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Social-psychological factors in the formation of irrational attitudes

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Abstract. Irrational beliefs constitute a significant component of human cognition; however, their impact on the development of psychological difficulties continues to be insufficiently explored, particularly within the context of social and cultural determinants. The purpose of this theoretical study was to identify and analyse the socio-psychological factors that contribute to the development of irrational beliefs in individual consciousness. The methodological framework of the study included a systemic analysis of scholarly sources and conceptual approaches to irrational beliefs. A synthesis of findings from experimental and applied studies in personality psychology enabled the identification of socio-psychological factors influencing the emergence and consolidation of irrational beliefs. The results revealed a wide range of contributing and reinforcing factors – from early childhood experiences and behavioural modelling within family dynamics to the internalisation of social stereotypes, ideals of appearance, achievement, and gender roles. The link between exposure to stress, psychological trauma, and the development of irrational beliefs was also demonstrated. Special attention was given to the role of everyday language practices in reinforcing irrational perceptions, particularly through proverbs and sayings. The practical value of the study lies in the potential application of its findings in psychological counselling, the prevention of emotional disorders, and the development of psychoeducational programmes aimed at correcting dysfunctional beliefs and supporting mental well-being

Keywords: childhood experience; stress; social modelling; gender roles; beauty ideals; achievement; proverbs

Introduction

Irrational beliefs represent a complex cognitive-emotional phenomenon, developed as stable and often unconscious assumptions that lack logical substantiation yet markedly influence an individual's emotional state and vital life decisions. They play a distinct role in perception, behaviour, and interpersonal interaction. This phenomenon warrants particular attention in the context of socio-psychological and cultural determinants.

In the field of psychology, researchers have explored various aspects of irrational beliefs, focusing on understanding their impact on behaviour, emotional states, and overall psychological well-being. In their study on a sample of university students, O.O. Chumak & O.V. Bohach (2024) demonstrated that irrational beliefs are predictors of self-efficacy. O. Igumnova & T. Shlinchak (2022) noted the role of irrational beliefs

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in the development of emotional burnout among psychologists. Special attention was given to the impact of irrational beliefs on an individual's psychological well-being. V. Koshyrets & K. Shkarlatyuk (2022) confirmed that irrational beliefs limit personal development and suggested an approach to their correction for achieving psychological well-being. B. Ivanenko *et al*. (2024) showed that irrational beliefs have a significant negative impact on psychological well-being, stress resistance, and even physical health. I.M. Yushchenko (2024) empirically confirmed that rational thinking is a crucial cognitive resource that enhances personal resilience, while irrational beliefs, conversely, diminish it. However, a significant methodological feature and potential limitation of these studies is that most were conducted on a sample of university students. While this provides valuable data on young people as a significant social group, their findings may not be generalisable to the broader population. University students typically possess a higher level of education and specific social and age characteristics that can influence their cognitive beliefs, resilience, and self-efficacy, differentiating them from other age and social groups.

Departing from the age group of university students, R. Deperrois & N. Combalbert (2022) examined respondents aged 18 to 39 and investigated the influence of irrational beliefs on emotional regulation strategies. The presence of any cognitive distortions led to the intensification of maladaptive strategies and the weakening of adaptive strategies of emotional regulation. Susceptibility to irrational beliefs is largely influenced by levels of self-esteem, critical thinking skills, and emotional stability. Such beliefs are typically manifested through distorted perceptions of reality and can hinder personal development and self-understanding. They may appear in convictions about personal worthlessness, the unattainability of success, baseless fears, or a profound lack of self-confidence. A. Orlowski *et al*. (2020) and R. Krébesz *et al*. (2023) showed the presence of irrational beliefs in behavioural addictions. The presented studies examined the role of cognitive distortions in the development and maintenance of addictions, using gambling and smoking as examples. Cognitive distortions can act as a barrier to recognising a problem and seeking help, while their correction can be an effective tool for addiction prevention.

Thus, the multifaceted nature and widespread presence of irrational beliefs in various aspects of human life render their systematisation and analysis highly relevant. Studies on irrational beliefs can be divided into two major areas. The first group of researchers examines the impact of irrational beliefs on psychological health and well-being. The second group seeks to identify their origins and mechanisms of development (Arpacıoğlu *et al*., 2024; Deperrois *et al*., 2024). A review of scholarly literature revealed their impact on the development of psychological problems. However, their cognitive origins within the context of socio-psychological and cultural determinants continue to be underexplored. The findings on the detrimental effects of irrational beliefs prompt the scientific community to return to the fundamental question of how these beliefs originate and develop. Understanding the development of irrational beliefs is essential for the advancement of methods in psychological correction and self-development, as these beliefs may be key factors preventing individuals from attaining personal fulfilment, satisfaction, and success. The purpose of this study was to investigate the socio-psychological factors that influence the emergence, development, and maintenance of irrational beliefs in personal consciousness. Particular attention was given to such formative and reinforcing influences as childhood experiences, behavioural modelling, the effects of social stereotypes, representations of gender roles, beauty and success standards, as well as everyday linguistic practices (e.g., proverbs and sayings).

Materials and Methods

The primary method of this study was a systematic review of scientific literature aimed at identifying, critically evaluating, and synthesising research findings concerning the social and psychological factors contributing to the development of irrational beliefs. Studies were included in this systematic review according to the following criteria: theoretical and empirical research examining the relationship between specific social-psychological factors (childhood experience, body and beauty ideals, cultural expectations about career and success, gender roles, stress and trauma, behavioural modelling, proverbs and sayings) and irrational beliefs in adolescents and adults; publications containing quantitative or qualitative data enabling assessment of these relationships; articles published from 2015 to the present; and publications in Ukrainian or English. The included studies were grouped for synthesis according to the following categories of social-psychological factors: childhood experience; body and beauty ideals; career and success; gender roles; stress and trauma; behavioural modelling; proverbs and sayings.

Studies were excluded if they were not full-text articles but only abstracts or conference papers lacking sufficient information for evaluation; investigated other factors unrelated to social-psychological aspects; did not include irrational beliefs as part of the study indicators; were published prior to 2015; were qualification theses; or were written in languages other than Ukrainian or English. A systematic search for relevant literature was conducted in the following electronic databases: Google Scholar, MDPI, and Research4life. For each database, a search strategy was developed and applied using a combination of keywords ("irrational beliefs," "cognitive distortions"). The study independently reviewed the titles and abstracts of all identified records to determine their eligibility based on the

inclusion criteria. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. In the second stage, the full texts of potentially relevant studies were retrieved and independently assessed by the same three reviewers. For each included study, two reviewers independently extracted data using a standardised form (created in Google Docs). The form included the following elements: bibliographic information, citation, study type (empirical/theoretical), abstract and keywords, discussion of results, and conclusions. Publications were then grouped according to the identified social-psychological factors. Duplicates were removed. Any discrepancies in data inclusion or exclusion were resolved through discussion. The search and the number of records selected for further analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Literature search in databases

Database	Keywords	Results	Since 2015	Relevant
Google Scholar	"Irrational beliefs"	176	78	15
Research 4 life	"Irrational beliefs"	0	0	0
Research 4 life	"Cognitive distortions"	5,388	595	22
Research Gate	"Irrational beliefs"	40	30	3
ResearchGate	"Cognitive distortions"	0	0	0
MDPI	"Cognitive distortions"	7	4	1

Source: compiled by the authors

Analysis of search results in scientific databases provided a reasonable basis to conclude on an uneven distribution of publications on the topics of irrational beliefs and cognitive distortions. Google Scholar and Research4Life were distinguished by the greatest number of relevant sources. This reflects an elevated scientific interest in the issue of cognitive distortions in psychology. Other databases, such as MDPI and ResearchGate, demonstrate a lower level of indexing or specific focus. The study employed a combination of sources and keywords to ensure maximum completeness of the literature review, which allowed covering the relevant aspects of the research.

Results and Discussion

A structured review of contemporary scholarly literature enabled the synthesis of empirical and theoretical studies on the socio-psychological factors that influence the development of irrational beliefs. The analysis identified key mechanisms through which the sociocultural environment contributes to the development of irrational thinking. The concept of irrational beliefs was first introduced in the 1950s by the American psychologist and psychotherapist Albert Ellis and focused on examining the impact of irrational beliefs on mental health and developing methods for their correction. A. Ellis argued that irrational beliefs play a key role in the emergence of emotional and psychological difficulties, and that their transformation may lead to improved psychological functioning. A. Ellis conducted clinical observations, analysed case studies of his clients, and utilised psychotherapy sessions to identify and understand irrational cognitions. Based on this work, A. Ellis developed a psychotherapeutic approach known as Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). According to A. Ellis (2005), an irrational belief is a rigid cognitive-emotional association that does not correspond to reality and contradicts objective conditions, naturally leading to personal maladjustment. From a psychological standpoint, irrational beliefs are stereotypes, convictions, or tendencies that reflect a distorted perception of reality and may result in maladaptive reactions and behaviours. As A. Ellis emphasised, irrational beliefs – like rational ones – are developed through experience within the framework of social relationships, cultural influences, and personal values, beginning with family norms and rules. The development of irrational beliefs is a complex psychological process influenced by a set of interrelated factors. These key factors are considered below.

Early childhood experiences and development of irrational beliefs

Childhood and adolescence are periods during which self-esteem and one's sense of identity are actively shaped. Consequently, experiences accumulated during this stage of life, alongside parental and environmental upbringing, play a vital role in the development of irrational beliefs. D.D. Burns (2020) provided significant insights into the impact of negative childhood experiences on mental health and the development of irrational beliefs. In exploring the concepts of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and other therapeutic approaches to treating depression and altering maladaptive thinking patterns, D.D. Burns analysed in detail the types of early-life experiences that may contribute to distorted perceptions of the self, others, and the world. Negative comments from parents, teachers, or peers may result in the development of irrational beliefs concerning personal inadequacy, lack of value, or social rejection. For instance, a child repeatedly told they are incapable may internalise the belief that they will never succeed at anything. Stressful events or traumatic experiences in childhood may also contribute to the development

of irrational beliefs. For example, a child involved in a car accident or exposed to domestic violence may develop the conviction that the world is fundamentally unsafe and threatening. D.D. Burns (2020) used a range of clinical examples and case analyses to demonstrate how adverse experiences – such as parental rejection, abuse, discrimination, or other traumatic situations – may become the basis for irrational beliefs that shape future mental health. For instance, if parents frequently express pessimism about the future, the child may learn to adopt an analogously negative worldview.

Experiences gained during childhood play a fundamental role in shaping an individual's worldview, belief system, and, consequently, irrational cognitions in adulthood. Early interactions with one's environment, the family context, and significant life events form the foundation of cognitive schemas through which a person interprets both the external world and their own self. A. Wuth *et al.* (2022) made a valuable contribution in this context, focusing on the connection between childhood experiences of unpredictability and harshness, and the cognitive patterns in adulthood. The researchers explored how early childhood environments influence the development of maladaptive schemas and cognitive distortions – key elements of irrational beliefs. The findings indicated that experiences of parental unpredictability and harshness during childhood were significantly associated with a greater number of maladaptive schemas and cognitive distortions in adulthood. This supports the hypothesis that adverse early developmental conditions directly affect the cognitive domain, fostering distorted beliefs about the self and the surrounding world. Specifically, the path modelling proposed by A. Wuth *et al*. (2022) showed that childhood experiences of unpredictability and harsh caregiving are direct predictors of maladaptive schemas and cognitive distortions, which is crucial for understanding the aetiology of irrational beliefs and designing targeted therapeutic interventions.

Additionally, M. Colak *et al.* (2023) emphasised the role of parenting in childhood and adolescence in the development of cognitive distortions and, consequently, irrational beliefs. Their research explored the relationship between adolescents' levels of social anxiety and their perceptions of parental acceptance-rejection and control, with particular attention to the mediating role of interpersonal cognitive distortions. The researchers found that perceived parental rejection and excessive maternal control were predictors of social anxiety. A key finding was that interpersonal cognitive distortions – such as "unrealistic expectations in relationships" and "interpersonal rejection" – served as mediators between negative parenting attitudes and adolescents' social anxiety. This suggests that negative parental experiences, especially feelings of rejection and overcontrol, contribute to the development of psychological problems through the development of specific irrational (cognitive) distortions, which later affect perceptions of social interactions and self-efficacy. Furthermore, the influence of adverse childhood experiences on aggressive behavioural responses in adulthood is also mediated by the development of cognitive distortions. L. Huang *et al.* (2023) provided an in-depth analysis of how early maladaptive schemas relate to aggression and the mediating role of cognitive distortions. The researchers found that cognitive distortions mediated the relationship between certain maladaptive schema domains (e.g., impaired autonomy) and manifestations of aggression. Specifically, the development of self-serving and pro-aggressive cognitive distortions emerged as a key mechanism through which adverse childhood experiences (leading to specific maladaptive schemas) contribute to aggressive behaviour in adulthood, regardless of gender. This study highlighted the profound and multifaceted impact of early experiences on the development of irrational beliefs and their role in the development of destructive behavioural patterns.

Further improving the understanding of this relationship, Z. Su Topbaş *et al.* (2024) examined the link between anxious attachment (developed in childhood) and social media addiction in adolescents. The researchers found that interpersonal cognitive distortions, along with low self-esteem and the desire to be liked, played a mediating role in this relationship. This suggested a complex chain where early experiences (leading to anxious attachment) contribute to the development of irrational beliefs (interpersonal cognitive distortions) and low self-esteem, which increase the risk of social media addiction. This highlighted how media influence interacts with pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities developed in childhood, fostering the development of irrational beliefs and related problems. The development of irrational beliefs during adolescence also depends on the combination of individual characteristics and environmental influences. C. Esposito *et al.* (2020), conducted among Italian high school students, found that low self-control and high exposure to community violence were major predictors of consistently elevated trajectories of self-serving cognitive distortions during adolescence. These findings emphasised that adverse external conditions and individual deficits in self-regulation, developed in early life, may jointly contribute to the consolidation of irrational beliefs – crucial for understanding the long-term consequences of early experiences.

Body image and beauty ideals

Contemporary society, especially through media and social networks, promotes and maintains certain beauty and body ideals. For example, beauty standards often promote slimness or specific facial features, and individuals who do not meet these ideals may develop irrational beliefs about their unacceptability or failure, which can lead to negative body image and increase

the risk of eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia. A. Thames (2023) demonstrated that social media pages portraying women in an idealised light in terms of appearance can negatively affect women's well-being and mental health. In the study, participants answered a series of questions regarding their social media use, self-confidence, and body image. Specifically, women who were more active on social media and were more frequently exposed to idealised beauty images expressed greater levels of unreported stress and poorer psychological states compared to those who spent less time on social media or were less influenced by these beauty ideals. This study highlighted the significance of understanding the impact of social media and beauty ideals on women's mental health and well-being. The researchers also emphasised the need to promote positive and realistic representations of beauty in virtual environments to support users' mental well-being and self-esteem.

A. Dastbaz *et al*. (2024) confirmed a direct link between body image perception, cognitive distortions, and related disorders. Conducted exclusively on female students, this study explored the predictive role of personality traits and cognitive distortions in the development of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). The choice of an all-female sample is particularly telling, as women are disproportionately exposed to rigid and unrealistic beauty standards, which reflect prevailing gender expectations in society. The findings demonstrated that cognitive distortions had both a direct and significant positive impact on the development of BDD, as well as an indirect influence through challenges in emotional regulation. This suggests that under the pressure of unattainable beauty ideals, individuals may develop specific irrational beliefs about their appearance which, in interaction with poor emotional regulation, can lead to serious psychological issues such as BDD. Beauty and body ideals emerge as key socio-psychological factors directly contributing to the development of irrational attitudes related to self-perception and physical appearance.

Additionally, the relationship between physical condition (potentially linked to body dissatisfaction or consequences of eating disorders) and irrational beliefs has also been the focus of empirical investigation. F.Q. Da Luz *et al*. (2017) examined early maladaptive schemas and cognitive distortions (dysfunctional cognitions) among adults with morbid obesity. Although the researcher concluded that the dysfunctional cognitions observed were more likely associated with general mental health rather than weight per se, the study still underlines the presence of such cognitions in individuals with weight-related issues, which may be secondary to societal pressure from beauty ideals and the development of unhealthy behavioural patterns. It further demonstrates that certain dysfunctional cognitions, such as "labelling", and early maladaptive schemas like "insufficient self-control/self-discipline" may be present among individuals with obesity. This may reflect a complex interplay between physical health, psychological well-being, and irrational beliefs indirectly shaped by the internalisation of beauty and body ideals.

Cultural ideals of beauty and success

A review of the literature demonstrates that prevailing sociocultural ideals of beauty, promoted by the media and social networks, significantly contribute to the development of irrational cognitions related to body image and self-perception. A. Thames (2023) and A. Dastbaz *et al*. (2024) confirmed the association between exposure to idealised visual representations, cognitive distortions, challenges in emotional regulation, and a decline in psychological well-being. Women were identified as particularly vulnerable to pressure from prevailing attractiveness standards, which was linked to heightened anxiety, body dysmorphia, and disordered eating behaviours. These findings underscore the need for psychopreventive strategies aimed at correcting cognitive distortions and promoting a healthy sense of self. In societies where professional achievement and success are highly valued, cultural expectations may lead to persistent stress and psychological tension in individuals who feel compelled to meet such standards, often out of fear that even minor errors or failures are unacceptable. Fear of risk, as well as the avoidance of new opportunities or challenges due to beliefs regarding one's inadequacy or potential failure, can result in low self-esteem and uncertainty, and may lead to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and chronic stress. A study in the field of career psychology by R. Carucci (2019) at Harvard Business School examined the relationship between elevated expectations for career success and levels of burnout among professionals. The study revealed that individuals with elevated career expectations experienced more pronounced symptoms of burnout, including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a diminished sense of professional efficacy. These findings suggest that such expectations may create further psychological stress and negatively affect overall employee well-being.

The influence of cultural standards of success on self-esteem and mental health was also explored within social psychology. N.E. Nawa & N. Yamagishi (2024) investigated how culturally embedded ideas of career success in Japan affect individuals' self-esteem and life satisfaction. The study found that in Japanese culture, where career achievement is highly valued, individuals tend to base their self-worth on their professional accomplishments. While this can enhance self-esteem in times of success, it may also lead to a decline in self-worth and a sense of failure during setbacks. This point was further emphasised by S. Akutsu *et al.* (2022) on a large sample of Japanese employees. The researchers examined the relationship between competitive work environments, subjective ill-health, and workaholism.

A key finding relevant to the development of irrational beliefs was that cognitive distortions moderated the link between workplace competitiveness and the development of workaholism. Specifically, the positive association between high competition and tendencies toward workaholism was significantly stronger among individuals with greater levels of cognitive distortions. This indicates that cultural expectations around career success and competition may trigger or amplify irrational beliefs, which increase vulnerability to maladaptive behavioural patterns such as workaholism.

Gender role expectations and irrational belief development

The impact of gender roles on the development of irrational beliefs is associated with culturally embedded stereotypes regarding adequate behaviours for men and women. For example, women may experience increased pressure concerning their appearance and conduct, which can lead to perfectionism and low self-esteem – outcomes reflected in the findings of a study on gender psychology by E. Mayor (2015). The study involved female participants of various ages and social backgrounds. They completed a questionnaire assessing levels of perfectionism and self-criticism, which were compared with the internalised gender role stereotypes they adhered to. The findings confirmed that women who conformed more strongly to traditional gender role expectations exhibited greater levels of perfectionism and self-critical tendencies. These participants were more prone to self-analysis and self-judgment regarding their personality and achievements, which may negatively affect their mental health and emotional well-being.

Social expectations regarding the roles of men and women in the family and the labour market may also influence the development of irrational beliefs. Traditionally, society expects women to be responsible for domestic tasks and childcare, which can lead to the internalised belief that a woman must be an "ideal" housewife and mother. At the same time, societal expectations may also generate irrational beliefs in men – that they must be the "head of the family", serve as financial providers, and succeed professionally. This can result in overload, stress, and a sense of inadequacy, particularly among men who deviate from traditional gender norms and feel insecure about their masculinity. Irrational beliefs may also be shaped by stereotypes about how men and women "should" express their emotions (Haines *et al*., 2016). Furthermore, gender roles significantly influence perceptions and expectations within interpersonal and romantic relationships, which may contribute to the development of cognitive distortions.

W. Costello *et al.* (2024) examined the mating psychology of men who identify as involuntary celibates (incels), revealed significant cognitive distortions in how they perceived women's partner preferences. The researchers found that these men (as well as unmarried men from a control group) tended to overestimate the significance of physical attractiveness and financial status for women, while underestimating qualities such as intelligence, kindness, and a sense of humour. This illustrates how societal and gender stereotypes related to attractiveness and success in relationships can give rise to irrational beliefs, which affect self-esteem and interpersonal functioning. The study underscores that such distorted beliefs – shaped by gender expectations and subjective (or distorted) social experiences – can contribute to the development of misogynistic attitudes and call for targeted psychological interventions. Thus, gender roles influence not only individual self-perception but also the development of irrational beliefs about interactions with a different sex and expectations in romantic relationships.

Stress, traumatic experiences, and irrational cognition

Stressful or traumatic life events may serve as catalysts for the emergence of irrational beliefs, functioning as psychological defences against emotional pain. Such experiences – like the death of a loved one, a car accident, or a painful relationship breakup – may give rise to beliefs such as "there is no point in planning anything", "it is unsafe to walk down the street", "I am incapable of healthy relationships", "I am worthless", or "I do not deserve happiness". The impact of stress on the nervous system may increase susceptibility to irrational thinking by activating brain regions that favour emotional over rational responses. The link between stress, trauma, and irrational beliefs was supported by A.B. Grove *et al.* (2024) of irrational beliefs and increase the risk of various mental disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder.

M.C. Chung & M. Shakra (2020) illustrated this connection through a study on Syrian refugees who endured the horrors of war. The research investigated the relationship between trauma centrality (the degree to which a traumatic event becomes central to a person's identity), post-traumatic stress, and psychological comorbidity. A key focus of the study was the role of cognitive distortions (or dysfunctional beliefs) and self-efficacy in trauma recovery. The findings indicated that traumatic experiences significantly altered self-perception, worldview, and identity among Syrian refugees. These changes were linked to elevated psychological symptoms, especially PTSD. Cognitive distortions were found to mediate the relationship between trauma centrality and psychological distress: individuals with more distorted beliefs about themselves and the world reported significantly greater levels of distress. The study highlighted that such dysfunctional beliefs, which often arise from traumatic experiences, are critical factors contributing to intensified psychological responses and the development of irrational beliefs. Importantly,

the relationship between irrational beliefs and stress is not unidirectional. While stress can trigger the development of irrational beliefs, these beliefs themselves can contribute to the emergence of new stressors – a phenomenon known as stress generation. T.J. Harrison *et al.* (2023) conducted among youth at elevated risk of developing anxiety disorders, found that cognitive distortions and anxiety symptoms were significant predictors of dependent stress over a one-year period. This indicates that irrational beliefs are not only a response to stress but may also actively shape behavioural patterns and interpersonal interactions that lead to the emergence of new stressful circumstances in an individual's life. This reciprocal relationship underscores the complexity of the interaction between cognitive processes, emotional states, and external events in the development and maintenance of irrational beliefs.

Furthermore, specific types of childhood trauma may lead to the development of certain irrational beliefs, which mediate the link to later psychological difficulties. M. Colak *et al*. (2023) found that childhood sexual abuse is positively associated with adult separation anxiety. A key finding was that cognitive distortions – particularly helplessness and concern with danger – played a mediating role in this relationship. This suggests that traumatic experiences in childhood can lead to specific irrational beliefs that become a central mechanism in the development of certain anxiety disorders in adulthood. The influence of traumatic experience on the development of irrational beliefs also significantly depends on cultural context and social norms. A review by S. Amaya & M.J. Gray (2021) focused on Latin American women who had experienced sexual violence, illustrates how culturally conditioned problematic beliefs (e.g., victim-blaming) can be internalised and contribute to the development of maladaptive post-traumatic cognitions (a form of irrational beliefs). This study highlighted that social and cultural narratives surrounding trauma may directly influence how individuals interpret their experiences, leading to the development of dysfunctional and irrational beliefs. Confirmation of the aforementioned statement was provided by a cohort of studies dedicated to examining the place of irrational beliefs in the structure of affective anxiety-depressive and borderline personality disorders (Puri *et al*., 2021; Guryanova & Kanevskyi, 2021; Mercan *et al*., 2023). Specifically, the study found a correlation between dysfunctional beliefs and anxiety-depressive disorders, confirming that irrational thoughts impair psychological and physical health. The researchers showed that people with borderline personality disorder frequently use various cognitive distortions. Studies revealed that changes in cognitive distortions during therapy lead to changes in the affective symptoms of anxiety-depressive disorders. It can therefore be assumed that preventing the development of irrational beliefs will contribute to psychological well-being.

Behavioural modelling and social transmission of irrational beliefs

Another major factor through which individuals may acquire irrational beliefs is by observing others or through positive reinforcement for displaying irrational behaviour. For example, if a person observes others experiencing anxiety in certain situations, they may adopt analogous irrational beliefs. Behavioural modelling – observing and imitating others' behaviour – can influence the development of irrational beliefs through several mechanisms.

Social Comparison: when people observe the behaviour and successes of others, they may compare themselves to these models and feel inadequate. This can lead to the development of irrational beliefs about their inferiority or failure. For instance, if an individual compares their achievements to those of others, they may perceive themselves as less competent or unsuccessful, which can affect their self-esteem. J.B. Celniker *et al.* (2022) clearly illustrated mechanism of social behavioural modelling, which demonstrated how the culture of "safetyism" contributes to the development of irrational beliefs among university students. Specifically, students with greater levels of cognitive distortions were more likely to endorse beliefs about the danger of emotional discomfort, the harmfulness of words, and the necessity of constant labelling of potentially traumatic stimuli (so-called "triggers"). Such beliefs are disseminated within the social context – primarily through media and educational settings – and are acquired through observation and imitation of dominant behavioural models within one's immediate social environment. Thus, the study confirmed that social modelling within the framework of safety culture is a significant factor in the development and reinforcement of irrational beliefs. Implicit Learning: behavioural modelling can serve as a form of learning, especially in childhood. Children often imitate the behaviour of adults or older children without conscious analysis. If these models express irrational beliefs or behaviours, children may internalise them, developing their own irrational beliefs.

Psychological Climate: Individuals can be influenced by the psychological climate created by their close environment, including family, friends, and colleagues (Persons *et al*., 2023). If this environment reinforces or supports irrational beliefs or behaviour, then these beliefs may be reinforced and spread to others. Experimental psychology provides numerous examples and studies confirming the influence of behavioural modelling on the development of irrational beliefs. For instance, laboratory experiments observing children's behaviour in various social situations showed that children frequently imitate the behaviour and attitudes of their role models (Bandura *et al.*, 1961). In modern world, media – especially social media – plays an increasingly significant role in shaping beliefs, values, and self-perceptions. I.A. Galaktionova & E.V. Stepura (2021) noted

that the constant flow of information, idealised images, social comparison, and feedback mechanisms affect cognitive processes and are associated with negative changes in psycho-emotional states, serving as a factor in the development of irrational beliefs.

In a study analysing historical language records, J. Bollen *et al.* (2021) discovered a pronounced surge in textual markers of cognitive distortions over the past two decades. The levels of such distortions exceeded those recorded during the World Wars and the Great Depression, suggesting a possible collective shift toward language associated with irrational beliefs and internalising disorders. According to the researchers, this phenomenon, extending beyond the individual level, is related to socio-economic changes, the development of advanced technologies, and the proliferation of social media. One of the examples of such influence is the study by O. Sireli *et al.* (2023), which examined the relationship between problematic social media use and self-esteem among young people, focusing on the mediating role of cognitive distortions. The researchers found that the more problematic the students' use of social media was, the lower their self-esteem tended to be. A key finding was that cognitive distortions, such as negative self-perception, self-blame, hopelessness, and a perception of life as dangerous, played a significant mediating role in this relationship. This means that problematic social media use not only directly affects self-esteem but also does so significantly through the stimulation and reinforcement of irrational beliefs, which then negatively affect young people's self-image and overall well-being.

Proverbs and sayings as elements of folk experience

L.I. Shragina & V.Y. Voronkova (2024) studied the influence of proverbs and sayings on the development of irrational beliefs. An analysis of proverbs and sayings – elements of folk wisdom accumulated over centuries – revealed that these expressions, reflecting social values, beliefs, and stereotypes, do not always correspond to objective reality and can markedly influence the development of irrational beliefs. They often serve as a basis for reinforcing negative worldviews and ideas, offering overly simplified ideas about the world and people, thereby reinforcing fears and limitations rooted in cultural norms. Numerous examples from various spheres of life provided in the analysed study showed that the cultural patterns encoded in proverbs and sayings represent generalised models of the "world and oneself" that should apply to "any life situation", but often contradict each other. Therefore, the final decision about which belief is rational, and which is not depends on the person themselves.

Content analysis of proverbs and sayings revealed belief patterns that reflect fatalism, distrust, fear, and contradictory life orientations. Specifically, it was found that certain expressions (e.g., "What is written in one's fate…") foster a passive stance; others (e.g., "Trust no one…") amplify anxiety and social distrust; some proverbs convey conflicting messages (e.g., caution vs. risk-taking), which complicate cognitive interpretation. Thus, proverbs and sayings can serve as sources of both adaptive and irrational beliefs, depending on the context and personal interpretation. The obtained results reflected that proverbs and sayings function as cultural cognitive frames that influence the development of an individual's worldview and belief systems. They often contain contradictory or outdated meanings that may contribute to an irrational perception of reality, especially when internalised automatically during childhood (Shragina & Voronkova, 2024). As a result of the study, the following were identified as formative elements in the development of irrational beliefs: early childhood experiences, behavioural modelling (i.e., imitation of significant adults), cultural ideals related to beauty and the body, gender roles and associated expectations, social representations of success and achievement, psychological trauma, and linguistic formulas – particularly proverbs and sayings that reinforce stereotypical perceptions. Each of these factors contributes in a distinct way. The identified socio-psychological factors that influence the development of irrational beliefs are presented in Figure 1.

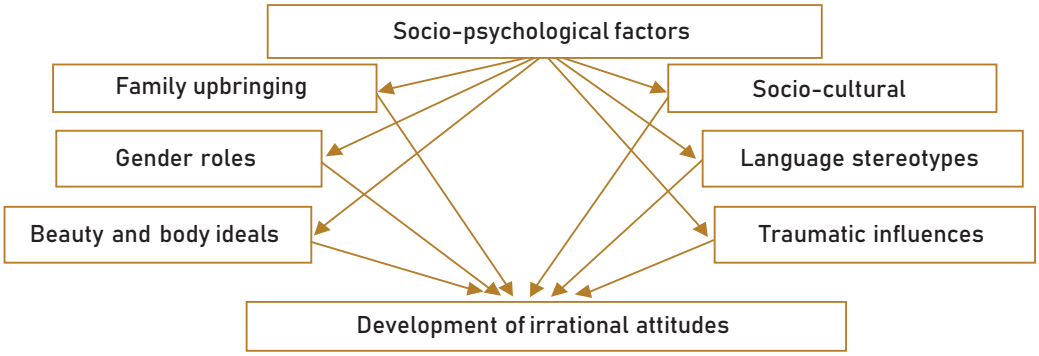


Figure 1. Socio-psychological factors that influence the development of irrational attitudes
Source: compiled by the authors

The key groups of factors identified in the study reflect the mechanisms through which irrational beliefs are developed – including internalisation, social modelling, repetition of verbal formulas, and emotional reinforcement. The cultural context of irrational belief development deserves particular attention. Proverbs and sayings, as carriers of collective experience and values, contribute to the development of stable cognitive schemas by promoting simplified and normative messages. While they may support social learning and cultural transmission, such expressions also legitimise stereotypes and cognitive distortions – including perfectionism, fear of failure, or a passive stance towards life. Deeply rooted in cultural narratives, these formulas shape how individuals interpret events and evaluate themselves and others. When internalised uncritically, they tend to limit cognitive flexibility and may lead to stress or internal conflict – particularly when outdated ideals come into conflict with contemporary realities. Particular attention should be paid to how vulnerable early-life experiences serve as the foundation for the development of maladaptive cognitive schemas. Rigid or inconsistent parental behaviour, traumatic events, and a lack of emotional acceptance contribute to distorted perceptions of the self and others. These experiences give rise to specific cognitive distortions, which may later manifest as social anxiety, aggression, or dependency. These are not isolated psychological reactions but stable patterns that interweave memory, emotion, and past interpretations. This finding invites reflection on the profound role of early experience as a trigger for irrational thinking. While there is no linear causality, a consistent regularity is evident: negative childhood experiences gradually transform into a system of perception and response. This highlighted the significance of a mindful approach to early upbringing and the creation of environments where a child feels safe and accepted. It is telling that irrational beliefs related to embodiment and body image are often rooted not merely in individual experiences but in deeply internalised cultural templates. Imposed beauty standards and socially endorsed ideals of "success" become unconscious benchmarks, pursued even in the face of internal resistance or harm. This can lead to chronic self-dissatisfaction, anxiety, and perfectionism. Such beliefs are frequently regarded as "normal" and continue to be unexamined, thereby requiring particularly sensitive psychotherapeutic interventions.

When professional achievement becomes the primary measure of personal worth, irrational beliefs emerge that render mistakes unacceptable and perpetual excellence mandatory. This internal stance creates a state of chronic tension, where any deviation from the expected is perceived as failure. Such tendencies are especially pronounced in cultures that emphasise success and individual performance. Importantly, these cognitive schemas can be adjusted, provided that psychological support strategies are developed that consider not only individual but also cultural factors. In considering the gendered aspects of irrational belief development, it becomes clear that gender roles function not only as external expectations but also as internal regulators of self-perception. Women are more likely to encounter ideals of being the "perfect" wife, mother, or homemaker, while men are pressured to be strong, successful, and in control. Deviations from these archetypes are often experienced as personal inadequacies. The phenomenon of "incels" is particularly illustrative, where distorted views of interpersonal relationships combine with low self-esteem and aggressive beliefs. This is a striking example of how gender stereotypes can transform into cognitive distortions that undermine psychological wellbeing. The link between traumatic experience and irrational beliefs becomes especially evident when working with childhood trauma. Such experiences give rise to beliefs associated with helplessness, guilt, and anxiety. A particularly dangerous situation arises when societal and cultural norms, such as victim-blaming, reinforce these beliefs. Psychological support in such cases requires a comprehensive approach: it is essential not only to address individual experiences but also to help individuals recognise the extent to which their beliefs are shaped by cultural context. Approaches that foster the re-evaluation of trauma through dialogue, self-compassion, and group support may prove especially effective. Behavioural modelling as a mechanism is highly relevant in contemporary society. Observing others – particularly their reactions and reinforcement patterns – shapes beliefs that are often unconscious. Young people, comparing themselves to idealised images on social media, may fall into a trap of constant evaluation and self-blame. This reinforces anxiety and leads to persistent distortions, ranging from negative self-image to a sense of hopelessness. For this reason, the digital environment should be viewed not only as a risk factor but also as a potential space for developing critical thinking and emotional resilience. Preventive and therapeutic interventions must consider the impact of the digital context, supporting individuals in recognising and reinterpreting the beliefs they have inadvertently internalised.

Conclusions

The concept of irrational beliefs is essential for understanding the psychological mechanisms that influence an individual's mental well-being. These beliefs represent a system of convictions that often lack a rational foundation or connection to objective reality yet exert a considerable influence on a person's thinking, emotional state, and behaviour. The analysis of contemporary scientific sources has shown that irrational beliefs are shaped by a series of factors, including family and cultural environments, personal experience, and broader social contexts. Within the framework of the present

study, a classification of key socio-psychological determinants that contribute to the development of such beliefs was created for the first time. These include early childhood experiences; behavioural modelling (i.e., imitation of significant adults); cultural ideals of beauty and the body; gender roles and related expectations; social representations of career and success; psychological trauma; and linguistic formulas – specifically, proverbs and sayings that reinforce stereotypical perceptions.

Scientific research showed that having irrational beliefs is associated with greater levels of anxiety, emotional stress, lower life satisfaction, and a tendency to engage in maladaptive behaviours (such as perfectionism). These beliefs can substantially hinder personal development and the achievement of psychological well-being. Understanding the socio-psychological origins of irrational beliefs enables deeper analysis of client issues, the development of effective strategies for psychological intervention, and the cultivation of critical thinking as a key resource for maintaining mental health. Investigating gender, age, and cultural differences in how irrational beliefs influence subjective well-being may also provide valuable insight. Irrational beliefs constitute a cognitive-emotional framework of an individual's subjective worldview, mediating perception of reality, interpretation of events, and behavioural responses. Through this lens, each person constructs a unique vision of the world, which directly affects their level of psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Future research may focus on examining the relationship between specific types of irrational beliefs and life satisfaction, as well as identifying psychological mechanisms (such as anxiety, cognitive rigidity, or resilience) that mediate or moderate this relationship.

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Анотація. Ірраціональні переконання є важливою складовою людського пізнання, проте їхній вплив на розвиток психологічних труднощів залишається недостатньо дослідженим, особливо в контексті соціальних і культурних детермінант. Метою цього теоретичного дослідження було виявлення та аналіз соціально-психологічних факторів, що сприяють розвитку ірраціональних переконань в індивідуальній свідомості. Методологічна основа дослідження включала системний аналіз наукових джерел та концептуальних підходів до ірраціональних переконань. Синтез результатів експериментальних та прикладних досліджень у галузі психології особистості дозволив виявити соціально-психологічні чинники, що впливають на виникнення та закріплення ірраціональних переконань. Результати виявили широкий спектр факторів, що сприяють та підсилюють це явище – від досвіду раннього дитинства та моделювання поведінки в рамках сімейної динаміки до інтерналізації соціальних стереотипів, ідеалів зовнішності, досягнень та гендерних ролей. Також було продемонстровано зв'язок між впливом стресу, психологічною травмою та розвитком ірраціональних переконань. Особлива увага була приділена ролі повсякденних мовних практик у підсиленні ірраціональних уявлень, зокрема через прислів'я та приказки. Практична цінність дослідження полягає в потенційному застосуванні його результатів у психологічному консультуванні, профілактиці емоційних розладів та розробці психоосвітніх програм, спрямованих на корекцію дисфункціональних переконань та підтримку психічного благополуччя

Ключові слова: дитячий досвід; стрес; соціальне моделювання; гендерні ролі; ідеали краси ; досягнення; прислів'я