (i.e. laughs with others at a joke but doesn't "get" the joke), verbally or nonverbally shows false knowledge ("yes, of course I've read it!"), or as in Asch's classic experiment (Asch, 1956), agrees with others, but deep down has a differing opinion. As it has been established, the underlying basis of this behavior is the desire to be acknowledged, accepted and liked by others, or the fear of being mocked, isolated, humiliated; in short, caring for social status. It is noteworthy, that even in case of normative conformity, individual's behavior is an attempt to reduce witnesses' potential dissonance. Preventive behavior is often manifested by real or pretend reasons that justify the lack of knowledge, which is inappropriate to the status: "I wasn't here", "I came in late. . ." A simple apology also belongs to the same category.

Sometimes we can see classic dissonance reduction in preventive behavior (i.e. by weakening the importance of the cognitive element), but with a stronger social component "directed outwards". An example is the attempt to raise/maintain personal status at the cost of humiliating others. For example, by diminishing the competence area of an opponent, which is accompanied by an unjustifiable generalization: "you are only interested in these stupid sports of yours", "reading a lot does not mean you are intelligent. . ."

We should attribute the so called "failure insurance", or damage control to the same class, in its narrow meaning (pre or post factum): "I knew I would fail", or "this is an old joke, probably you all know" (a story known to everyone does not have any worth, therefore its narrator may become the object of kidding.) It is important to clarify that in these cases we can separate the aspects of self- justification and justification in front of others.

One of the varieties is prevention of undesired interpretation of one's behavior or status by others; I have witnessed such a scene at a pharmacy: while buying a large number of condoms a lady loudly informs others around her that in these condoms she keeps eggplants for winter (which can be true, but the attempt to save face is evident). The attempts to conceal forgetfulness, clumsiness, deprivation also belong to this category ("I didn't bring any warm clothes, but I am not cold", "I am not hungry").

One of the specific types of the previous category is a method, to which an individual refers during a dangerous failure of the reputation or status (i.e. being left by a partner, getting fired); When a person thinks that this story will become public, that person spreads the information preventively, most frequently a favorable version of the story ("It was me who left"). The same phenomenon occurs when people joke about their own physical or personal defects (i.e. big nose, bad memory). The context is clear:

this way a person tries to decrease the importance of the information (cognitive elements), which is not in his/her favor.

It is noteworthy to mention a method, similar to "failure insurance" - self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978): in order to justify an anticipated failure, an individual refers to such behavior that this failure is attributed to situational factors rather than personal skills (i.e. going to the exam drunk).

Prevention is also used during attempts to form positive or favorable attitudes in others. In the common scheme of self-presentation (Pittman, 1982), there are 5 different strategies: attempt to be likable, self-advertisement, frightening, giving and example, and asking. Seeing a preventive element in every one of them is easy.

We should attribute a relatively rare ego defense mechanism to preventive behavior as well As described by Freud. this mechanism is known as reactive formation. The main idea is the replacement of a personally or socially unacceptable or dangerous behavior impulse by behavior that contradicts this impulse, which can often be exaggerated (Grohol, 2016). (Since I am interested in prevention as a social phenomenon, I will not refer to the Freudian interpretation of this mechanism). For example, explicitly aggressive behavior among teenagers, towards the object of their attraction in high school. It is probable that, in this case, justification and self-justification merge together.

The goal of this article was to find a unifying concept for more or less diverse forms of social behavior. If prevention can be used for this role, the author will consider his goal achieved and will hope that the number of described methods and patterns of preventive behavior can be increased.

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