IS RATIONAL-EMOTIVE THERAPY (RET) "RATIONALIST" OR "CONSTRUCTIVIST"?

Albert Ellis
Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy
45 East 65th Street, New York

Recent discussants of cognitive-behavioral therapies have emphasized new developments in the field, especially the emergence of "constructivist" or "systems-process-oriented" theories and practices and have contrasted these with what they term the "rationalist" approach to psychotherapy (Dobson, 1988; Guidano, 1988; Mahoney, 1988; Reda & Mahoney, 1984). Among the "rationalist" approaches, along with the cognitive therapies of Beck (1976; Beck & Emery, 1985; Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979), D'Zurilla and Goldfried (1971), and Meichenbaum (1977), they have especially singled out rational-emotive therapy (RET) as being highly stoical and "rationalist."

I have elsewhere (Ellis, 1988a, 1988b) briefly argued against this kind of dichotomizing and held that none of the cognitive-behavioral therapies that Mahoney (1988) notably labels as "rationalist" are actually in that camp. In the present paper I shall more comprehensively show that RET is not only nonrationalist but that it is in several important respects more constructivist and more process-oriented than just about all the other cognitive therapies, including those of Guidano (1988) and Mahoney (1988). Although RET originally favored logical positivism and fairly strict empiricism (Ellis, 1958, 1962), and therefore partly followed what Mahoney calls the "rationalist" approach, I was, ironically enough, led by Mahoney's book, Scientist As Subject (1976), to abandon logical positivism and to follow the more modern "constructivist" views of Bartley (1962) and Popper (1959) and thereby to change some of its philosophical underpinnings. Even be-
fore that, I radically changed my views on the place of emotion in psychotherapy (Ellis, 1969, 1973) and on the importance of heredity rather than of early conditioning in the "causation" of emotional and behavioral disorders (Ellis, 1962, 1965a). Present-day RET, therefore, has changed significantly from some of its early formulations; and if it ever was "rationalist," it hardly is so today!

CONSTRUCTIVIST ASPECTS OF RATIONAL-EMOTIVE THERAPY

Let me review some of the main theories and practices that Guidano (1988) calls "process-oriented" and that Mahoney (1988) calls "constructivist" to see exactly how RET agrees and disagrees with them today.

Deep Cognitive Structures

Guidano's systems, process-oriented approach to therapy "emphasizes the active-generative, and intentional dimensions of personal knowing processes. In this approach assessment procedures are aimed at identifying invariant deep structures that provide the entire individual knowledge organization with coherence and stability. The strategy of therapy is therefore based upon the elaboration of alternative models of the self and the world such that the deep structures can adopt a more flexible and adaptive articulation" (Guidano, 1988, p. 306).

I don't like the terms "invariant" and "entire individual knowledge" in this statement, but otherwise I agree with it. RET assumes that people learn, from their parents and culture, many "deep" standards, preferences, values, and rules of living (because they are innately, especially when young, gullible and teachable) and that they also have a strong biological tendency to overgeneralize (Korzybski, 1933) and to transmute their rules into dogmatic, absolutist shoulds, oughts, and musts (Ellis, 1962, 1973, 1977, 1988c; Ellis & Becker, 1982; Ellis & Dryden, 1987; Ellis & Harper, 1975). They apply both their preferences and rules and their musturbatory dogmas to themselves and the world and thereby create coherence and stability to their lives. RET does its best to help them retain and achieve their personal values and preferences but to be much more flexible and adaptive about their dogmatic musts. Like Guidano's therapy, it explores the relationship be-