

THE RATIONAL-EMOTIVE APPROACH: A CRITIQUE

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Abstract

Certain limitations are apparent in the Rational-Emotive approach postulated by Albert Ellis. These limitations extend to both the theoretical and practical aspects of this psychotherapeutic model. Criticism of this approach can be directed at Ellis' concept of irrationality, analysis of human behavior and therapeutic techniques. The philosophical assumptions underlying Rational-Emotive theory are shown to be restrictive in nature and that irrational thinking may be a necessary step leading to increased personal integration.

Résumé

L'approche Rationnelle-Emotive d'Albert Ellis comporte des limites apparentes. Ces limites concernent tout autant les aspects théoriques que pratiques de ce modèle psychothérapeutique. La critique de cette approche peut viser le concept d'irrationalité d'Ellis, ainsi que son analyse du comportement humain et ses techniques thérapeutiques. On montre que les postulats philosophiques sous-jacents à la théorie Rationnelle-Emotive sont de nature restrictive et que la pensée irrationnelle peut être une étape nécessaire à l'intégration personnelle.

All theoretical models of human behaviour, including the Rational-Emotive approach of Albert Ellis (1962, 1973), have definite limitations. The purpose of this paper is to indicate some of the limitations apparent in Ellis' approach. Such an analysis will help to provide a perspective from which this contemporary model of human functioning can be evaluated.

The effectiveness of Ellis' approach to psychotherapy may be limited to those individuals possessing certain personality characteristics. Rational-Emotive therapy, according to Ellis, is philosophical, intellectual, theoretical, logical, and empirical in its approach to psychological disturbance. Individuals who are intelligent, educated, insightful and willing to work at changing their thinking would no doubt be more likely to find this form of therapy beneficial. Individuals with serious intellectual deficiencies or psychotic behaviour may not have the capacity to relate to the therapist on the level required. Since communication, and hence language, is a vital aspect of this therapeutic model, it would seem that individuals with severe personality deterioration, whose language and thinking processes have become incoherent, insensible, and illogical, will experience difficulty with this

method of therapy. As the individual's cognitions become more disintegrated, Rational-Emotive therapy may become less effective.

Another limitation of Ellis may be found in his logical analysis (A-B-C) for identifying and removing irrational beliefs. Such an analysis for identifying behavioural dysfunction sees little value in peak-experience, satoris, revelations, and spiritual experiences. Self-understanding may be enhanced by virtue of these experiences and denial of their worth may limit the value of Rational-Emotive therapy, making it more specialized and restrictive than necessary.

The personality characteristics of the therapist who uses the Rational-Emotive approach provide another area of concern. In order to be an effective Rational-Emotive therapist the individual would need to be active, directive, perceptive, responsive, insightful, and analytical during the therapy session. This individual may find it necessary to possess teacher-educator traits, have a working knowledge of other psychotherapeutic systems, have a theoretical and philosophical orientation, realize the importance of cognitive factors in determining behaviour, have an awareness of his own irrational beliefs, and see the

value of interpretation as related to human behaviour. As the "expert" this individual would also need to feel at ease about placing his values upon this client to help him lead a more productive existence. Possession of these therapist characteristics for Rational-Emotive therapy may be too unrealistic for many individuals to adopt, further limiting the use of Ellis' approach.

Rational-Emotive therapy is based upon assumptions concerning the nature of man and about the etiology of psychological disturbances. One assumption states, "that man is uniquely rational, as well as irrational" (Ellis, 1962, p. 36). Ellis never clearly defines the meaning of this assumption and, therefore, interpretation often leads to confusion. Possible explanations would need to consider whether a simultaneous or temporal relationship exists between this dichotomy found in man. It may be questionable whether man is capable of being both rational and irrational simultaneously. If this position is accepted, it would indicate that a temporal relationship of these factors may be the more appropriate explanation. Granting this premise, however, some uncertainty may still occur. If, at any given point in time, man is irrational, then it would seem reasonable to assume that he may experience difficulty in rationally deducing his own irrationality. Ellis contends, "that false conclusions stem from setting up false premises" (1973, p. 88). The individual who acts in accordance with false conclusions may experience difficulty in logically deducing their false premises. For this reason, Ellis believes, an emotionally disturbed individual requires a psychotherapist.

The view that emotional disturbance results from irrational thinking is another assumption underlying Rational-Emotive theory. Negative emotion is seen as being related to an individual's sustained and reflective self-appraisals which are based upon illogical thoughts. According to Ellis, action of this nature is detrimental to one's psychological health and active therapy is encouraged. In contrast, Ellis' form of irrational thinking may be perceived as a positive factor leading to self-awareness. For instance, Laing (1965) believed that individuals who experience emotional imbalance often obtain a deeper, more positive meaning for their existence. Similarly, the theory of Positive Disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964) postulated that some pathological states are necessary conditions for positive development of the individual. Thus, psychological disturb-

ances may be seen as having the potential to accelerate or deepen personality growth. If this is true then there is a possibility that Ellis' irrational beliefs may be components leading to psychological health, according to Laing and Dabrowski.

The premise that individuals have "normal biological tendencies toward irrationality" (Ellis, 1962, p. 93) also underlies Rational-Emotive theory. Other theoretical orientations concerned with the nature of man, which have attracted more supporters, have defined man as being predisposed toward self-actualization (Humanistic Psychology), instinctual gratification (Psychoanalytic Psychology), and positive reinforcement (Behavioral Psychology). Ellis has arrived at his assumption of man primarily from clinical data and more scientific and empirical research may be necessary to make such a contention valid.

Another assumption of Ellis considers early childhood experiences important determinants of one's irrational thinking. However, a developmental model which would enhance understanding of this relationship is not included in Rational-Emotive theory. Unlike others (Erikson, Freud, Piaget) who have proposed stages in attempting to understand human development, Ellis sees little concern for a stage-theory in the acquiring of irrational beliefs. A certain strength may be added to Rational-Emotive theory if such a model is incorporated within its theoretical framework.

Ellis also assumes an interrelatedness among the four basic processes of man, which include thinking, emoting, sensing, and acting. Although a relationship is proposed, little attention is devoted to the processes of sensing and acting; much greater emphasis is placed on thinking and emoting. If a more comprehensive analysis were presented to further demonstrate the interrelationship of the four basic processes, then an added quality would be introduced to Rational-Emotive theory.

A major limitation of Ellis is found when considering the concept of irrationality. Ellis eludes directly defining this concept and, instead, perceives it as a process of human behaviour. Failure to formulate a clear and explicit definition of this major concept, which is integral to Ellis' formulations, constitutes a definite weakness within Rational-Emotive theory.

Ellis maintains that motivating determinants of behaviour are found in what Freud termed

the preconscious. Hence, these determinants are readily available to conscious awareness. Certain limitations of this position are apparent if, in fact, motivating factors of human behaviour are located in the unconscious. Descriptive and concrete techniques employed by the Rational-Emotive therapist may be too elementary to resolve aspects of dynamic behaviour. If the human being is a complex and dynamic entity, and general agreement can be found to support this view, then examination of an individual's irrational beliefs may be too simplistic an approach to effectively understand behavioural dysfunction.

Self-evaluation is seen by Ellis in terms of an individual's traits and performances rather than in terms of "being" and self. Ellis (1973) believes, "that an individual does not have to rate himself, esteem himself, or have any self-measurement or self-concept whatsoever" (p. 65). In contrast, a personal being, representing the perfection of oneself, is often seen as fundamental to human functioning (Freud, 1950; Maslow, 1968; Perls, 1969; Rogers, 1951). Ellis refuted the existence of a "being" on both empirical and logical grounds. St. Thomas Aquinas (cited in Smullyan, Dietrichson, Keyt, & Miller, 1962) argued that proof of a "being's" existence, however, may be beyond man's finite reasoning capacity and suggested that such arguments are in themselves not completely rational. If man does not possess those faculties which enable him to prove the existence of a "being" then arguments against the existence of "being" may also escape man.

Disagreement also appears between Ellis' concept of anxiety and concepts presented by other psychologists. According to Rational-Emotive theory, anxiety is detrimental to human functioning. Alternate views suggest that emotional distress is fundamental to human development. For instance, May (1953, p. 39), defined anxiety as, "an inner struggle . . . between our strength as a self and a danger that threatens our existence as self." Anxiety occurs when an individual becomes overly concerned with "being" disintegrating into "non-being." This Existential state is inevitable and presumably "natural," resulting from fear of death. Frankl (1969) maintained, "that mental health is based on a certain degree of tension . . . which is inherent in the human being" (p. 165). In addition, an individual behaving in a way contrary to conscience is also seen as resulting in anxiety (Mowrer, 1964).

In this case, anxiety is considered realistic and socially useful to the individual and "the thing for him to do is to make acknowledgment and restitution, rather than rationalize away his guilt by means of analytical insight" (p. 231). In contradiction to Ellis, anxiety may prove essential to the individual's pursuit of self-awareness.

Ellis views the process of rational thinking as maximizing one's pleasure, whereas irrational thinking minimizes one's pleasure. Rational thinking leads to human happiness, while irrational thoughts create human despair. Certain Existentialists, on the other hand, pursue the belief that man cannot be free to become, without experiencing painful emotion. Kierkegaard (1969) aptly stated, "that man wills in despair to be oneself" (p. 201). This point of view proposes that man must encounter his anxiety and guilt which enables him to "forge his own being by his own choice and by his own will" (Johnson, 1971, p. 117). The Existential position sees pain and suffering as fundamental components of self-awareness. Ellis' form of irrational thinking which increases self-pain may produce existential crises, increasing self-transcendence.

Further limitations of this approach arise when Ellis states that the purpose of Rational-Emotive theory is, "to accept the full measure of his (man's) humanity . . . in attempting to help him become a more rational, more efficient person" (1962, p. 419). In order that such a goal be achieved, man must be consciously aware of his emotions, senses, actions and thoughts. However, James (cited in Smullyan et al., 1962), believed, "that man's inability to reason beyond that which is fact limits his reasoning ability and therefore, loses the ultimate truth if he denies its existence" (p. 416). Perhaps Ellis' definition of mental health based upon rational thinking places unrealistic restrictions on man. In relation to Existential thinking, Binswanger (1963) saw, "that existential thought comes from man's realization that rational thought has definite limitations" (p. 150). If man's potential does limit seeking the "ultimate truth" of existence, then Ellis' concept of rationality may not do justice to the entire spectrum of human thought and action. The search for self-knowledge and grappling with existential predicaments appear to be beyond the scope of Ellis' theoretical formulations.

In sum, the system of Rational-Emotive psychotherapy projects certain limitations in its

therapeutic approach as well as within its theoretical framework. Emotional disturbances cover a wide spectrum of pathological categories and awareness of the limitations of this approach may prove valuable. Evaluation of Ellis' cognitive approach to personality disorders may conclude that Ellis offers a method of therapy for practitioners, rather than an holistic theory of human behaviour.

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