

POWER AND CONTROL IN THE MALE ANTISOCIAL PERSONALITY

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ABSTRACT: In this article, "cognitive analysis" and interviews are used to identify specific irrational processes and beliefs which underlie the behavioral patterns defining antisocial personality disorder. The antisocial often acts aggressively without overt anger, emotional distress or provocation. It is hypothesized that he is compelled to antisocial behavior by the belief that he can and must obtain power and control over others. When others conform to his desires due to his intimidation and aggression, then the antisocial believes that he can control them. Oppositional behavior occurs when the antisocial believes that those in authority will control him if he follows their orders. Antisocials are empowered when they are taught the ABC's of emotions and understand that they can only control their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Oppositional behavior is also curtailed because they learn that no one can control them. The REBT therapist can be most effective with antisocial clients by confronting the irrational processes and beliefs that lead to antisocial behavior and by encouraging them to take responsibility for their own emotional and behavioral choices.

Ellis' RET theory maintains that human beings are predisposed to neurotic, emotional disturbances by their irrational tendencies toward "absolutistic thinking" i.e., by transforming their strong preferences, desires and wishes and converting them into absolute necessities through the use of shoulds, oughts, demands or musts. While Ellis proposes that there are basic irrational beliefs that lead to all forms of psychological disturbances, other writers have suggested that particular types of dysfunctional beliefs and irrational processes are related to specific types of pathology (Simon-Sutton, 1980). Recently, Bernard

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(1995) has called for investigation into whether there are unique and specific types of irrational beliefs associated with discrete disorders.

RET appears well-suited for an offender population (see authors, this edition). Anyone working with offenders would agree that clients within this population are experts at awfulizing, I can't stand it-it is and demanding that others and the world should treat them fairly. At other times, however, offenders often act without emotional distress in a cool and calculated manner, sometimes without any obvious provocation. Many offenders, in contrast to a neurotic individual, do not appear motivated by approval from others, experience little or no guilt and may have an overly valued sense of self. In their clinical analysis of emotional and behavioral problems in children and adolescents, Bernard and Joyce (1984) were challenged in using the traditional RET system of irrational beliefs to understand some children exhibiting antisocial behaviors. Bernard and Joyce note (1984, p. 165) "There are certain youngsters whose destructive behavior does not appear motivated by feelings of anxiety, anger and inferiority and who appear to enjoy a relatively normal mental status."

Antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) is defined in the DSM-IV (American Psychological Association, 1994) as a person who demonstrates patterns of behaviors that consistently violate the rights of others. This pattern must be demonstrated before the age of 15. Approximately 75% of incarcerated inmates can be diagnosed with ASPD, although only 30% of inmates meet the more stringent personality criteria of the Cleckly-type psychopath (Hare, 1981). To understand the ASPD individual more clearly, one could use the DSM-IV behavioral criteria and apply a procedure set up in the RET literature which Bernard and Joyce (1984) call "cognitive analysis." In a cognitive analysis, one looks at the behavior and asks "What irrational belief would an individual have to endorse and in what faulty reasoning process would he or she have to engage in to feel and behave in this way?" This analysis assumes a logical relationship between the behavior and the thinking that precedes it and presumes that no matter how deviant a behavior might be, it makes sense when you understand the beliefs and reasoning behind it (Bard, 1980). In fact, correctional psychologists (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976; Bush, 1995) have found that the attitudes, beliefs and thinking patterns in the minds of violent and criminal individuals support and promote their antisocial behaviors.

What thoughts and beliefs, then, motivate the antisocial to break rules, resist authority, commit property crimes and physically injure

others? How is it possible for one human being to hurt another so drastically, seemingly without conscience or remorse in what appears as unprovoked and apparently senseless violence? How does the antisocial perceive his world?

POWER AND CONTROL

A clue to our cognitive analysis can be found in the language of the antisocial. As soon as one begins working with antisocial offenders, one repeatedly hears the words “power” and “control.” As Ellis has hypothesized different dimensions of irrationality i.e. approval, comfort, achievement etc. (Bernard, 1990), the ASPD client is clearly motivated primarily to “gain control.” What does “control” mean to the antisocial? Let’s look at an example. If someone is bothering the antisocial, then he, the antisocial hits the bothersome other and subsequently the other person stops the bothersome behavior. The antisocial, then sees himself in “control.”

The antisocial believes that he can “control” another person through violence and intimidation. Tom is a 27-year-old, black male who describes his first antisocial act as hitting a fellow student at age 7. He has been in correctional institutions for on-going criminal behaviors since age 12. He fits the criteria for ASPD. He talks about controlling.

Tom: I was always in control, I think with the exception of my anger, my temper. I couldn’t really control that til I got older. I had a need to control others. I’d get people to go along with what I wanted them to think and do and if they didn’t I would hit them.

Therapist: What if they still didn’t do what you wanted?

Tom: I’d hit them again.

Tom describes how he felt powerful during his first burglary at age 13.

Tom: It was exciting. It was a feeling of euphoria. The idea of doing something sneaky like that, getting away with it. *I was in control.* It was overwhelming. It was intoxicating and back then I didn’t even know what intoxicating was. I had never used drugs or nothing. I just knew it felt good to be able to do something like that you know?

The feeling of control is gained in many situations. Doug is a 34-year-old, white male who was described by a social worker as having “one continuous crime spree” since the age of 15. The last two times he was paroled, he remained on the streets for a period of only 3 and 2 months respectively. He continued to commit crimes even while on intensive supervision. Doug has been having thoughts of violence:

Doug: I want to destroy everything. It's being locked up. There's no hope. I get more pissed off everyday. Somebody (another inmate) says something stupid, I feel like taking his neck off.

Therapist: What are your thoughts?

Doug: How I enjoy being violent. It's like hitting someone and making someone's jaw break. I like the feel of it. *There's a feeling of power, like I'm in control.*

Authority is a danger for the antisocial since then he believes that *others can control him.*

Tom: Authority's always tried to control me, control my thoughts, you know. They tried to control me through violence, locking me up.

Joshua is a 24-year-old, black male who is incarcerated for a power rape of a 13-year-old female. He has been stealing cars and selling drugs from an early age and has described himself on the streets as a “con man.” Now in prison, he was confronted by a security officer who was going to give him a conduct report even though Joshua believed he was “in the right.”

Joshua: It's not what he said but the way he was saying it. It was like he was playing a game with me. He was trying to control me. “You have to do what I say.”

Therapist: Are you feeling angry over that?

Joshua: Somebody else controlling me is a very panicked situation. It's red lights, sirens. It's very hard to stay calm when I feel someone else is controlling me. I stepped up to him with a look that said “Hey man, don't you know I could snap your mother-fucking neck?”

Therapist: What were your thoughts?

Joshua: I can't let you (the officer) control me. No one controls me.

I told him with a look that I could slam him against the wall and really hurt him before anybody could come.

Therapist: What could happen if he did control you?

Joshua: Don't nobody control me. I got to be in control.

Therapist: What would be terrible about him controlling you? If you are controlled, then what?

Joshua looks around wildly not able to answer except to repeat that he *has to be in control*. This belief motivates him even in the absence of any specific activating event. He is motivated to gain control by the use of violence, aggression and criminal behavior and is motivated to avoid control by others through the use of oppositional and rule-breaking behavior.

RESPECT

RET has long taken the position that individuals can strive for superiority and power without Adlerian feelings of inferiority and worthlessness (Bernard and Joyce, 1984). An individual simply turns his demands onto the environment and in a grandiose manner charges that the world be as he desires it and demands that he gets what he wants when he wants it.

Antisocials appear to differ on their original feelings of superiority versus inferiority (perhaps depending on the level of narcissism in their character development). However, many antisocials appear to define their self-worth on the amount of control they have in their lives and in the *respect* others give them.

Antisocials demand that others respect them. They seem to define respect as a superficial deference by others to their ability to control. Respect differs from the approval from others sought by the neurotic in that it is less dependent on the individual's own personality qualities. Respect is given to a "man" simply for being a human being who is "in control."

Respect appears as a very important concern in the antisocial's world. For example, Scott is a 25-year-old black male with a history of battery, gang membership and car thefts. While in segregation status, Scott aggressively fought the officers on two occasions, was put into restraints and went on a very serious hunger strike all because he believed that the security officers were "disrespecting" him. A recent poll of gang members conducted by a government-commissioned study

found that more than one in three believed it is acceptable to shoot someone who "disrespected" them.

When the antisocial sees himself as "not" in control, for example, when he is initially imprisoned or when others do "not" give him the respect he demands, he may experience a reactive depression with feelings of worthlessness which Yochelson and Samenow (1976) call the "zero state." This depression is only transitory, however, since the antisocial will quickly act to reestablish control, often with aggressive or passive-aggressive behavior. The "power thrust" (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976) is seen as an antidote, a defense or compensation against depression (Doren, 1989).

TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS

The first therapeutic task with the antisocial client is to teach him the fallacy of his inference that he can control others and others can control him. This is accomplished by the didactic teaching of Ellis' ABC theory of emotions, that it is the individual's beliefs and self-talk rather than external conditions that lead to feelings and behavioral consequences. Despite an initial high level of resistance (Nauth & Edward, 1988), the antisocial will eventually learn that he can control and only control his own thoughts, feelings, behaviors and attitudes. He learns that he has emotional and behavioral choices.

The antisocial has often developed a pattern of oppositional behavior to authority, i.e., the antisocial will do the opposite of what the authority requests since he perceives that by acquiescing to the authority, he loses "control." When he is able to see that he is always making his own behavioral choices, he is freer to make less oppositional and self-defeating choices. Joshua has already learned the ABC's and understands that he is in control of his own thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Therapist: Can you think of anything the officer could have ordered you to do that you would definitely not do, even if it meant that you would get a conduct report, go to segregation or have to stay in prison longer?

Josh: Sure.

Therapist: Then who is in control of you? The officer? He can order you to do something and has control of the consequences that occur when you follow the order or choose to ignore it. Or are

you in control? You ultimately decide whether you will follow the order or not.

Josh: Me. You're right, I always have a choice to be good or not. Only I can control me.

ANTISOCIAL AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

Bush (1993) has developed a model of the automatic thoughts which lead to and reinforce antisocial and criminal behaviors.

A WORLD ALONE

ENTITLEMENT	POWER STRUGGLE	SELF-VICTIMIZATION
RIGHTEOUS ANGER		RETALIATION
WIN-attribute win to self		LOSE-blame others

A WORLD ALONE—The offender begins with the perception that he is alone in the world. He sees himself as either superior and unique or alienated and misunderstood by others.

ENTITLEMENT—The offender sees himself as entitled to whatever he wants, i.e., “If I want it, it’s mine and I deserve it. If he is in a romantic relationship, he believes “She’s mine.”

POWER STRUGGLE—the offender is often fighting for power against others, i.e., the system, authority, peers etc.

SELF-VICTIMIZATION—He often sees himself as a victim when he doesn’t get what he believes he deserves and is often filled with self-pity. “They (he or she) did this to me” or “The system screwed me over.”

RIGHTEOUS ANGER—The offender feels justified in his anger towards others. The offender thinks “He’s asking for it” when he hits his victim and asks “How can she do this to me?” when he batters his wife. He awfulizes and demands that the world act in accordance with his desires.

RETALIATION—The offender believes that retaliation is a necessity for a perceived wrong done to him or his family.

WIN—if the criminal commits a crime or hurts someone through revenge, and gets away with it, he attributes his success to himself. He thinks “I’m too smart to be caught by the cops,” “I beat the crap out of him” or “I’m stronger and tougher than anyone.” This increases his thoughts and feelings of entitlement and begins the cycle all over again.

LOSE—if the criminal gets caught, he attributes his failure to

others and returns to self-pity and self-victimization which again strengthens his antisocial logic. This split attribution, i.e., attributing success to oneself and failure to others (Doren, 1989) maintains his motivation to control yet helps him avoid guilt or pangs of conscience.

Since he sees himself as entitled, any attempt by society to stop the antisocial from taking what he wants or doing as he pleases is seen as unfair and victimizing. As Bush (1995, p. 6) states "In this dreadful logic, punishment and the imposition of social controls have the consequence of validating the offender's license to break the law. The more punitive we are, the more he feels entitled to defy our authority." Many inmates spend their entire incarceration blaming others and often return to society, more angry and more violent than ever.

CONCLUSIONS

Once we see how an antisocial individual thinks, his actions make sense. His automatic thoughts tell him that he is entitled to what he wants, that others "ask for it" when he is aggressive towards them and that he is engaged in a life or death struggle for power. Within this logical system, violence appears normal, justified and necessary (Bush, 1995).

Are there unique thinking patterns specific to individuals exhibiting an antisocial personality? Yes. The antisocial appears to infer incorrectly that because he can influence another's behavior in the short term through aggression and intimidation, he is therefore in control of the other person's behavior. He also infers that if he follows rules and authority when he would rather not follow them, then others control him. These two inferences are alternate sides of the same irrational belief of the antisocial, i.e., "I must have control." This belief motivates the antisocials' behavior even in the absence of any specific activating event or apparent provocation.

Additional automatic thoughts and irrational logic compels the antisocial to act aggressively and then allows him to rationalize his behavior so there is no need to feel guilty when he hurts others or violates others' rights. This logic allows him to act calmly and dispassionately while committing the most horrendous acts of violence against others. Often, however, the antisocial does act with anger and sometimes rage which is created by his demand that he must have what he wants and it is terrible if others act in ways which he finds annoying. This right-

eous anger results from irrational and non-empirical beliefs, demandingness and awfulizing.

It is believed that the antisocial's preoccupation with power and control represents a new belief content domain in addition to those already proposed (Sutton-Smith, 1980), i.e., social approval, achievement and comfort and fairness (Bernard, 1990). Research will be needed to collaborate the clinical and speculative hypothesis of specific antisocial logic and irrational beliefs. In a 1984 study of shoplifters, authors Solomon and Ray did identify a variety of irrational beliefs that were routinely endorsed by the majority of shoplifters, i.e., "I must have the item I want" and "shoplifting isn't a major crime." As in Bush's model, the irrational beliefs found by Solomon and Ray appear to facilitate and compel the offender towards antisocial conduct by rationalizing the behavior and minimizing the negative consequences of their actions.

REBT appears ideally suited for therapeutic work with antisocials since it focuses on identifying and confronting the beliefs and irrational logic that generates both his emotional distress and his maladjusted behavior. He can no longer blame others when he gets caught and feels the negative consequences of his actions since he understands that it is his thoughts which led him both to the behavior and the subsequent consequences. By helping the antisocial understand that he is in control of his own thoughts, feelings and behaviors, he comes to see himself as the responsible agent with emotional and behavioral choices.

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