

Magdalena Bekk<sup>1</sup>, Anna Baumert<sup>2</sup> & Matthias Spörrle<sup>1</sup>

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München<sup>1</sup>  
Universität Koblenz-Landau<sup>2</sup>

Rational-Emotive-Behavior Therapy (REBT, Ellis, 1962, 1994) postulates that irrational thinking implies demanding thoughts about punishing people for their evil activities. Hence, irrational thinking should be associated with increased individual sensitivity concerning unfair social events. Results of our study ( $N = 108$ ) confirm this hypothesized correlation between Irrationality and Justice Sensitivity. Notably, the strongest correlation was found between low frustration tolerance, a subdimension of irrationality, and justice sensitivity from the perspective of a victim. This indicates that easily frustrated individuals are particularly prone to suffer when being treated unfairly and are, therefore, eminently susceptible to justice sensitivity.

## 1. Introduction

The theory of Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) by Albert Ellis (1962) proposes that the psychic response to a certain event depends mainly on how this event is perceived and put in relation to the individual's belief system. Ellis distinguished, in this process, between rational and irrational beliefs. In his recent publication Ellis (2003) postulated three main factors of irrationality:

(1) demandingness, (2) negative self-evaluation, and (3) low frustration tolerance. One specific demanding thought postulated by REBT is the assumption that one absolutely has to be treated fairly and just by the social environment and that people must be punished for evil actions. The theory of justice sensitivity is based on the assumption that people differ in their perceptions of injustice. Thereby, injustice can be perceived from four different perspectives: that of (1) the victim, (2) the beneficiary, (3) the neutral observer, and (4) that of the perpetrator (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005). The purpose of our study is to investigate whether there is a connection between irrational thinking and justice sensitivity as both constructs depend (at least partly) on the subjective appraisal and evaluation of an event as being (un)just. There is already some empirical evidence supporting this relation: Schmitt, Neumann, and Montada (1995) found a strong correlation between justice sensitivity and low frustration tolerance (i.e., one facet of irrationality). Our study is the first to further corroborate this association by examining all of the three core dimensions of irrationality.

## 2. Method

### Participants

Participants were 108 students from the University of Koblenz-Landau. 33 were male and 75 were female. Their average age was  $M = 23.76$  ( $SD = 5.02$ ) ranging from 19 to 49 years.

### Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire in the laboratory of the Department of Psychology at the University of Koblenz-Landau. This implied a 30 item questionnaire on justice sensitivity (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005) and (one week later) a shortened 15-item-version of the Multidimensional Scale of Irrational Beliefs (MSIB short; Strobel, Bekk, Fischer, Spörrle, & Försterling, 2008).

## 3. Results

### Internal consistency

#### MSIB short

The internal consistency of the MSIB measuring irrational beliefs was good with a Cronbach's alpha of .88 for the total scale. The three subscales, too, showed good reliabilities: Alpha was .80 for demandingness, .83 for negative self-evaluation and .75 for low frustration tolerance.

### Justice Sensitivity

The internal consistency of the total scale was very good with a Cronbach's alpha of .93. The four scales, too, showed good reliabilities: Alpha was .80 for the perspective of the victim, .87 for the perspective of the perpetrator and .88 for the perspectives of the beneficiary and the observer.

**Table 1: Correlations between justice sensitivity and (dimensions of) irrationality**

	Irrationality	Demandingness	Self-evaluation	Low frustration tolerance
Justice Sensitivity	<b>.33</b>	.05	<b>.36</b>	<b>.39</b>
Victim	<b>.34</b>	<b>.27</b>	<b>.24</b>	<b>.34</b>
Observer	<b>.29</b>	.05	<b>.33</b>	<b>.33</b>
Beneficiary	<b>.20</b>	-.11	<b>.30</b>	<b>.29</b>
Perpetrator	<b>.20</b>	-.03	<b>.25</b>	<b>.26</b>

Note: Correlations with  $|r| > .15$  are significant  $p < .05$

Overall, there is a medium size correlation of .33 between irrationality and justice sensitivity. Justice sensitivity from the perspective of the victim is the only perspective consistently associated with all irrationality facets. For the three subdimensions of irrationality we find the highest correlations with justice sensitivity for low frustration tolerance and the lowest correlations for demandingness (some of them not even reaching significance).

## 4. Discussion

- A medium size correlation between justice sensitivity (JS) and irrationality goes in line with our hypotheses that there is, indeed, a relation between those two constructs.
- Based on the analysis of the subdimensions all significant correlations indicated a positive association between the two constructs. Low frustration tolerance and self evaluation were consistently associated with all facets of JS, whereas, most correlations involving demandingness did not reach significance and some were even negative in direction.
- When looking at the dimensions of JS, the facet of the perpetrator's point of view seemed to have the smallest association with dimensions of irrationality, whereas the victim's perspective was consistently associated with irrationality, indicating that the dimensions of JS capture different facettes of JS. Therefore, people holding irrational beliefs seem to be more susceptible to unjust behavior, especially when sharing the victim's point of view.
- This implies that irrational beliefs, low frustration tolerance and self evaluation in particular, might be accompanied by some positive aspects like JS. Our study is, thus, to our knowledge the first to provide first empirical evidence regarding a potential positive (or: positively evaluated) aspect of personality, namely justice sensitivity, to be associated with irrationality as conceptualized by REBT.
- Future research should further investigate this connection especially regarding the non-significant negative correlations.

### Literature

Ellis, A. (1962). *Reason and emotion in psychotherapy*. New York: Lyle Stuart.

Schmitt, M. J., Gollwitzer, M., Maes, J., & Arbach, D. (2005). Justice sensitivity: Assessment and location in the personality space. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, 21(3), 202-211.

Schmitt, M. J., Neumann, R., & Montada, L. (1995). Dispositional sensitivity to befallen injustice. *Social Justice Research*, 8(4), 385-407.