SOME REFLECTIONS ON RATIONAL BELIEFS

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In this paper, a number of issues concerning the nature of rational beliefs will be discussed. In particular, a distinction will be made between partial and full rational beliefs which help to explain how people transform rational into irrational beliefs. It will also be argued that while a person cannot hold a full rational belief and its irrational equivalent at the very same time, she (in this case) can change from holding a full rational belief to holding its irrational equivalent and back again in very short order.

The Nature, Characteristics and Types of Rational Beliefs

In REBT theory, rational beliefs are deemed to be at the core of psychological health and a primary goal of REBT is to help clients to change their irrational beliefs into rational beliefs. What are rational beliefs? Basically, rational beliefs are viewed as the opposite of irrational beliefs. Thus, irrational beliefs are considered to be rigid and extreme in nature and

rational beliefs are thus considered to be flexible and non-extreme. The defining characteristics of irrational beliefs are that they are inconsistent with reality, illogical and lead to predominantly unhealthy results for the individual and his (in this case) relationships as well as impeding his pursuit of his personally meaningful goals (i.e. they are unempirical, illogical and dysfunctional). Correspondingly, rational beliefs are deemed to be consistent with reality, logical and lead to predominantly healthy results for the person and his relationships as well as facilitating his pursuit of his personally meaningful goals (i.e. they are empirical, logical and functional).

Finally, while REBT theory posits four basic types of irrational beliefs, i.e. demands, awfulising beliefs, low frustration tolerance (LFT) beliefs and beliefs where the self, others and/or life conditions are depreciated, it also posits four basic types of rational beliefs, i.e. preferences, anti-awfulising beliefs, high frustration tolerance beliefs and beliefs where the self, others and/or life conditions are accepted.

Escalation versus Transformation

In working with clients, Ellis used to speak of the tendency of people to

escalate their rational beliefs into irrational beliefs (Yankura & Dryden, 1990). However, the concept of escalation implies that a person's rational belief and her (in this case) irrational belief exist on a continuum. Theoretically, this is incorrect. A rational belief is qualitatively different to its irrational alternative. Consequently, it is more accurate to say that a person transforms her rational belief into an irrational belief. The concept of transformation accurately portrays the qualitative difference between rational and irrational beliefs.

Both an irrational belief and a rational belief can be placed along its own continuum which describes varying strength of conviction. Thus, an irrational belief can be held weakly, moderately or strongly and the same applies to a rational belief. Although there is no empirical evidence on this point it is likely that a strongly held rational belief can be transformed into an irrational belief more readily than the same rational belief held weakly.

Full versus Partial Rational Beliefs

In order to make the process of transforming rational beliefs into irrational beliefs clear, it is important to distinguish between a partial rational belief and a full rational belief. As will be shown, when transformation occurs the

person changes his (in this case) <u>PARTIAL</u> rational belief into an irrational belief rather than his <u>FULL</u> rational belief. This is best illustrated with an example.

Full versus partial preferences

Let us assume that a person holds the following rational preference: "I want to pass my forthcoming examination". As expressed, this belief is really a partial preference because although the person asserts her preference, she does not negate her demand. If she were to express her full preference (alternatively known as a non-dogmatic preference) she would say: want to pass my forthcoming examination, <u>BUT</u> I do not rave to do so". Here the person both asserts her preference and negates her demand. These two characteristics have to be stated explicitly for it to be clear that the person's preference is truly a rational belief.

When this person transforms her rational preference into an irrational demand, she

is in reality transforming her partial transformation becomes clear when the preference into an demand. This person says: "I want to pass my forthcoming

examination .... and therefore I have to do so".

Indeed, whenever a person states her partial preference, we do not know for sure that this truly represents a rational belief. Thus, the person may explicitly state: "I want to pass my forthcoming examination", and then implicitly add ("...and therefore I have to do so").

Given a person's ability to add an implicit demand to an explicitly stated partial

preference, REBT therapists are strongly advised, when assessing their clients' beliefs, to encourage them to focus on their stated partial preference and to determine whether this is really a full preference or an implicit demand. This can be done by taking the partial preference e.g.: "I want to pass my forthcoming examination" and by asking them to state which of the two additions represents their true belief:

i) "BUT, I don't have to do so" or
ii) "And therefore I have to do so"

When it is clear that the person's true belief is a full preference, the person should be encouraged to use the full preference form whenever referring to this rational belief.

When we take the person's full preference, it becomes clear why she cannot transform this rational belief into an irrational belief. Thus, if she believes: "I want to pass my forthcoming examination, but I do not have to do so" she cannot logically transform this into the following demand: "I must pass my forthcoming examination". However, this person can at one moment hold a

full preference about her passing her exam and at the next moment demand that she must pass it. But these are best regarded as two separate belief episodes whereas were the person to transform her partial preference into a demand this can be seen as a single belief episode.

For similar reasons a person cannot logically hold a full preference about something and a demand about that same thing at the very same time. She can, however, hold a partial preference and a demand at the same time and this is probably what Ellis is referring to when he says in his advanced workshops that a person can hold a desire and a demand at the very same time. As stated above a person can oscillate from holding a full preference to a demand and back again several times in a short period of time, but each of these oscillations are best seen as a separate belief episode.

This point about the simultaneous and consecutive adherence to beliefs also holds for partial and full anti-awfulising beliefs, partial and full LFT beliefs and partial and full acceptance beliefs.

Full versus partial rational derivatives

As is well known in REBT circles, demands are regarded by Ellis as primary irrational beliefs (to denote their central position in accounting for psychological disturbance) and awfulising beliefs, LFT beliefs and depreciation beliefs are regarded as secondary irrational beliefs or more properly irrational derivatives from these demands (Ellis, 1994). Similarly, what I have called full preferences are regarded by Ellis as primary rational beliefs (to denote their central position in accounting for psychological health) and anti-awfulising beliefs, HFT beliefs and acceptance beliefs are regarded as secondary rational beliefs or more properly rational derivatives from these full preferences (Ellis, 1994).

Similar points can be made about partial and full rational derivatives as were made about partial and full preferences.

Full versus partial anti-awfulising beliefs. When a person holds a partial anti-awfulising belief she asserts the point that it was bad that the event in question occurred, for example. This point holds regardless of the time frame of the event. Thus, in our example the person's partial anti-awfulising belief was as follows: "It would be bad if I were to fail my forthcoming examination". Note, however, that in this belief the person does not negate

the idea that it would be awful if the target event were to occur. Given this omission, we do not know whether in fact the belief is really an awfulising belief since the person could implicitly add "AND THEREFORE it would be awful if this were to occur". Indeed, if the form of this belief is partial then the person could easily transform it into an irrational awfulising belief.

Thus, we only know that an anti-awfulising is rational when it is stated explicitly in its full form, thus: "It would be bad, BUT not awful if I were to fail my forthcoming examination". Note that in this statement the person asserts that it would be bad if the event were to occur, but negates the proposition that it were therefore be awful if it were to happen.

Full versus partial HFT beliefs. The distinction between partial and full HFT beliefs is not as obvious as that between partial and full preferences and partial and full anti-awfulising beliefs. This is because asserting that you can tolerate something seems to incorporate negating the idea that you cannot tolerate it. The problem comes back into focus when the client does not use "tolerance" words interchangeably. Thus, the following belief seems fully rational: 'If I were to fail my exams, I could tolerate it". However, the

person could add the statement either explicitly (if asked) or implicitly, "BUT if I did fail the exam I would fall apart".

In this case, it is harder to encourage the person to develop a full HFT belief since you do not know if you have exhausted all the words she uses to denote a LFT belief. What you can do in this situation is to explain the concept of LFT beliefs to the client and elicit from her the key words she uses to denote such beliefs. You can then ensure that she negates her most common LFT belief term. In our example, "falling apart" was for this client a common LFT belief term so that in her mind she could tolerate something, but still fall apart. Thus, the person's partial HFT belief was: "I could tolerate it if I were to fail my forthcoming examination", but this really hid an implicit LFT belief: "BUT if it were to happen I would fall apart". Her full HFT belief would be as follows: I could tolerate it if I were to fail my forthcoming examination and if it happened I would not fall apart".

Full versus partial self-acceptance beliefs. In this section, the focus will be on self-acceptance beliefs although as is well known, acceptance beliefs can also refer to one's attitude about other people and life conditions. When a person articulates a partial self-acceptance belief, she often makes a

statement about who she is not. Thus, in our example the person's partial self-acceptance belief was as follows: "If I were to fail my forthcoming examination, it would not prove that I was a failure". This seems rational until you note that the person has not stated who she thinks she would be if she were to fail the exam. Thus, our client could go on to say: "...But if I did fail the examination, I would be less worthy than I would be if I were to pass it". If she did this she would be revealing that what on the surface appeared to be a self-acceptance belief was nothing of the kind. Indeed, it turned out to be a subtle form of self-depreciation belief.

Thus, when a person negates a self-depreciation statement, she has revealed a partial self-acceptance belief and in doing so we cannot rule out the possibility/ that she may hold an implicit self-depreciation belief and we cannot be sure that she will later transform this partial self-acceptance belief into a self-depreciation belief.

A full self-acceptance belief, in contrast, makes clear both who the person believes she is not and who she believes herself to be. We have dealt with the case where the client negates a self-depreciation statement, but what can she say when she asserts a self-acceptance statement? To answer this question a brief consideration of the REBT concept of self-acceptance will be made.

In REBT theory, unconditional self-acceptance means that the person refrains from making any kind of self-rating. Here, the person accepts or acknowledges that she is a complex, unrateable, unique process who has good aspects, bad aspects and neutral aspects and is in essence fallible. REBT theory also advocates (although less enthusiastically) the concept of

unconditional positive self-rating. Here, the person regards herself as worthwhile no matter what. If she wishes to assert a reason for this she can say: "I am worthwhile because I am alive, human and unique". Normally, however, the person asserts her worth for reasons that change, e.g.: "I am worthwhile because I passed my examination". This is problematic because the person's worth fluctuates according to changing circumstances. This is REBT's major objection to the concept of self-esteem: it is conditional and allows for worth to vary as was revealed in the implicit statement of the person in our example: '...But if I did fail the examination, I would be less worthy than I would be if I were to pass it".

A full self-acceptance statement, then, should assert who the person is and this statement should be either an unconditional self-acceptance statement or an unconditional positive self-rating statement. Thus, the person in our example could say either: "If I do not pass my forthcoming examination, it does not mean that I am a failure, it means that I am a fallible, unique, unrateable complex human being who has failed this time. Nothing can alter this fact about me" or 'If I do not pass my forthcoming examination, it does not mean that I am a failure. I am still worthwhile even though I failed for

my worth depends on my aliveness, my uniqueness and my being human". As you can see, in the first full self-acceptance statement the person asserts an unconditional self-acceptance belief and in the second, she asserts an unconditional positive self-rating.

In summary, a full self-acceptance belief has the following features. First it negates a self-depreciation belief. Second, it asserts an unconditional self-acceptance belief or an unconditional positive self-rating belief. It is thus unconditionality that is important and without it the person may hold an implicit self-depreciation belief and is in danger of transforming his seemingly rational self-acceptance belief into a subtle self-depreciation belief.

The strength of partial preferences and the transformation process

Partial rational beliefs are more likely to be transformed into irrational beliefs when they are strong than when they are moderate or weak. This will be illustrated with reference to partial preferences and demands. Thus, the person in our example is more likely to transform her partial preference into a demand when it is strong: ("I really want to pass my forthcoming exam and

therefore I have to do so") than when it is moderate ("I would rather like to pass my forthcoming exam and therefore I have to do so") or weak ("I suppose I do want to pass my forthcoming exam and therefore I have to do so"). The transformations outlined in the latter two situations are possible, but less likely to be made than that illustrated in the first situation.

The converse to this is that it is easier to develop a full preference from a partial preference when the latter is weak ("I suppose I do want to pass my forthcoming exam, but I don't have to do so") or moderate ("I would rather like to pass my

forthcoming exam, but I don't have to do so") than when it is strong ("I really want to pass my forthcoming exam, but I don't have to do so"). While latter full preference is the hardest to achieve, it is perhaps the very hallmark of psychological health if the

person can truly believe it.

Other Issues

In this section, four further issues will be discussed: i) the importance of probing for conditions where the person would think irrationally when he (in

this case) holds a rational belief; ii) the importance of distinguishing between two different types of preferences; iii) the importance of distinguishing between true preferences and introjected, false preferences, and iv) the question of whether rational beliefs exist prior to the development of irrational beliefs.

Probing for possible irrationalities when a client holds a rational belief

When you have helped a client to construct a rational belief, it is still important to check whether or not the person holds a further irrational belief which may mean that the stated rational belief is dependent upon the existence of certain conditions. Consider this statement: "I am not a failure for failing my examination. I am a fallible human being who has failed this time". This seems to be a rational belief, but the client who made it went on to say: "I can accept myself if I fail the exam, but I must not fail it really badly. If I did I would be a failure". Another example of this was the client who in response to my questioning admitted that while she could accept herself if she made mistakes, this would only be true f those mistakes were relatively small. "I must not make really big mistakes and f I did I would be a failure". In both these examples it transpired that the client's rational

belief was conditional.

If a client puts forward a rational belief such as: "I am not a failure for failing my examination. I am a fallible human being who has failed this time", ask her the following questions: i) Are there any circumstances relevant to this situation where you would consider yourself a failure?" and ii) "You are not demanding that you must pass your exam, but can you think of any circumstance relevant to failing where you would make a demand on yourself?" If these questions reveal the conditionality of the stated rational beliefs, help the person to make these beliefs unconditional by disputing the implicit rational beliefs.

Distinguishing between two different types of preference

The statement: "I would prefer to pass my forthcoming examination, but I do not have to do so" is clearly a rational preference, since it asserts what the person wants and negates the idea that she must achieve what she wants. Now consider the following statement: 'It would be better if I revised for my exam since it would increase my chances of passing it, but I do not have to do so" This is also a rational preference in that it negates the demand, but in this case the person does not want to do the activity in question i.e. revise

for her exam.

Thus, one type of preference points to something that the person wants and a different type of preference points to what the person does not want to do, but is in her interests to do. In other words, in this latter type of preference the person acknowledges that she has to do something undesirable (i.e. revise for her exam) in order to get what she does want (passing the exam). Both are rational preferences, but they can be properly regarded as different types of preference. This becomes important when challenging the irrational versions of these beliefs, which are i) "I must pass my forthcoming exam" and ii) "I must revise for my exam".

In the first example, it makes sense to ask the person: "Why do you have to achieve what you want i.e. passing your exam?" However, this type of question would not make sense in the second example because the person does not want to revise for her exam. In this case, it is better to ask: "Why do you have to do what you don't want to do i.e. revise for your exam?" The answer to the first question is "I don't have to pass the exam, but I do want to pass it". The answer to the second question is: "I don't have to revise for

my exam, but it is in my interests to do what I don't want to do to get the outcome that I do want".

Thus, it is important to distinguish between these two different types of preference and the different types of alternative demands that the person may make when they transform their preferences into demands.

Distinguishing between true preferences and introjected, false preferences

It sometimes happens that a client's preference may not represent what the person truly believes, but what he has introjected (i.e. taken from others or from other sources without consideration) from others. An example of an introjected, false preference occurred with a client who stated that he wanted to become an accountant. When asked why he wanted to pursue this career, he found it difficult to come up with plausible reasons. He was then asked who else apart from himself wanted him to become an accountant. He replied that his father wanted this. He was then asked how he would respond if his father changed his mind and didn't want him to pursue this occupation, he replied that in this case he would study to be a musician which was a

career that he truly wanted.

Although Ellis has stated that REBT therapists do not challenge a client's preferences, it is useful to do so if you have a hunch that the person's preference may be introjected and false. The clues to the existence of such a preference are as follows: i) the person finds it difficult to provide persuasive reasons for his preference; ii) other people think that he "should" have such a preference and iii) if presented with a scenario where these people no longer want him to have this preference, the person is prepared to relinquish it.

When a person has an introjected false preference, this is often a sign that he holds an irrational belief with respect to the people who nave an interest in him having the preference. This irrational belief relates to the person believing that he must have the approval of these others. If this is the case, this belief should become the focus for therapeutic intervention.

Do rational beliefs exist prior to the development of irrational beliefs?
Ellis (1976) has argued that humans have two inherent capacities: the capacity to think rationally and be self-enhancing and the capacity to think

irrationally and be self-defeating. If we take preferences and demands as representatives of these two capacities, the following question arises: Which comes first, the demand or the preference? While this might remind you of the famous chicken and egg conundrum (and as having equal practical relevance), it is an important point to consider from the perspective of REBT theory.

The proposition put forward here is that a partial preference exists both before the full preference and before the demand. In other words, a person has a partial preference (e.g. a desire for approval) which he can either nurture into a full preference (by believing that he does not have to get his desire met) or transform into a demand (by believing that he has to get his desire met). A partial preference is then like a freshly planted seed which can either be nurtured into a plant or strangled into a weed. However, the seed precedes both the plant and the weed. It should be borne in mind that this viewpoint is conjectural and the views of other REBT therapists would be welcomed on this point and on any of the others that have been put forward in this paper.

References

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