DYSFUNCTIONAL BELIEFS AND MARITAL CONFLICT IN DISTRESSED AND NON-DISTRESSED MARRIED INDIVIDUALS

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Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Clinical Psychology at the University of Stellenbosch

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November 1999
DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part submitted to any university for a degree.

Hester Rabe

Date

2000-01-28
Ten einde die hipotese te toets dat die irrasionele evaluerende gedagtes, grondliggend aan die teorie van die Rasioneel-Emotiewe Gedragsterapie, verband hou met huwelikskonflik, het 17 individue met swak huweliksaanpassing aan die Articulated Thoughts during Simulated Situations poscedure deelgeneem. Vier tonele, verteenwoordigend van verskillende dimensies van huwelikskonflik, is gebruik. Die resultate het aangetoon dat die swak aangepaste groep, op al die tonele, beduidend meer irrasionele kognisies gehad het as die goed aangepaste groep, terwyl laasgenoemde groep beduidend meer positiewe kognisies as die swak aangepaste groep vertoon het. Die resultate het ook aangedui dat die groep met goeie huweliksaanpassing beduidend meer positiewe as negatiewe kognisies op al die tonele getoon het. Daar is egter nie 'n beduidende verskil tussen positiewe en negatiewe kognisies by die groep met swak huweliksaanpassing gevind nie.
ABSTRACT

To test the hypothesis that the irrational evaluative beliefs, postulated by Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy, are related to marital conflict, 17 individuals from distressed marriages and 20 individuals from non-distressed marriages participated in the Articulated Thoughts during Simulated Situations procedure. Four scenes, representing different dimensions of marital conflict, were used. The results showed that, on all the scenes, the distressed group showed significantly more irrational cognitions than the non-distressed group, while the latter group showed significantly more positive thoughts than the distressed group. The results also showed that the non-distressed group displayed significantly more positive than negative thoughts for all the conflict scenes combined. However, no significant difference between positive and negative thoughts was found for the distressed group.
The research on which this report is based meets the requirements of a Master’s thesis in clinical psychology. The Department of Psychology arranged that the research may be reported in the format of a journal article.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following people for their contribution to this study:

• The Lord for granting me the opportunity and ability to study further.

• Prof Møller for his hard work, devotion and loyal input into this study.

• Mr Nortjé for his hard work and time spend on the coding of transcriptions.

• The participants who were willing to share their experience in marriage.

• My husband for his unselfish sacrifices and believing in me throughout.

• My parents and the rest of the family for their interest and support.

• Marianna le Roux for her assistance with the statistics.

• My friend Cari Corbet-Owen and other colleagues who gave ongoing encouragement.
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Cognition and marital satisfaction

The field of cognitive-behaviour therapy has developed dramatically since its inception in the 1960’s and 1970’s (Dobson & Block, 1988). In the relative short period of time since then, cognitive-behaviour therapy has become a leading psychotherapy in most parts of the world, partly due to the close link between science and practice characteristic of the movement, and the demonstrated effectiveness of the treatment (Clark & Fairburn, 1997).

According to the cognitive-behavioural approach, based on an information-processing paradigm, an individual gives meaning to his/her environment through a set of individually held schemas of beliefs. Ellis first introduced this paradigm to the field of marital therapy in 1962. Since then, the cognitive-behavioural approach to marital therapy and marital adjustment has received increasing attention (DiGuisepppe & Zee, 1986; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Fincham, 1985; Grieger, 1986). It was for example realized that behavioral changes in a marital relationship do not seem to lead to the cognitive and affective changes needed for a better relationship (Iverson & Baucom, 1990). Consequently, greater attention was given to the cognitions associated with marital dissatisfaction.

The main focus of this approach to marital adjustment has been on how individuals in a relationship construe reality. It is postulated that the way in which people think, as well as the contents of their thoughts, exert a profound influence on their adjustment within a relationship. According to Ellis’s Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy, irrational or dysfunctional cognitions will effect poor relationship adjustment, while more rational, or
functional thinking, is seen to effect better adjustment. For a marital dyad to be well adjusted, both partners need to think rationally and functionally (Ellis, 1986; Ellis & Harper, 1975; Epstein, 1986).

Recently, attempts have been made to identify which beliefs, particularly those that partners have about the nature of relationships, contribute towards marital distress. Eidelson and Epstein (1982) found a significant relationship between the extent to which such dysfunctional relationship beliefs were held and levels of marital distress. They also found that unrealistic beliefs about the nature of marital relationships were more highly predictive of poorer marital adjustment than were general irrational beliefs as assessed by means of the Jones' Irrational Beliefs Test. Epstein (1986) therefore concluded that cognitive content is more important than general irrationality in accounting for marital dysfunction.

Based on the theoretical and empirical literature, Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, and Sher (1989) identified five types of cognitions associated with marital adjustment or distress: selective attention, attributions, expectations, assumptions, and standards.

*Selective attention* involves each spouse's idiosyncratic perception of the events that occur in marital interaction. Although selective attention refers to the process of thinking, and not to a type of cognition as categorised by Baucom, et al., (1989), members of distressed couples are known to have lower perceptual agreement about events in their relationships (Christensen & Nies, 1980), and are less able to predict how their partners would define relationship concepts (Arias & O'Leary, 1985). Christensen, Sullaway, and King (1983) found that couples in distressed relationships tend to have
lower levels of agreement about relationship events, and to have more negative biases, in their perceptions of their spouses' communication. This study emphasized that members of distressed couples are more inclined towards their subjective understanding(s) of marital events and less attuned to the way their partners perceive these events. This perceptual bias is problematic because it contributes to a global negative, pessimistic view of the relationship and, in addition, because spouses who fail to notice their partners' positive behavioural changes are unlikely to reinforce these behaviours (Baucom, Epstein, Rankin & Burnett, 1996b).

*Attributions* are the explanations spouses provide for events in their relationship. Consistent findings indicate a relationship between attributions and level of marital distress. Marital distress is associated with the degree to which spouses view each other's negative behaviours as intentional, reflecting negative motives, selfish intent, and worthy of blame (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Evidence of systematic differences in the attributions reported by individuals in distressed and non-distressed relationships, was given in a study by Jacobsen, McDonald, Follette, and Berley (1985). They found that distressed spouses were more likely than non-distressed spouses to attribute positive partner behaviour to external factors, and negative partner behaviour to the internal dispositions of a partner. Fincham and O’Leary (1983), in their study of causal inferences for spouse behaviour, concluded that distressed couples viewed the causes of negative events to be intentional and descriptive of their partner's character.
Expectations are the predictions that each person makes about the probabilities that particular events will occur in the future, based on their observations of present events. Doherty (1981) proposed that individuals who had low expectations of being competent in solving relationship problems would engage in fewer problem-solving behaviours, and would exhibit more learned helplessness responses than those with high efficacy expectations. Consistent with Doherty’s view, Pretzer, Epstein and Flemming (1991) found that spouses who reported positive expectancies that as a couple they (a) had the ability to change their relationship, and (b) actually would change their relationship, scored higher on self-reported marital satisfaction and constructive communication, compared to couples with less optimistic expectations. Also consistent with Doherty’s (1981) model, spouses with more positive expectations regarding effective problem-solving, reported fewer helplessness responses, more positive behavioural interactions during problem-solving discussion, higher quality behavioural approaches to problem resolution, and higher marital satisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1989).

The two major types of cognitive structures or schemata that appear to influence marital interaction are Assumptions and Standards. It has been widely assumed in the theoretical and clinical literature that marital conflict is likely to be elicited and exacerbated, and overall relationship satisfaction impaired, when spouses perceive their relationship not to match (1) their assumptions about the characteristics of a marriage, and (2) their standards about the way a marriage “should” be (Epstein, Baucom & Rankin, 1993). An example of such an irrational standard that a spouse could hold about his/her intimate
relationship may be: “You should be able to read my mind, and I should not have to tell you what I want or need”.

Until recently the only measure to assess marital assumptions and standards was Eidelson and Epstein’s (1982) Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI). This questionnaire measures the following relationship beliefs: disagreement is destructive to a relationship; partners should be able to “mindread” or sense each other’s thoughts and feelings without communicating overtly; partners cannot change themselves or their relationship; one must be a perfect sexual partner; and men and women have fundamentally different personalities and relationship needs. Studies employing the RBI (e.g., Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981; Epstein, Pretzer, & Flemming, 1987; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987) supported the theoretical predictions and clinical observations that the degree of adherence to the assumptions and standards assessed by the RBI is associated with lower marital satisfaction. Jones and Stanton (1988) also found that the more spouses perceived similarity in their relationship beliefs, the more satisfied they were with their relationship. However, relatively little empirical research has been done on the association between distorted assumptions and standards and marital discord.

Relationship beliefs from a Rational-Emotive perspective

Extreme standards have been labeled ‘irrational beliefs’ within Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) (Dryden, 1985; Ellis, 1986). ‘Irrational’ refers to thinking that is highly exaggerated, inappropriately rigid, illogical and absolutistic (Ellis, Sichel,
Yeager, DiMattia & DiGiuseppe, 1989). Irrational beliefs, also referred to as dysfunctional beliefs, may be categorized in terms of “Demandingness”, “Awfulizing”, “Low Frustration-tolerance” and “Negative rating/condemnation of self and/or others”. Within the theory of REBT, it is hypothesized that these dysfunctional beliefs may be mediating factors in interpersonal behaviour such as marital conflict (Ellis & Harper, 1975; Ellis, et al., 1989).

The majority of studies on marital cognition have investigated spouses’ attributions for positive and negative events in their relationships (Epstein, et al., 1993), while dysfunctional beliefs on extreme standards about intimate relationships have largely been neglected by researchers (Kayser & Himle, 1994). This is particularly true about the relationship between the irrational, evaluative beliefs postulated by REBT and marital dissatisfaction or conflict. No studies could be found in which marital dissatisfaction and/or conflict were investigated from an REBT perspective.

Consequently, Möller and Van der Merwe (1997) tested the hypothesis that the major evaluative beliefs postulated by REBT are related to marital adjustment. Fifty married couples completed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976), and the Survey of Personal Beliefs (SPB) (Kassinove, 1986). Significant correlations were found between DAS scores and the SPB subscales of (Other-directed Shoulds, Low Frustration-tolerance and Negative Self-rating), indicating that these irrational beliefs were associated with poorer marital satisfaction. Möller and Van der Merwe (1997) also investigated irrational beliefs in terms of interpersonal perception, hypothesizing that marital satisfaction would be associated with a spouse’s prediction of his or her partner’s irrational, evaluative beliefs. On the interpersonal dimension of assumed similarity (that
is the degree of overlap between a spouse’s self-description of his or her marital beliefs, and his or her prediction of his/her partner’s self-description, it was found that females in the high dyadic adjustment group were better able to predict their spouses’ Awfulizing, Low Frustration-tolerance and Self-worth beliefs than were females in the low adjustment group. However, this study offered only limited support for the hypothesis that interpersonal perception of irrational evaluative beliefs is related to marital adjustment. Möller and Van Zyl (1991) reached a similar conclusion for the interpersonal perception of relationship beliefs as measured by means of the Relationship Beliefs Inventory (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

In a third study by Möller and de Beer (1998), to test the hypothesis that the major irrational evaluative beliefs postulated by REBT are related to marital conflict, 15 married couples participated in a thought-listing procedure. During this procedure three idiosyncratic scenes portraying marital conflict and three control scenes free of conflict were identified for and presented to each member of the dyad. Results showed that the conflict-portraying scenes were associated with significantly more irrational evaluative beliefs and significantly fewer rational cognitions than the control scenes. On average, of the total number of irrational beliefs scored, the independent raters in this study most often identified Demandingness (42.8%), followed by Negative rating of Self and Others (32.4%), Low Frustration-tolerance (15.2%), and Awfulizing (9.7%). This is largely in accordance with the findings by Möller and Van der Merwe (1997), and points towards the possible important role of Assumptions and Extreme Standards in marital conflict.
Objective and hypotheses

In discussing the results of their study, Möller and de Beer (1998) pointed towards the lack of research on the association between extreme standards and marital conflict, especially from a REBT perspective. They also suggested that future research on irrational beliefs and marital conflict needs to compare healthy and distressed couples. In addition, they suggested that the Articulated Thoughts in Simulated Situations paradigm (Davison, Robins & Johnson, 1983) be used, as there is increasing evidence of the validity of this procedure (Davison, Navarre & Vogel, 1995). Möller and de Beer also recommended that in stead of idiosyncratic conflict scenes, standard conflict scenes be constructed along the dimensions of marital conflict identified by Epstein, Baucom, Rankin, and Burnett (1991). These dimensions are (a) power/control, (b) boundaries, and (c) investment. As these dimensions of marital conflict were used in the present study as part of the Articulated Thoughts in Simulated Situations procedure, they are briefly defined here.

The first dimension involves the power/control spouses believe should be exercised by each other in the process of executing decisions. There can either be a system of compromise or dominance when it comes to the decision-making processes. According to Gray-Little and Burks (1983), power or control can be associated with two factors: (a) process (whether a partner attempts to assert his or her will in a situation), and (b) outcome (or whether one partner has decision-making authority over some aspect of the relationship).
The dimension of *boundaries* involves the degree of independent functioning versus the degree of sharing between two partners. Those spouses who tend to favor independent functioning believe in having firm boundaries between themselves and their partners, whereas those who believe in more diffuse boundaries desire greater interdependence in various spheres of daily functioning. Boundaries may come to the forefront when, for example, the amount of time spent together, degree of self-disclosure, or sharing of interests and activities are discussed. Marital distress is more likely when the boundaries between partners are too rigid or too diffuse (Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996a).

*Investment* entails how and how much spouses give to the marriage, both instrumentally (task-oriented efforts to maintain or enhance the relationship, e.g., through parenting and household chores), and expressively (efforts to make one's partner happy, e.g., by expression of affection and sharing of negative thoughts and feelings).

Consequently, the objective of the present study was to investigate the association between irrational evaluative beliefs (as postulated by REBT) and marital conflict in distressed and non-distressed married individuals by means of the Articulated Thoughts in Simulated Situations procedure.

It was hypothesized that distressed married individuals would display significantly more irrational evaluative beliefs in marital conflict situations (characterized by the dimensions of power/control, boundaries an investment), than non-distressed married individuals.
In addition, it was also hypothesized that distressed married individuals would display significantly more irrational than positive beliefs in these situations, while partners from non-distressed marriages would display more positive than negative beliefs in these conflict situations.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 37 Afrikaans-speaking married individuals, recruited from acquaintances of the researchers. Apart from marital status, only individuals in the age group of 22 to 45 years were included in the study. This criterion was used because of the possibility that marital relationships of older people might be complicated by additional issues such as retirement and children leaving home.

Participants were divided into a distressed or non-distressed subgroup according to their scores on the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995), where scores below the cut-off point of 48 indicate marital distress. The distressed subgroup consisted of 17 participants (including 5 couples) and the non-distressed subgroup consisted of 20 individuals (8 couples and 4 individuals). A comparison of the two subgroups in terms of their scores on the RDAS, showed a significant difference in dyadic adjustment between the subgroups ($Z = -5.190, p < .000$); the mean RDAS score for the distressed subgroup as $40.18 (SD = 5.31)$, and for the non-distressed subgroup $53.65 (SD = 4.18)$. 
In the distressed subgroup there were 8 males and 9 females. Their mean age was 32.82 years (SD= 6.17; range 25 to 43). On average they were married for 7.82 years (SD= 6.52; range 1 to 18 years), with number of children ranging between 0 and 3.

In the non-distressed group 10 participants were male and 10 female. Their mean age was 30.05 years (SD= 5.07; range 23 to 40). They were married 5.75 years on average (SD= 4.17; range 1 to 17 years), with number of children ranging between 0 and 3.

Screening Instrument
Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS)

The RDAS (Busby, et al., 1995), a revised and shorter version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) developed by Spanier (1976), was used to select the marital distressed and non-distressed participants.

A factor analysis of the original DAS with scores from distressed and non-distressed couples by Crane, Busby and Larson (1991), showed its Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale to be problematic. Some of the questions from this subscale had a higher loading on one of the other subscales of the DAS. The validity of the DAS as a measure of the marital quality of non-distressed couples was also shown to be highly questionable in studies by Kazak, Jarmas, and Snitzer (1988) and Sharpley and Cross (1982).

The study by Busby et al. (1995) suggested the RDAS to be an improvement over the DAS because of the following advantages:
(a) It is 18 items shorter than the DAS, and discriminates successfully between distressed and non-distressed individuals.

(b) The Guttman split-half reliability coefficient of .94 for the RDAS is an improvement over the same statistic of .88 for the DAS, which makes the RDAS more appropriate for use in situations where repeated measurement is necessary.

(c) The RDAS has acceptable levels of construct validity and adequate internal consistency (Cronbach’s Alpha = .90).

The RDAS is a 14-item Likert scale type instrument. A spouse is asked to indicate on a 5-point scale the extent of agreement or disagreement between him/herself and his/her partner regarding eleven different aspects of their marriage and the occurrence of three different events in their marriage. According to Crane, Bean, and Middleton (In Press) the cutoff score for the RDAS is 48. Scores of 48 and above represent non-distressed and marital relationships; scores of 47 and below are indicative of marital distress.

Articulated Thoughts During Simulated Situations Paradigm

The Articulated Thoughts during Simulated Situations procedure (ATSS) was developed by Davison, et al. (1983) for collecting data on how people think under a wide range of conditions. The procedure consists of an audio recording of a conversation or interpersonal encounter, created to simulate a complex event. Subjects are asked to pretend that the event is actually happening and that he/she is part of the situation. They are also told that the experimenter is interested in the kinds of thoughts and feelings they are having as the situation is occurring. A brief (15-20 second) segment of the tape is
played, followed by a 30 second silence, during which subjects say aloud what they were
thinking and feeling during that segment of the event. Another segment is played,
followed by the subject’s report and so on. Subjects’ responses are tape-recorded, and
transcribed and analyzed at a later stage.

The ATSS procedure was chosen for this study because of the following advantages
(Davison, et al., 1995):

1. It gives the opportunity for open-ended responding as subjects are not limited to
   experimenter selected options.

2. It is not limited to retrospective or anticipatory appraisals of cognitions.

3. The procedure relies on short term memory, minimizing censoring and distortions of
   thoughts.

4. It allows for a high degree of experimental control over and situational specificity in
   the assessment of cognition, and

5. It is a flexible paradigm that makes the investigation of different kinds of cognitions
   possible.

The ATSS paradigm has been used for the assessment of cognitions in a number of
studies, which included samples of subjects with hypertension (Davison, Williams,
Nezami, Bice, & DeQuattro, 1990), social anxiety (Bates, Campbell, & Burgess,
1990), smoking relapse (Haaga, 1989), and marital and family conflict (O’Brien, Balto,
Erber, & Gee, 1995). The ATSS successfully differentiated between the cognitions of
(1995), the ATSS has proven face, concurrent, predictive, and construct validity as a cognitive assessment procedure, while its construct validity is shown through its ability to elicit thoughts that can be coded reliably.

The procedure entails that a subject is requested to sit in front of two tape recorders, one equipped with speakers and the other with a microphone. Before beginning the procedure each subject received the following explanation and instruction (adapted for the present study):

*In this study we are interested in the kinds of thoughts people have when they are in certain situations. Often when people are going about their daily affairs, and interacting with others, they have a kind of internal monologue going through their heads, a constant stream of thoughts or feelings that reflect their reactions to something that is happening. What we would like you to do is to pretend that the event you are about to hear is actually happening and that you are part of the situation. We have audiotaped a number of situations. The situations are about married individuals talking to each other. You have to tune into the situation and imagine that you are in the situation. The conversation will pause several times at the sound of a tone, during which I would like you to say out loud whatever thoughts are going through your mind. Say as much as you can until the conversation starts again. There are of course no right or wrong answers. Feel free therefore to just say whatever comes to mind, without judging whether it seems appropriate or not. Note that your task is not to speak back to any one of the voices on the tape, as though you were having a conversation with one of them. Rather, you should tune in to your own thoughts and say them out loud.*
In the present study, each participant first practiced the procedure to become familiar with the instructions by listening to a practice tape describing a traffic situation. When the instructions were clear, the participant listened and responded individually to an experimental tape containing four simulated situations of the three dominant marital conflict areas (discussed previously).

Four conflict scenes were constructed by the researchers according to the dimensions of power/control, boundaries, expressive investment, and instrumental investment. In the following description of the scenes A and B represent two voices, that of a male and that of a female, or vice versa.

Scene 1: Power/control dimension

Stel jou voor dit is laat Vrydagmiddag en jy en jou eggenoot is by die huis. Jy het die tipe week gehad wat so was dat jy lus het om net 'n slag uit te gaan en die volgende gesprek volg.

A: Kom ons gaan eet 'n slag lekker uit.
B: Kom ons bly liewer by die huis en wees net rustig.

A: My week was so dat dit vir my lekker sal wees om 'n slag uit te gaan.
B: Ek het weer so 'n week gehad dat ek net by die huis wil wees en ontspan.

A: Ek wil graag gaan uiteet en ek wil hé jy moet saam gaan.
B: Ek wil weer by die huis bly en wil hé jy moet ook.

A: Ag, kom nou. Jy sal dit geniet.
B: Ons bly liewer. Dit sal jou ook goed doen.
Scene 2: Boundary dimension

Stel jou voor dit is ‘n Saterdagoggend en jy en jou eggenoot is by die huis. Daar is ‘n paar goed wat julle van die dorp af nodig het en wat gehaal moet word.

A: Kom ons gaan saam dorp toe.
B: Ons kan eerder elkeen op ons eie dorp toe gaan.

A: Ons kan saam na die winkels toe gaan.
B: Ek wil eerder op my eie na die winkels toe gaan.

A: Dit sal lekker wees as ons die inkopies saam kan gaan doen.
B: Dit sal vir my lekkerder wees as ek op my eie inkopies gaan doen.

A: Ek wil graag iets saam met jou gaan doen.
B: Ek wil eerder op my eie iets doen.

A: Dit is vir my belangrik as ons dinge saam sal doen.
B: Dis is vir my belangrik dat ek dinge op my eie kan doen.

A: Dit voel asof ons nie meer dinge saam doen nie.
B: Dit voel asof ek nie meer op my eie dinge kan doen nie.

Scene 3: Expressive investment dimension

Stel jou voor dat jy en jou eggenoot op ‘n Saterdagaand vir die eerste keer daardie week alleen saam by die huis is.

A: Ons kan baie meer met mekaar deel.
B: Ek dink ons deel genoeg met mekaar.

A: Ek wil hê jy moet met my praat.
B: Ek praat mos met jou.

A: Dit gaan nie net oor praat nie. Ek wil weet hoe jy voel en dink oor dinge.
B: Jy weet teen die tyd hoe ek dink en voel oor dinge.

A: Ek het nodig om te hoor wat jy dink en voel.
B: Ek praat nie maklik oor sulke goed nie. Jy kan dit sommer sien.

A: Dit sal ‘n goeie ding wees as ons meer gevoelens en gedagtes met mekaar deel.
B: Ek dink ons is goed soos ons is.
Scene 4: Instrumental investment dimension

Stel jou voor dit is 'n Saterdagoggend en jy en jou eggenoot is albei besig by die huis met administrasie. Daar is 'n pakkie vir julle om te gaan afhaal by die poskantoor.

A: Wil jy nie die pakkie by die poskantoor gaan afhaal nie?
B: Ek sal bly wees as jy dit kan gaan afhaal.

A: Ek is nou regtig besig.
B: Ek is net so besig.

A: Dit sal my baie help as jy dit gaan haal.
B: My tyd is net so beperk.

A: Ek voel lastige takies word gewoonlik my verantwoordelikheid.
B: Ek doen ook lastige takies.

Participants’ responses were audiotaped and transcribed. Two raters, both experienced in the theory and practice of Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy, analyzed the responses independently. In a joint session of about an hour, the raters practiced the procedure. The responses of the present study were then presented to them in random order, and they were blind as to which scene a particular response represented, or whether it was 'n response from an individual from the distressed or non-distressed subgroups.

Responses were not rated in terms of frequency. Raters were merely instructed to indicate whether a response contained one or more of the following:

(1) Rational/positive thoughts
   (a) thoughts suggesting coping
   (b) thoughts indicating tolerance of the situation
(c) thoughts indicating emotional control or positive affect

(2) Irrational/negative thoughts

(a) thoughts indicating demandingness of self, the situation, or others

(b) awfulizing thoughts, indicating anticipation and/or exaggeration of negative events and consequences

(c) low frustration-tolerance, indicating a desire to escape or avoid the situation

(d) damnation/negative rating of self, others or the situation.

Procedure

After an appointment was made, a personal interview was conducted with each individual. It was explained that a study is planned to understand the thoughts that are present in marital interactions so that we can broaden our knowledge in this area and to be better able to help distressed marital couples through therapy. The ATSS procedure was then explained and assurance was given that all information will be used and treated confidentially. Uncertainties about the procedure and possible participation were discussed and cleared up before individuals were requested to participate. Once consent was obtained, the ATSS procedure was practiced. The experimental tape, consisting of the four conflict scenes, was then presented. The responses to the experimental tape were audiotaped, after which the RDAS and a biographical questionnaire were completed by each individual. A typed verbatim transcript was made of each participant's responses after the experimental procedure was completed for all the participants, the transcripts were handed to the raters to be coded.
RESULTS

Interrater agreement was assessed by means of Spearman correlation coefficients. The results are shown in Table 1. (As not all participants responded with positive and/or negative thoughts to every scene, total frequencies for scenes vary, as shown in Table 1).

Table 1

Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficients between Raters for Conflict Scenes
(N = 37)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Valence of Thoughts</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>.874**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>.803**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>.930**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>.872**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>.924**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>.871**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>.767**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>.837**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p< 0.01
Table 1 indicated sufficient interrater reliability for positive as well as for negative thoughts, on all scenes.

The non-distressed and distressed subgroups were compared in terms of positive and negative thoughts, for each scene, by means of the Mann-Whitney test. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Comparison of Distressed (n= 17) and Non-distressed (n= 20) Subgroups in terms of Positive and Negative Thoughts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Valence of Thoughts</th>
<th>Distressed Group</th>
<th>Non-distressed Group</th>
<th>Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** \( p<0.01 \)

Table 2 shows significant differences between the subgroups. On all scenes, the distressed group showed significantly more negative thoughts than the non-distressed group.
group, while the latter group showed significantly more positive thoughts than the distressed subgroup.

In order to test the hypothesis that distressed married individuals would display significantly more irrational than positive cognitions during the conflict scenes, while spouses from non-distressed marriages would display more positive than negative cognitions, positive and negative thoughts were compared for each subgroup by means of the Wilcoxon test. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Comparison between Positive and Negative Thoughts for the Distressed (n=17) and Non-distressed (n= 20) Subgroups respectively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroups</th>
<th>Positive Thoughts</th>
<th>Negative Thoughts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>8.65</td>
<td>6.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-distressed</td>
<td>16.85</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p< 0.001

The results from Table 3 supported the hypothesis only partially. It shows that the non-distressed group displayed significantly more positive than negative thoughts for all the conflict scenes combined. However, no significant difference between positive and negative thoughts was found for the distressed group.
The mean percentage of irrational evaluative beliefs, as scored by the two raters, are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Percentage Irrational Evaluative Cognitions for each Scene (Distressed Group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Irrational Cognitions</th>
<th>Distressed Group (n= 17)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Demandingness</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awfulizing</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LFT</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative rating</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Demandingness</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awfulizing</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LFT</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative rating</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Demandingness</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awfulizing</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LFT</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative rating</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Demandingness</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awfulizing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LFT</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative rating</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study investigated the hypothesis, based on the theory of Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy, that distressed married individuals would display significantly more irrational evaluative beliefs in marital conflict situations than non-distressed married individuals. The results supported the hypothesis as significant differences between the subgroups were found for positive as well as negative thoughts, on all four scenes (Table 2). It showed that the conflict scenes elicited significantly more positive thoughts with the non-distressed group, compared to the distressed group. Similarly, the distressed group displayed significantly more negative thoughts, compared to the non-distressed individuals.

These results are in accordance with the results reported by Möller and de Beer (1998). To test the hypothesis that the major irrational evaluative beliefs postulated by Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy are related to marital conflict, this study entailed 15 married couples participating in a thought-listing procedure. During this procedure, three idiosyncratic scenes portraying marital conflict and three control scenes free of conflict were identified for and presented to each member of the dyad. Analysis indicated that the conflict-portraying scenes were associated with significantly more irrational evaluative beliefs and significantly fewer rational cognitions than the control scenes.

However, these two studies differ in several respects. In the first study, conflict and conflict free control scenes were compared, while the present investigation compared distressed and non-distressed married individuals. In the study by, Möller and de Beer
idiosyncratic marital conflict scenes specifically identified for each participant were utilized. They than suggested that, in future studies of this nature, standard conflict scenes be constructed along the dimensions of marital conflict identified by Baucom, et al. (1996a). In the present study, in which the conflict scenes represented these dimensions of marital conflict, the distressed group displayed significantly more negative thoughts on all the conflict scenes. This may imply that the irrational evaluative beliefs are associated with marital conflict, irrespective of whether such conflict revolves around power/control, boundaries or investment issues.

However, such a conclusion must be handled with circumspection. Apart from the fact that the present study was not designed to test the association between irrational beliefs and the different dimensions of marital conflict, the conflict scenes were not validated in terms of the dimensions of marital conflict.

The hypothesis that distressed married individuals would display significantly more negative than positive cognitions during the conflict scenes, while spouses from non-distressed marriages would display more positive than negative cognitions, was only partially supported. The results showed that the non-distressed group displayed significantly more positive than negative thoughts for all the conflict scenes combined.

However, no significant difference between positive and negative thoughts was found for the distressed group. This result suggests that marital conflict may not be a consequence of an absence of rational cognitions or an overweight of negative
cognitions. It might rather be associated with the conviction with which specific irrational beliefs are held, which was not investigated by the present study.

An inspection of the irrational evaluative cognitions elicited by each conflict scene (Table 4) showed demandingness to be the dominant cognition for the distressed group (varying between 56% and 43%). This was followed by negative rating, low frustration-tolerance and awfulizing. A similar result was reported by Möller and de Beer (1998). This may imply that the dynamics of marital conflict, in terms of Rational-Emotive Theory, may be associated with a strict set of rules or demands related to power or control, acceptance, investment, etc., which if they are not met, result in negative rating of the spouse.

In conclusion: the present study offers support for a relationship between the irrational evaluative beliefs, postulated by Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy, and marital conflict. However, these results are based on a relative small sample. In addition, the conflict scenes utilized in the thought-listing procedure were not validated beforehand, while a very rudimentary system was used to code the responses for content. Also, the design of the present study did not allow for an assessment of the degree to which irrational beliefs were adhered to. These limitations will have to be taken into consideration in future studies on the relationship between marital conflict and irrational beliefs.
REFERENCES


