



Research report

Mechanisms underlying REBT in mood disordered patients: Predicting depression from the hybrid model of learning

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ABSTRACT

Background: Jackson's (2005, 2008a) hybrid model of learning identifies a number of learning mechanisms that lead to the emergence and maintenance of the balance between rationality and irrationality. We test a general hypothesis that Jackson's model will predict depressive symptoms, such that poor learning is related to depression. We draw comparisons between Jackson's model and Ellis' (2004) Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy and Theory (REBT) and thereby provide a set of testable learning mechanisms potentially underlying REBT.

Methods and results: Results from 80 patients diagnosed with depression completed the learning styles profiler (LSP; Jackson, 2005) and two measures of depression. Results provide support for the proposed model of learning and further evidence that low rationality is a key predictor of depression.

Conclusions: We conclude that the hybrid model of learning has the potential to explain some of the learning and cognitive processes related to the development and maintenance of irrational beliefs and depression.

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1. Introduction

The central focus of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy and Theory (REBT) is that irrational beliefs lead to depression and psychological disturbance. Irrational beliefs are stable, illogical and at odds with reality whereas rational beliefs lack stability, are logical and are consistent with reality. The consequence of holding irrational beliefs is that people can develop depression, unhealthy emotions and dysfunctional behaviors. Rational and realistic ways of thinking, on the other hand, usually produce healthy emotions and functional behaviors (see Dryden and Neenan, 2004). Ellis (2004) argued that rationality may involve checking and replacing initial impulses, habits or beliefs with a more considered choice. Ellis (2004) did not regard initial impulses as necessarily

unadjusted or irrational and proposes that human beings are exceptionally complex in which there is neither a single way of becoming emotionally disturbed, nor a single way in which they can be helped to be less self-defeating. All this suggests, but does not clearly identify, formal cognitive mechanisms underlying REBT which underlie the development and maintenance of depression. Jackson's (2005, 2008a) hybrid model of learning provides a set of theory based and testable cognitive mechanisms that lead to the emergence and maintenance of the balance between rationality and irrationality. The aim of this study is to potentially provide a testable process model of REBT by determining if Jackson's model of learning predicts depression in mood disordered patients. This will be useful given that REBT has generally been regarded as effective in the past (e.g. Emmelkamp and Beens, 1991; Emmelkamp et al., 1985; Haaga and Davison, 1989; Lipsky et al., 1980; Maultsby et al., 1974; Solomon and Haaga, 1995) but more recently has been the subject of much less interest due to the general lack of specificity in the theory (Ellis, 2003).

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Numerous studies find a significant correlation between irrational beliefs and emotional disturbance such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (e.g., Chang, 1997; Chang and Bridewell, 1998; Daly and Burton, 1983; Goldfried and Sobocinski, 1975; Kassirer and Eckhardt, 1994). In one study, Goldfried and Sobocinski (1975) found that people holding irrational beliefs concerning imagined social rejection reported greater anxiety and hostility than people with more rational beliefs. More generally, Blau and Fuller (2006) reported that irrational beliefs were significantly correlated with many of the scales of the five factor model of personality. While such studies provide support for the core focus of REBT, it needs to be remembered that participants in these kinds of studies tend to be college students tested in artificial situations. Moreover, the five factor model of personality is descriptive and designed from exploratory factor analysis such that it does not explain underlying mechanisms or processes related to depression. Other problems with the five factor model are outlined by Boyle (2008). As far as we know, no research has attempted to identify learning mechanisms underlying the emergence and development of irrationality and the subsequent link to depression.

Jackson's (2005, 2008a) hybrid model of learning provides the opportunity to study these underlying processes. Although developed independently of REBT, it was designed to have clinical and other application and, like REBT, it provides a model of learning beginning with undirected impulses which lead to the development and maintenance of rationality. It aims to provide a model of functional and dysfunctional behavior and suggests that there are numerous pathways from initial impulses to the holding of rational or irrational beliefs. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first application of Jackson's hybrid model of learning to the clinical domain.

In Jackson's (2005, 2008a) hybrid model of learning, the biological basis of personality is sensation seeking. Sensation seeking is widely accepted as an important dimension of personality (Zuckerman, 1978, 1994) with a biological basis related to dopamine and testosterone (Zuckerman, 1994). While sensation seeking has been generally linked to risk taking and negative outcomes (e.g. Zuckerman, 1994), sensation seeking can also have positive outcomes related to learning (Ball and Zuckerman, 1990; Pickering, 2004). Others agree that the dysfunctional consequences of sensation seeking have been over-stated (e.g. Arnett, 1994; Roth et al., 2009). As a result of this emerging consensus, Jackson (2005, 2008a) argued that sensation seeking is more appropriately defined as a general energizing drive associated with being curious and exploratory. Jackson therefore argues that initial impulses for action are neither good nor bad; Ellis (2004) believes the same.

Elliot and Thrash (2002), Humphreys and Revelle (1984), Jackson and Francis (2004) and Izadikah et al. (2009) argue that human behavior is more complex and strategic than other animals, because successful human behavior is largely regulated by higher order cognitive mechanisms that re-express biological drives as complex, functional, and adaptive behavior. In this study, we use the word 're-express' to indicate that sensation seeking influences depression indirectly through a range of cognitive processes. We will also use the word 'hone' to signify how

cognitive mechanisms improve, sharpen, polish and perfect the general energizing drive of sensation seeking such that rationality and mental wellness develop and are maintained. According to Jackson's (2005, 2008a) model, appropriate honing of sensation seeking leads to functional outcomes and the direct expression of dysfunctional behavior leads to dysfunctional outcomes.

In Jackson's (2005, 2008a) hybrid model of learning, the higher-order mechanisms that re-express sensation seeking are represented by well known socio-cognitive variables. Mastery or learning goal orientation is related to allocation of cognitive resources such that cognitive effort is put into a task (Cury et al., 2006; Dweck and Leggett, 1988; VandeWalle, 1997; VandeWalle and Cummings, 1997). Conscientiousness is derived from the five factor model of personality (Costa and McCrae, 1992), and is related to achieving success through social responsibility, hard work and persistence. Rationality is concerned with emotional independence and objectivity. The experiential-cognitive component of the model is captured by deep learning which indicates a proactive interest in acquiring information and reflecting deeply on issues and problems (loosely representing a part of Kolb's, 1984, model of experiential learning).

Jackson's (2005, 2008a) model is a hybrid as it unites the biological, socio-cognitive and the experiential research foci in personality psychology as discussed by Jackson et al. (2008). Only Jackson's (2005, 2008a) hybrid model of learning crosses these three research foci. The closest similar model is Cloninger's which spans biological and socio-cognitive research foci (Cloninger et al., 1993). The basis of Jackson's (2005, 2008a) model, the key terms it employs and how it overlaps with some of the premises underlying REBT (Ellis, 2004) are presented in Table 1 for reference.

At a general level there is a great deal of overlap between REBT and Jackson's hybrid model of learning. Both models seek to understand the antecedents of functional versus dysfunctional behavior and both argue that the balance of rationality and irrationality is a crucial element in the model (Ellis, 2005; Jackson, 2005, 2008a).

Of most interest is the potential overlap in meaning between Ellis's and Jackson's definitions of rationality as this where the two models seem to have most similarity. Irrationality has been defined in many ways in REBT (Ellis, 1987), but it is often linked with demandingness, which is a dogmatic and unreasonable belief that the world has to be a particular way if it is to be acceptable (Bridges and Harnish, 2010). Examples are: "To be happy, I must maintain the approval of all the persons I consider significant" or "I won't be able to live with myself if I lose this particular job opportunity." The theory therefore focuses on beliefs that cause emotional distress not on emotional thought processes themselves.

Jackson's (2005, 2008a) measure of rationality is constructed such that rationality is related to beliefs associated with low demandedness (i.e. emotional independence from the world) and high irrationality is constructed so that it is related to high demandedness (i.e. high emotional dependence). The items concern dogmatic beliefs as opposed to emotional thought processes (e.g. "I believe my personality was shaped by childhood experiences so that there isn't much I can do to change it"; "I often feel a victim of forces

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