

Irrationality as a determinant of gender stereotyping towards women

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Abstract

Irrational thinking can be considered to be the key concept of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and has been conceptualized as rigid and inflexible adherence to absolutistic thinking and person evaluations. Based on this definition we predicted a positive relation between irrationality and gender stereotyping towards women. Established reliable scales were used to assess the constructs in a non-student sample ($N = 240$). In line with assumptions we were able to detect a significant positive relation between irrationality and gender stereotyping while controlling for the Big Five, life satisfaction, sex and age. Implications for interventions concerning stereotypes are outlined.

Introduction

Irrationality, one of the central concepts of Albert Ellis' theory of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT; Ellis, 1994), can be defined as a person's tendency towards demanding, absolutistic thinking as well as rigid person evaluations. It has been shown not only to result in dysfunctional emotions and behavior (cf. Spörrle & Försterling, 2007, 2008) but also to be associated with numerous dysfunctional cognitive contents.

On the other hand, gender role ideology is conceptualized as a conjoined set of cognitive schemata or stereotypes concerning general perceptions of private or occupational roles (Kulik, 1999, 2006) that are regarded to be typical of women or men.

In this sense, both irrationality and gender role ideology can be considered as temporally stable, rigid, stereotyping ways of thinking containing categorizations and evaluations of persons and their respective actions. Despite this striking similarity of these two constructs, empirical psychological research on their relation is lacking up to now - there is no evidence of a connection between irrational and gender stereotyping beliefs.

Therefore the aim of the present study is an exploration of the relationship between irrationality and gender stereotyping. It is hypothesized that there is a systematic overlap between these two constructs that can be used for statistical prediction purposes: The incremental contribution of irrationality to the prediction of gender stereotyping is investigated while controlling for the important person characteristics sex, age, the Big Five and life satisfaction as potentially influencing covariates.

Method

Sample

A survey was conducted among $N = 240$ non-student participants with the sample consisting of 130 women (54.2%) and 110 men (45.8%) between 18 and 73 years of age ($M = 37.07$, $SD = 13.62$).

Measures

Irrationality:

Irrational beliefs were assessed by a combined ten-item-scale being composed of the six items of the Six Irrational Beliefs Scale (IRBS; Försterling & Bühner 2003) and four items of the „Fragebogen Irrationaler Einstellungen“ [Irrational Belief Questionnaire] (FIE; Klages, 1989). The four selected items were the most content-specific as well as the highest loading ones on each of the four dimensions of the FIE and were added in order to improve the reliability of the irrationality measure. Cronbach's alpha of the resulting new ten-item-scale was .71 indicating an acceptable internal consistency.

Gender role ideology:

For measuring participants' gender stereotypes, 23 items of the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973; German item versions were developed during this project) were employed containing statements on the roles, rights and responsibilities of women (as compared to men) in society and occupations. High values on this scale indicate more liberal and egalitarian attitudes towards the roles of women and men in society and occupations. Cronbach's alpha was .81 in this sample.

Big Five personality dimensions:

The NEO-Five-Factor-Inventory by Costa and McCrae (NEO-FFI; German version: Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1993) was used for measuring the Big Five personality dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to new experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness with each of these five subscales consisting of 12 items. The internal consistencies were .86, .79, .73, .73, and .76, respectively.

Satisfaction with life:

For the assessment of life satisfaction, the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was applied. In our sample Cronbach's alpha of this five-item-measure was .86.

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Results

The means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistencies of all constructs are presented in Table 1. The correlation coefficients provide a first overall impression of our data and point to the hypothesized relation between irrational beliefs and gender stereotyping ($r = -.18$, $p < .01$).

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, correlations and internal consistencies of all constructs

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Big Five										
(1) Neuroticism	2.68	0.65	(.86)							
(2) Extraversion	3.46	0.52	-.30**	(.79)						
(3) Openness	3.48	0.53	-.07	.21**	(.73)					
(4) Agreeableness	3.66	0.45	-.18**	.20**	-.12	(.73)				
(5) Conscientiousness	3.80	0.46	-.30**	.26**	-.04	.11	(.76)			
(6) Life Satisfaction	5.27	1.04	-.49**	.24**	.06	.22**	.21**	(.86)		
(7) Irrational Beliefs	2.74	0.58	.65**	-.12	-.09	-.21**	-.11	-.30**	(.71)	
(8) Gender stereotyping	3.49	0.33	-.09	.06	.30**	.21**	-.06	.04	-.18**	(.81)

Notes: ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) are shown in the diagonal.

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis referring to the specific efficacy of irrational beliefs in predicting gender stereotyping towards women while controlling for sex, age, the Big Five personality dimensions and life satisfaction (cf. Table 2).

Table 2: Hierarchical regression analysis - prediction of gender stereotyping towards women

	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3			
	B	SE _B	β	B	SE _B	β		
Sex	-.12	.04	-.18**	-.14	.04	-.21**		
Age	.00	.00	.11	-.00	.00	-.03		
Neuroticism				-.10	.04	-.19**		
Extraversion				-.06	.04	-.09		
Openness				.18	.04	.28***		
Agreeableness				.13	.05	.18**		
Conscientiousness				-.07	.05	-.10		
Life Satisfaction				-.02	.02	-.05		
Irrational Beliefs						-.08	.05	-.14*

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (one-tailed).

The first step which was introduced in order to control for the influence of socio-demographic variables showed a significant regression weight of sex ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .01$) indicating that women express more liberal and egalitarian attitudes regarding gender roles as compared to men.

Including the Big Five personality dimensions as well as life satisfaction in the second step caused a significant increase in explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .13$, $p < .001$, with sex ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$), neuroticism ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .01$), openness ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) and agreeableness ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$) serving as significant and plausible predictors.

Finally, the third step investigated the incremental predictive power of irrational beliefs. After adding irrationality as a predictor, neuroticism no longer reached significance, but the inclusion resulted in a small but significant increase in explained variance of gender stereotyping ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, $p < .05$). As expected, irrationality was a significant predictor of gender stereotyping towards women ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$) even when controlling for socio-demographic and personality variables as well as for life satisfaction. Its negative regression weight indicates that the more persons agree with irrational beliefs, the less they will express liberal and egalitarian attitudes regarding the roles of women and men in society and occupations.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between irrational beliefs and gender role ideology, an association that has not been empirically explored so far.

In line with our assumption, irrationality made an incremental contribution as a predictor of gender stereotyping towards women, even after including socio-demographic and personality variables and life satisfaction in the regression analysis. Therefore, a first empirical support of the expected relation was provided.

Further research is needed to replicate our finding and to explore a possible extension to different kinds of stereotyping and to a more behavioral rather than cognitive measure of stereotyping.

A central aspect of stereotyping in general and gender stereotyping in particular is that its inherent social categorization results in ingroup-outgroup-behavior. Taking into account that irrationality – based on our finding – now has to be considered as associated with gender stereotyping, this construct bears a societal rather than just an individual relevance.

The effectiveness of techniques according to the Rational Emotive Behavior Theory (REBT) by Albert Ellis has already been demonstrated with regard to modifications of irrational thinking. Besides replication efforts, further research could address the issue if REBT interventions are able not only to provoke direct changes in irrational beliefs, but also to indirectly influence gender role stereotyping and thus gain importance beyond the individual level.