

IRRATIONAL BELIEFS, LIFE ORIENTATION AND TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVE OF PRISON INMATES

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Abstract

This study investigated the psychological health of criminals based on Albert Ellis' Rational-Emotive Theory. Other dimensions of mental health examined were the criminals' life orientation, and temporal perspective.

The Adult Irrational Ideas Inventory, Life Orientation Test, Wallace Temporal Perspective Technique and a Biographical Data Inventory were administered to 104 male prison inmates and 63 non-institutionalized males from the general population. Findings indicated that the criminal sample possessed significantly more irrational beliefs and were less future oriented than non-criminals. Irrational beliefs, indicating self-centeredness and control of others, were most strongly adhered to by the prisoners. Future oriented prisoners were largely determined as being the eldest in their families, incarcerated for longer periods of time, and having unfavorable impressions of the institution. Implications for further research were also presented.

Résumé

Cette étude a eu pour but d'examiner la santé psychologique des criminels, selon la théorie Rationnelle-Emotive d'Albert Ellis. D'autres aspects de la santé mentale examinés sont l'orientation de la vie et la perspective temporelle des criminels.

L'Inventaire des Idées Déraisonnables des Adultes, le Test d'Orientation de la Vie, la Technique de la Perspective Temporelle de Wallace et un Inventaire des Données Biographiques ont été administrés à 104 prisonniers masculins et à 63 autres individus masculins non-institutionnalisés de la population en général. Les conclusions indiquèrent que l'échantillon criminel possédait, d'une manière significative, plus de croyances déraisonnables, et était moins orienté vers l'avenir que les non-criminels. Des croyances déraisonnables, indiquant l'égoïsme et la maîtrise d'autres individus étaient plus fortement entretenues par les prisonniers. Les prisonniers orientés vers l'avenir étaient pour la plupart les aînés dans leurs familles, incarcérés pendant de plus longues périodes de temps, et ayant une idée défavorable de l'institution. On suggéra également de poursuivre des recherches additionnelles.

Previous investigations into criminal behaviour have dealt primarily with personality attributes. Research in this area has tended to emphasize criminal characteristics such as aggressiveness (Fisher, 1968), compulsiveness (Caditz, 1959), defensiveness (Gough, 1960), dependency (Stewart, 1972), depression (Monachesi, 1950), obsessiveness (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1971) and outer directedness (Knapp, 1971). However, major reviews by Schuessler and Cressey (1950) and Waldo and Dinitz (1967), which attempted to

categorize existing research on the personality of the criminal, concluded that there is no available criteria that discriminates the criminal from the non-criminal.

Treatment methods which have been utilized to change criminal traits in "desired directions" have included the following: Behaviour modification (Saunders and Reppucci, 1972), family therapy (Ostby, 1968), group therapy (Fenton, 1958), home placement (Wilgosh, 1973), individual therapy (Adams, 1962), methadone therapy

(JooShin and Kerstetter, 1973), nominal groups (Zastrow, 1973), physical challenge (Kelly and Baer, 1971), and reality therapy (Coleman, 1970). Although a number of these treatment programs have found limited success, for the most part, they have proved unsatisfactory (Nelson & Richardson, 1971; Robison & Smith, 1971). Accordingly, Lehman (1972) contends, "that little real treatment is done in corrections today" (p. 204).

The determining factor related to the ineffectiveness of therapeutic programs may be the existing incongruency between criminal attributes and treatment method. Personality characteristics of the criminal represent descriptive aspects of his behaviour and such characteristics are not directly considered in most therapeutic approaches. Criminal traits, therefore, are usually perceived only indirectly during therapy since emphasis is placed upon other dimensions (feelings, causes, awareness, responsibility) which theoretically, at least, are related to these traits. On the other hand, if specific criminal characteristics could be clearly defined and a treatment approach implemented with its primary concern being the consideration of these characteristics, then the therapy may have a greater likelihood of success.

Recently, the cognitive dimension and its effects on delinquent behaviour has gained prominence in criminological research. Evidence (Kahn, 1971; Shore, Massimo & Moran, 1967; Spitzer and Spavecek, 1965) suggests that the delinquent is capable of developing a cognitive awareness which can lead to positive behaviour change. Direction for investigating the criminal's cognitive system is provided by DiTullio (1969) who believes that, "In clinical criminology, it is vital to be able to clarify reasons for the varying influence of feelings of anger, rage and power on human behaviour" (p. 13).

The purpose of the present study was to examine an aspect of the criminal's cognitive domain. If there are reasons influencing the criminal and if there is some indication that these reasons are related to delinquent behaviour then further research into the effectiveness of the therapeutic model would be of importance.

The investigation is based on the Rational-Emotive theory of Albert Ellis (1962, 1973). The focal point of his theory is that man is uniquely rational as well as irrational, and that emotional or psychological disturbances result from irrational or illogical thinking. When a person bases a decision about himself and/or

his environment on an irrational belief, it results in disturbed behaviour. Ellis (1962) has identified eleven illogical ideas which lead to psychological disturbances in individuals.

1. The idea that it is a dire necessity for an adult human being to be loved or approved by virtually every significant other person in his community.
2. The idea that one should be thoroughly competent, adequate, and achieving in all possible respects if one is to consider oneself worthwhile.
3. The idea that certain people are bad, wicked, or villainous and that they should be severely blamed and punished for their villainy.
4. The idea that it is awful and catastrophic when things are not the way one would very much like them to be.
5. The idea that human unhappiness is externally caused and that people have little or no ability to control their sorrows and disturbances.
6. The idea that if something is or may be dangerous or fearsome one should be terribly concerned about it and should keep dwelling on the possibility of its occurring.
7. The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face certain life difficulties and self-responsibilities.
8. The idea that one should be dependent on others and needs someone stronger than oneself on whom to rely.
9. The idea that one's past history is an all-important determiner of one's present behaviour and that because something strongly affected one's life, it should indefinitely have a similar effect.
10. The idea that one should become quite upset over other people's problems and disturbances.
11. The idea that there is invariably a right, precise, and perfect solution to human problems and that it is catastrophic if this solution is not found.

According to the Rational-Emotive approach those factors functioning at the cognitive level are most relevant. Ellis (1962, 1973) firmly believes that self-defeating thoughts can be conditioned within the individual and for all practical purposes become the roots of his feelings, which inevitably leads to emotional disturbance. The task of the therapist is to show the individual that he possesses some irrational beliefs and that his difficulties are a result of his perpetuating these thoughts. The disturbed behaviour can be eliminated if the individual substitutes a rational view of life for his previous irrational one.

Ellis (1962) contends that approximately 90 per cent of patients who engage in Rational-

Emotive Therapy for ten or more sessions show considerable or distinct improvement. Reported case studies (Ard, 1968; Diamond, 1967; Sella, 1969; Watkins, 1973) have demonstrated the effectiveness of this treatment approach with the delinquent.

Life orientation, according to Fromm (1964, 1968), is another measure of an individual's mental health. An individual's relatedness to life develops in either a "productive" or "non-productive" manner. Those individuals who characterize the productive orientation are considered to be open-minded, unstructured, conceptually complex, constructive, authentic, inner directed, and loving. In contrast, criminal characteristics appear to be consistent with the non-productive orientation. Studies have found the criminal to be impulsive (Docter & Widner, 1954), demanding (Smith, 1973), dependent (Mattocks & Spencer, 1971), neurotic (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1971), anti-social (Clark, 1952), rebellious (Gough, 1960) and unacceptable to self (Marshall, 1973).

Another dimension related to an individual's mental health is temporal perspective (Doob, 1971; Wallace & Rabin, 1960). Temporal perspective is the relative degree of concern an individual places on either past, present or future experiences. Constriction of future time perspective has been associated with behavioural disorders. Several studies (Barndt & Johnson, 1955; Cochran, 1971; Davids, Kidder & Reich, 1962; Julia, 1971; Stein, Sabin & Kulik, 1968) have demonstrated that prisoners operate from a shorter time perspective than do normals.

Evidence has supported the view that Ellis' (1962, 1973) form of irrational thinking leads to emotional disturbance and Fromm's (1964, 1968) non-productive personality represents pathology and temporal disorientation with both being associated with personality dysfunction. If in fact the criminal is psychologically unhealthy, and general agreement can be found to support such a contention, then it would be reasonable to conclude that the criminal possesses irrational beliefs from a non-productive orientation and lacks future time perspective.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedure

Prior to the start of the present investigation, the Director of Correctional Services for Alberta and the Wardens of the Correctional Institutes were contacted in order to obtain permission for

the study. Those institutions involved in the research were the following:

Bowden Correctional Institute
 Calgary Correctional Institute
 Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Institute
 Nordegg Correctional Institute

To obtain measures on those variables considered in the investigation, test booklets containing the Adult Irrational Ideas Inventory (AII), the Life Orientation Test (LOT), the Wallace Temporal Perspective Technique (WTP) and a biographical data inventory were administered to each inmate involved in the study.

One hundred and four male inmates served as subjects for the present study. All of these inmates were serving terms of six months to two years less a day the mean age of this sample being 21.6 years. For comparison, sixty-three male individuals from the general population were used and the mean age of this sample was 26.7 years.

INSTRUMENTS

Adult Irrational Ideas Inventory (AII)

The sixty (60) item Adult Irrational Ideas Inventory (Davies, 1970) was based on the original inventory constructed by Zingle (1965). It was designed to measure the eleven irrational beliefs outlined by Ellis (1962, 1973).

The items of the instrument were single statements scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The higher the score the greater the degree of irrationality.

Construct validity of the AII inventory has been established. Studies employing this scale have generally reported a positive relationship between irrationality and alcoholic tendencies (Davies, 1970), anxiety (Taft, 1968; Winship, 1972), delinquency (Hoxter, 1967), marital adjustment (Eisenberg, 1971), and underachievement (Conklin, 1965; Zingle, 1965).

Life Orientation Test (LOT)

The forty (40) item Life Orientation Test was developed by Fox (1969) as a means of measuring the life orientation of an individual as reflected in the writings of Erich Fromm (1964, 1968).

The items of the instrument are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "agree" to "disagree". Low scores suggest non-productive tendencies while high scores indicate productive tendencies. High scorers as opposed to low

scorers have been found to be more conceptually complex, more open-minded, less authoritarian and less socially acquiescent.

Wallace Temporal Perspective Technique (WTP)

An adaptation (Shybut, 1968) of the ten item Temporal Perspective Technique developed by Wallace (1956) was used in this study. This technique was designed to measure an individual's time orientation into the past, present and future. A measure of future time perspective was obtained by asking an individual to state ten things that he thought he would do or which he thought would happen to him. Subsequently he was to specify how far in the future he envisioned each event. Shybut's (1968) modification of this technique consisted of asking subjects for five responses to this question rather than ten. The median length of time constituted the time perspective score.

Construct validity has been established using this measure. For example, significant differences on time perspective scores have been found between normals and schizophrenics (Wallace, 1956), normals and psychologically disturbed persons (Shybut, 1968) and individuals with low and high ego strengths (Shybut, 1970).

RESULTS

A *t* test analysis revealed that on the measure of irrationality, the inmate sample possessed significantly ($t=4.82$, $p<.01$) more irrational beliefs than the normal sample.

On the measure of life orientation no significant differences ($t=1.26$, n.s.) were observed between the inmate and normal groups. It appeared that the inmates investigated in this study related to life in a manner similar to normals.

Distribution of the time perspective measure was highly skewed. The Mann Whitney U test (*z* approximate) was used as the statistical technique. Results indicated a significant difference ($z=2.27$, $p<.05$) between the two groups investigated. The inmates in this study were less future oriented than the normals.

Those beliefs which contributed most to the inmates' high scores on the Adult Irrational Ideas Inventory were the following:

1. The idea that it was awful and catastrophic when things are not the way one would very much like them to be.
2. The idea that one should become quite upset over other peoples' problems and disturbances.

Inmates were categorized into high, middle and low groups on the basis of their scores on the AII, LOT and WTP measures respectively. Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences between the inmates' scores on the measure of irrationality and biographical information.

A significant difference ($F=6.79$, $df=2,97$, $p<.01$) was obtained between the inmate's score on the LOT and his view of the institution. Inmates who were non-productive in orientation perceived the institution as being helpful in their rehabilitation. Significant findings ($F=3.36$, $df=2,97$, $p<.05$) also indicated that the "non-productive" inmates considered rehabilitation after leaving the institution.

Inmates' scores on the WTP measure indicated a significant relationship ($F=4.41$, $df=2,94$, $p<.01$) between time perspective and family position. Inmates who were the first or second born in their families were more future oriented than the other inmates. A significant finding ($F=3.36$, $df=2,91$, $p<.05$) was also observed between the time perspective measure and the inmates' period of incarceration. Inmates incarcerated for longer periods of time tended to be future oriented.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the psychological health of the criminal based upon the Rational-Emotive theory of Albert Ellis. According to Ellis' (1962, 1973) concept of irrationality, inmates in this study operated from irrational beliefs and hence, were emotionally disturbed. The irrational beliefs of the offender can be perceived directly within the framework of Rational-Emotive Therapy thereby, adding a certain congruency between personality attributes and treatment method. If effective therapy of the criminal is related to this aspect of congruency then in all likelihood Rational-Emotive Therapy would have a degree of success.

The findings of this study also indicate a relationship between the criminals' restricted time perspective and his orientation to life. A desire for immediate gratification of needs may be a factor influencing criminal behaviour. The criminal act, which is directed by a certain immaturity and difficulty in controlling impulses, may reinforce the criminal's desire for undelayed satisfaction. The delinquent's anti-social adjustment then, may be influenced by his shorter time perspective. If indeed, the criminal does have a similar *relatedness* to life as other

individuals, then a factor discriminating the non-criminal from the criminal may be his *adjustment* to society. If Ellis (1962, 1973) is correct, however, the criminal's maladaptive adjustment to social standards, as well as his desire for immediate gratification, may be based upon and related to illogical and irrational thinking.

Interpretations of those irrational beliefs strongly adhered to by the delinquent suggest a need for manipulation of as well as a need for affiliation with other individuals. Since many criminals tend to operate from a constricted time perspective, the need for control and affiliation may be easily and quickly satisfied by association with peers that initiate and perpetuate deviant behaviour. Peer groups which provide immediate satisfaction of needs may be contributing to the delinquent's anti-social adjustment. Treatment emphasizing the peer group and its influence upon the individual's irrational thinking may be a necessary prerequisite to behavioural change.

The study also revealed that inmates with a non-productive orientation had a favorable impression of the correctional institute and perceived it as assisting in their rehabilitation. The inmate functioning from a non-productive personality may see the necessity to conform to the rules and regulations of the institution. However, according to Fromm (1964, 1968) the non-productive orientation leads to self-defeating behaviours. If this position is accepted then correctional institutes may typify and promote pathological conditions which may be responsible for emotional dysfunction in the inmate. On the other hand, the psychologically healthy inmate may become frustrated, hostile and rebellious as he recognizes and is unwilling to accept the dehumanizing conditions of the institution. It may be that the mentally stable inmate is the disgruntled individual, whereas the inmate who appears to be functioning effectively within the institution is likely experiencing psychological conflict.

Demographic factors related to temporal perspective suggest that the future orientation of the delinquent is related to prolonged incarceration and family position. It may be that the added pressure of the "first child" syndrome is responsible for the formation of idealistic goals. Furthermore, it would appear that, in all probability, extended periods of incarceration allow for the creation of "fantasy aspirations". These goals and aspirations, for all intensive purposes,

however, may be so unrealistic and future oriented that in all likelihood they would lead to neurotic tendencies.

Investigations of the criminal may need to focus upon those characteristics which can be observed directly within the therapeutic process. The cognitive dimension as reflected in the writings of Ellis (1962, 1973) was considered of importance in this study. Possessing irrational beliefs and operating from a restricted time perspective clearly discriminated the criminal from the non-criminal. If irrational thoughts, as Ellis (1962, 1973) contends, lead to emotional conflict then replacing them with rational thinking may enhance the criminal's ability to anticipate the future in a manner consistent with social standards.

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