

Note de recherche / Research Note

Irrational Beliefs and Teacher Stress

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Ellis' (1962) rational-emotive therapy has acquired much empirical, theoretical, and clinical support (Ellis, 1979b). Ellis (1978), Weinrach (1980) and Higgins (1986) have argued that stress and occupational mental health can be explained in terms of rational-emotive therapy. Ellis believes that most social situations are not stressful in their own right but rather vary greatly in stressfulness depending upon the interpretations made of them. Ellis does not claim that no circumstances are intrinsically stressful (for instance, physical torture), but rather that in common situations individuals experience stress because of the beliefs they hold about the circumstances.

In Ellis' A-B-C model of personality and emotion, A (the Activating Event) does not cause C (the affective, behavioural and cognitive Consequences) although A may contribute significantly to C. Instead it is B (the individual's Belief System about A) that more directly and importantly leads to C. When B is a rational belief system, the individual acknowledges the undesirability of a negative A and appropriately experiences as C some negative emotion. This often motivates the individual to engage in either effective and constructive coping strategies or to ignore A. In contrast, when B is an irrational belief system, the individual does not merely acknowledge the undesirability of a negative A but also exaggerates it, and emotions experienced as C become inappropriate and extreme. In the presence of these strong negative emotions, a person's coping strategies become ineffective and nonconstructive, and stress increases. From a rational-emotive therapy perspective, individuals experiencing stress should replace their irrational beliefs with rational ones and therapists may actively and directly dispute the individual's irrational beliefs to that end (for a review of other methods see Ellis, 1979a).

The stress experienced in many occupational groups has lately

attracted increasing attention. The little empirical work conducted on teacher stress has yielded conflicting reports both as to the extent of stress and as to methods of dealing with it. A possible explanation consistent with Ellis' theory is that teachers who find teaching to be stressful hold more irrational beliefs than do teachers who do not find teaching stressful. Forman (1982), although successfully reducing teachers' self-reported anxiety and stress in a program incorporating techniques aimed at reducing irrational beliefs, did not consider whether reductions in stress were the result of reductions in irrational beliefs. Although this finding lent credence to the utility of rational-emotive therapy in reducing stress, it did not answer the question whether reductions in stress were the result of reductions in irrational beliefs.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the hypothesized relationship between irrational beliefs and stress. If Ellis is correct, one would expect that teachers experiencing more stress would demonstrate a stronger tendency to hold irrational beliefs about teaching. Further, if as Weinrach (1980) argued, "the tendency to think irrationally is not typically limited to only one sphere of a client's life" (p. 210), one would expect stressed teachers generally to have many irrational beliefs. Empirical validation of this hypothesis would lend further support to the advisability of employing techniques to detect and dispute irrational beliefs in stress management programs for teachers. Therefore, the following research hypothesis was proposed: the level of perceived job-related stress as measured by the Teacher Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire (TOSFQ) (Clark, 1980) and the Single Item Measure of Overall Job-related Stress (SIMS) (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977, 1979), will vary directly with the level of irrational beliefs as measured by the Adult Irrational Ideas (AII) Inventory (Davies & Zingle, 1970).

METHOD

Sample

We distributed questionnaires to 129 teachers employed by the Westlock School Division of Alberta; 122 questionnaires (94.6%) were returned. Teachers participating in the survey included 69 females (57%), and 52 males (43%). One teacher did not indicate sex.

Instruments

We used a four-part questionnaire. The first part requested demographic information about sex, age, education, major grade level taught,

teaching experience (years), teaching load (part time, full time), and position. The second part consisted of the AII (Davies and Zingle, 1970). The third part of the questionnaire was the TOSFQ (Clark, 1980), and the final part of the questionnaire was the SIMS (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977, 1979). The SIMS asks, "In general, how stressful do you find being a teacher?"

RESULTS

We analyzed the data obtained from the questionnaires using Pearson product-moment/point biserial correlation coefficients. Primary analyses tested the hypothesized relationship between stress and irrational beliefs. Supplementary analyses explored relationships between any of the demographic variables and either stress, or irrational beliefs.

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient between scores on the TOSFQ and the AII was .31, and between scores on the SIMS and the AII was .37. These correlations are in the predicted direction and are significant at the .01 level. Thus, the research hypothesis was confirmed. The level of perceived job-related stress as measured by TOSFQ and SIMS varied directly with the level of irrational beliefs as measured by the AII.

Correlation coefficients between each of the demographic variables and each of the three primary measures were not significant at the .01 level. Thus the demographic variables listed earlier were not found to vary in relation to stress, as measured by the TOSFQ and SIMS, or irrational beliefs, as measured by the AII.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis of our study—that the level of stress experienced by teachers is linked to their possession of irrational beliefs—was confirmed. Demographic variables, however, were not significantly related to stress or possession of irrational beliefs. Although causality cannot be inferred from correlational relationships, our findings are consistent with Ellis' A-B-C theory of rational-emotive therapy.

These findings have a number of clinical implications. Typical stress management programs aim either to identify and to change stressful situations, or to offer coping strategies to deal with emotions arising in these situations. The first method involves changing the situations themselves, whereas the second involves changing the individual's way of coping with the stress response arising in these situations. A third approach is supported by the present study. Here the aim is to interfere

with the situation's "ability" to evoke a stress response by changing the individual's irrational beliefs to more rational ones (for instance, modifying excessively high expectations of self and others, teaching acceptance of what cannot be changed, and working from there). This approach merits implementation along with the other two in any comprehensive stress management program.

In addition to the clinical implications of our study, several implications for further research are readily apparent. First, the assumption implicit in the clinical application advocated above should be examined. Is stress the result of irrational thinking or is irrational thinking the result of stress, or is some other variable responsible for both? Our findings are consistent with all of these conclusions. Thus, in order to determine whether the position we favour is valid, longitudinal research is required.

Another avenue for research involves examining whether or not the tendency to hold irrational beliefs specifically about teaching is more strongly linked to perceived job-related stress in teachers than is the tendency to hold irrational beliefs in general. The current study employed Weinrach's (1980) and Zingle's (1987) argument that the tendency to hold irrational beliefs is not typically limited to one dimension of a person's life. Perhaps a more specific measure that examines the prevalence of irrational beliefs related to one dimension of a person's life would prove more useful in designing programs for counselling in that dimension.

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