Fifty Years of Relative Deprivation Research

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The relative deprivation (RD) construct has been extensively used in social psychology, sociology, and other social sciences for more than half a century. This popularity reflects RD's usefulness for explaining numerous paradoxes (Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997). Why were African American soldiers stationed in the southern United States more satisfied than African American soldiers stationed in the northern United States during World War II (Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, & Williams, 1949)? Why did the 1960s urban riots in the United States occur when they did (Miller, Bolce, & Halligan, 1977)? Why aren't working women who earn less than their male colleagues more angry (Crosby, 1982)? The list could continue. The common theme among the answers to these questions is that people's reactions to objective circumstances depend on their subjective comparisons. African American soldiers compared their situation with the situation for local African Americans (a situation much worse in the South than in the North). The urban riots followed a period of economic and political gain for minorities that ironically created a discrepancy between their expectations and a reality that was not improving quickly enough. And, most working women compare their situation with other working women, not with their male colleagues.

Obviously, a concept that can explain so many different phenomena is one worth having in the armory of the social sciences. However, research on RD has progressed only fitfully. The construct of RD was first articulated by Stouffer and his colleagues (Stouffer et al., 1949) to explain a series of unexpected relationships between feelings of satisfaction and one's position in the army. The seductive nature of RD as a post hoc explanation led to a wide range of applications and definitions. Unfortunately, many attempts to test

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the concept directly were less successful (e.g., Gaskell & Smith, 1984; Thompson, 1989). For example, in the area of social movement research, RD was once commonly used as an explanatory vehicle (e.g., Abeles, 1976; Geschwender & Geschwender, 1973; Gurr, 1970). However, by the 1980s, the construct fell into disfavor and disrepute, partly because of devastating reviews by McPhail (1971) and Gurney and Tierney (1982). Subsequent social movement research relied almost exclusively on concepts such as resource mobilization to explain when and why people engage in collective behavior. The 1990s, though, saw the rediscovery of RD and its integration into theories of collective behavior. The ways in which people interpret grievance – central to RD – are now recognized as essential to a full under-standing of social movement participation (e.g., Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996; Klandermans, 1997; Simon et al., 1998; Tyler & Smith, 1998).

Over the past ten years, RD researchers have elaborated the distinction between feeling deprived as a unique individual and feeling deprived as a representative group member, and have integrated RD theory with other related theories such as social identity theory, social comparison theory, and distributive justice theory. The purpose of this book is to summarize recent developments in RD research and to help steer research in the coming years. We approached leading researchers from around the world and asked them to describe their recent work. Different authors have, as their work dictates, focused on different aspects of RD. We have organized each of their chapters into one of the three broad categories of specification, development, and integration. Of course, each chapter pertains to all three categories in one way or another.

SPECIFICATION

One risk of having a concept such as RD ranging as widely as it does is that it becomes too wide and ends up explaining nothing. Central to the task of precise specification of any construct is the delineation of what it is *not* as much as what it is, and of where it does *not* apply as much as where it does. Theoretical work by Crosby (1976, 1982), Folger (1984, 1986), and others has led to clarification of the nature and number of preconditions necessary to the experience of RD. Cook, Crosby, and Hennigan (1977) clearly articulated the contradictory positions regarding preconditions, especially the notion of feasibility, taken by earlier researchers. Subsequent research by Crosby (1982) and others pared the number of preconditions to just two: wanting what one does not have, and feeling that one deserves whatever it is one wants but does not have. The four chapters in the first

section of the book continue, directly or indirectly, to specify more pre-
cisely the RD construct and its range of applicability.

Taylor's chapter begins the book by showing how a close reading of
three perspectives on white racism – Runciman's fraternal deprivation,
Blumer's collective threat, and Kinder and Sanders' racial resentment –
reveals more similarities than differences. She supports her theoretical
conclusions with analyses of data from the 1990 and 1994 U.S. General
Social Surveys. Taylor uses the convergence of these three perspectives to
suggest new questions for research – how are intergroup boundaries
maintained and how do stratification systems define groups' interests?

Taylor draws on an important and frequently used distinction in the
RD literature between egoistic (or personal) and fraternalistic (or group)
RD. The former normally refers to RD experiences produced through
intrapersonal or interpersonal social comparisons; the latter to RD expe-
riences produced through intergroup comparisons. In their chapter, Tyler
and Lind propose extending to the intergroup level the distinction
between procedural and distributive justice that has been important at
the interpersonal level. Across three studies, Tyler and Lind show that
disadvantaged comparisons based on *treatment* consistently explain
more variance in people's reactions than disadvantaged comparisons
based on *outcomes*.

The transition in South Africa from apartheid to a majority Black govern-
ment provides the political backdrop to the study reported in the chapter by
Duckitt and Mphuthing. In their research, Black South African participants
completed measures of cognitive and affective RD and reported their atti-
tudes toward Afrikaans and English Whites before and after the transition.
Although ratings of RD and illegitimacy changed from pre- to post-transi-
tion, these changes were not accompanied by any notable changes in inter-
group attitudes. This research is particularly remarkable because it combines
a longitudinal design with a charged political context – both rare events in
social psychological research.

The final chapter in this section on the further specification of the RD
construct is by Smith and Ortiz. RD theory initially promised to explain,
among other things, participation in collective behavior, but some claim
this promise has not been realized. Smith and Ortiz explore several
important theoretical distinctions within RD theory that help account
for this failure, and then present meta-analytic evidence to support
these distinctions. The meta-analysis suggests clearly that group and
affective measures of RD *do* predict relevant social behaviors, so long as
the measures directly tap RD and do not infer it from comparisons of

responses to different items. The second part of the chapter extends the meta-analysis by incorporating aspects of social identity theory into an explanation and test of reasons for the differential effects of personal and group RD.

DEVELOPMENT

As important as clear specification of theoretical constructs is, a theory on which only specification work was done would quickly pass away. Theories need to be developed in many ways if they are to continue to have currency in the academic community. The five chapters in this section illustrate some of the important theoretical and empirical developments over the past decade.

In the first chapter, Tougas and Beaton examine three types of relative deprivation: personal, group, and deprivation experienced on behalf of others. The vicarious experience of RD is an especially underresearched area, but the phenomenon of advantaged group members acting for the interests of a disadvantaged group (and against their personal and group interests) is surely common enough to be worthy of more attention. Tougas and Beaton summarize several studies demonstrating the importance of temporal and social comparisons to all three types of RD, and showing the differential impacts of the three types on social behaviors. Finally, the chapter proposes an integrative approach to the relationships between social identity, self-esteem, and relative deprivation. This model systematizes existing knowledge and points the way for future research in this area.

Whereas Tougas and Beaton explore the possibility that majority group members might feel deprived on behalf of a disadvantaged group, Leach, Iyer and Snider explore the psychology of the advantaged more completely, including the more common tendency for the advantaged to ignore or minimize their disadvantage. Drawing on material from many different disciplines, Leach and his colleagues present an innovative, integrative model of reactions to relative advantage. They propose three broad classes of reactions to advantage (taking advantage for granted, minimizing advantage, and acknowledging advantage) that each contain several different ways of experiencing advantage. Finally, they examine the implications of different reactions for promoting or inhibiting social change.

Social comparisons between people (as individuals or as groups) are at the heart of relative deprivation. A perennial problem in relative deprivation theory is the inability to specify a priori who compares with whom. Gartrell argues forcefully that a main reason for the continuation of this

problem lies in psychologists' assumption that individuals are free agents to engage in whichever social comparisons they choose. Instead, Gartrell argues, social comparisons are embedded in social networks that largely dictate comparison others. Elaborating a model of embedded social comparisons, Gartrell then presents evidence that treating social comparisons as patterns of ties in a social network affords a powerful new understanding of the nature and meaning of social comparisons.

Gender discrimination in the workplace is a global problem, and affirmative action policies are one of the most common and effective tools used to attack discriminatory practices. Crosby, Ozawa, and Crosby reason that reactions to gender discrimination and to affirmative action policies are likely to vary across nations and cultures. In particular, they propose that responses may depend on whether the focus is on how practices affect either an individual or a group. They suggest that Americans, being predominantly individualistic, are likely to favor remedies to the problem of gender discrimination that focus on individuals, whereas Japanese, being more collectivistic, will favor categorical remedies. After presenting data from Japan and America testing these ideas, the authors consider the implications of cross-cultural research work for relative deprivation research.

There are many different possible responses to the perception of relative deprivation or disadvantage, ranging from collective action to doing nothing. In the final chapter of this section, Wright and Tropp incorporate (1) insights from social identity theory and self-categorization theory, (2) the distinction between personal and group relative deprivation, and (3) the distinction between cognitive and affective relative deprivation to build an impressive model of responses to disadvantage. Their model and its supporting research especially helps us understand why it is that grievance so often fails to result in collective action.

INTEGRATION

Much of the current integrative work was presaged by a seminal contribution to the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation series by Tom Pettigrew in 1967. In that chapter, Pettigrew integrated research from social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education into a single focus on "social evaluation." Following this tradition, the last decade or so has seen considerable work integrating the construct into other, related frameworks. Notable in this regard has been work relating RD to social identity theory (SIT). Tajfel (1981, 1982) and subsequently Tajfel's students and colleagues (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes,

Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) developed SIT partly in response to the over-whelmingly individualistic emphasis of North American social psychol-ogy at the time. SIT is a broad theory of social behavior, and now occupies a position of international prominence. Tajfel early on saw the links between RD and social identity (e.g., Tajfel, 1981, pp. 259–267).

Following Tajfel's lead, several chapters in this section, as well as in the other sections, employ social identity theory to help explain or further expli-cate relative deprivation effects and conundrums. The chapter by Ellemers tackles the relationship between social identity and relative deprivation the-ories directly and systematically. Ellemers outlines an integrative model link-ing the antecedents and consequences of social identification with behavioral and social consequences. Resonating with the theoretical and empirical per-spective presented in the chapter by Wright and Tropp, this model neatly draws together two different research traditions into a single framework and ought to serve as a guide for research for some time.

Relative deprivation theory typically asserts that social and/or tempo-ral comparisons are an essential component in assessing whether one is deprived. Olson and Roese argue that both these comparisons can be sub-sumed within the more general process of counterfactual comparisons between one's current outcomes and the outcomes that might have been. Olson and Roese enumerate principles of research on counterfactual thinking, and apply each principle to relative deprivation. The product is a clear research agenda for examining the cognitive processes involved in constituting relative deprivation, as well as greater theoretical integrative-ness, breadth, and depth.

The chapter by Walker, Wong, and Kretzschmar attempts to delineate a theoretical integration of principles from attribution theory into relative deprivation theory, and provides a series of testable hypotheses derived from this integration. Two studies are described, each designed to address some of the attributional processes linking grievance interpretation to social action. The first, of members of environmental groups, leads to the conclusion that relative deprivation principles may not apply to all kinds of protest action. The second, of personal and group relative deprivation in a sample of working women, suggests that attributional style exerts a predictable and significant influence in the mediation between grievance and action.

Relative deprivation theorists rarely take a developmental approach to the study of relative deprivation. Similarly, they rarely study naturally occurring in situ comparisons leading to perceived injustice. The chapter by Wilson, Hoshino-Browne, and Ross documents a study of naturally

occurring social comparisons in the narratives children provide about conflicts involving them and their siblings. The number of comparisons made increased with age, but even the younger children made comparisons (at ages younger than the literature suggests). The children mostly made social, not temporal, comparisons. Moreover, children seemed satisfied with the way conflicts about perceived inequalities between themselves and their siblings were resolved. The chapter exemplifies how relative deprivation research can be researched in situ, focusing on naturally occurring conflicts of practical interest and importance, and also furthers the integration of principles from social comparison theory into relative deprivation theory.

Smith's (1993) reconceptualization of prejudice as intergroup emotion presented a significant turn in the understanding of prejudice. The prejudice-as-emotion model is used in his chapter with Ho to provide a framework within which linkages to relative deprivation and social comparison are developed. These linkages make group relative deprivation a significant precursor of prejudice. The model is then used to explain the paradoxical finding that positive stereotypes of Asian Americans can lead to negative emotions (prejudice) toward the same group.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THOMAS F. PETTIGREW

The RD construct recently (1999) celebrated its fiftieth birthday. When we developed the idea for this book, and when we approached potential authors, the field was celebrating another anniversary – the thirtieth anniversary of a landmark publication by Tom Pettigrew (1967). Pettigrew's 1967 chapter is a landmark in many ways. It demonstrates clearly the broad, multidisciplinary nature of RD, drawing examples from theory and research in psychology, social psychology, sociology, education, economics, and political science – a rare feat in a single publication, especially a single-authored publication. The chapter also was notable in its application of sometimes esoteric social scientific theory and research to significant social problems. In many ways, Pettigrew's chapter is a prototype of the sort of social psychology that significant pioneers of social psychology such as Kurt Lewin envisaged.

It is significant, and certainly no accident, that both of us, and many of the contributors to this volume, have been students and/or colleagues of Pettigrew. His influence in social psychology generally, and on RD work particularly, has been widespread and lasting. It is rare in social psychology that a publication exerts significant influence more than thirty years

on. The present volume provides testimony to Pettigrew's lasting influence on the field, as well as to the significant personal influence he has had on many of the authors within the present volume. We are lucky indeed that Pettigrew agreed to write a concluding chapter (his "old man" chapter, as he calls it) to the book, addressing each of the chapters within it, as well as the area of RD overall.

In his chapter, Pettigrew encapsulates what he sees as eight prominent themes from across the chapters in the book, and puts them neatly into historical and theoretical perspective. Typically unable to resist pushing ideas further, he develops a few hypotheses from these themes, and goes on to test them with one of his all-time favorite data sets – the 1988 Euro-barometer Survey (Reif & Melich, 1991). In this and other ways, Pettigrew's concluding chapter is typical of his contributions to the field over almost four decades.

We hope that the chapters in this book will foster the progression of RD from a provocative post hoc explanation of unexpected findings to a fleshed out theory of social justice.

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<u>PART ONE</u>

SPECIFICATION