Advances in Relative Deprivation Theory and Research

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Abstract   The focus of this special issue is relative deprivation (RD): the judgment that one or one's group is worse off compared to some standard accompanied by feelings of anger and resentment. This collection of seven papers demonstrates the range of the new thinking and research about RD, and they include data from an impressive variety of participants—including Canadians (both French- and English-speakers), Dutch, the Maoris of New Zealand, Mongols, Singaporeans, and South Africans (both Blacks and Whites). These seven papers show that if RD, and its counterpart, relative gratification, are defined carefully, at the right level of analysis and employed within larger theoretical models, the concept offers invaluable insight to how people respond to often dramatic changes in their objective circumstances.

Keywords   Relative deprivation · Relative gratification · Collective action · Prejudice · Deservingness · Resentment · Comparison

Relative deprivation (RD) was introduced in 1949 by Samuel Stouffer as a post-facto explanation for several surprising findings in the famous American Soldier series (Pettigrew, 2015). What began as a useful and intuitive explanation for people's unexpected interpretations of their objective circumstances has evolved slowly into a full-scale theory employed throughout the social sciences to predict a varied array of phenomena (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). And it has become a major entry in the study of social justice.

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RD Definition

We define relative deprivation as *a judgment that one or one's ingroup is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent, and that this judgment invokes feelings of anger, resentment, and entitlement.* In addition to the fundamental feature that the concept refers to *individuals and their reference groups,* note that there are four basic components of this definition. Individuals who experience RD: (1) first make cognitive comparisons, (2) then make cognitive appraisals that they or their ingroup are disadvantaged, (3) perceive these disadvantages as unfair, and finally (4) resent these unfair and undeserved disadvantages. If any one of these four requirements is not met, RD is not operating (Smith et al., 2012).

Defined in this manner, relative deprivation is a classic social psychological concept. It postulates a subjective state that shapes emotions, cognitions, and behavior. It links the individual with the interpersonal and intergroup levels of analysis. It melds easily with other social psychological processes. And RD challenges conventional wisdom about the prime importance of absolute deprivation. It is no surprise that references to RD can be found in hundreds of academic papers (Smith et al., 2012).

Wide Scope of Papers

Recent years have witnessed renewed interest in the theory. This issue of *Social Justice Research* provides a collection of seven papers that demonstrate the range of the new thinking and research on RD. One paper is basically theoretical, two employ experimental designs, and four use surveys—two of them with longitudinal designs. All the authors build upon the classic distinction between individual relative deprivation (IRD) and group relative deprivation (GRD; Runciman, 1966). IRD is the product of comparisons between oneself as a unique person and a referent, whereas GRD is the product of comparisons between one's ingroup and a referent. The authors document how both forms of RD are related to a variety of outcomes—from collective action, prejudice, and felt grievance to political conservatism, perceived well-being and satisfaction with the government.

Note also the variety of respondents who participated in these studies. In the past, social psychologists have rarely concerned themselves with the universality of their phenomena. But Smith and her colleagues (2012) found in their meta-analysis of RD significant effects that had been uncovered in thirty different countries around the globe. The following papers lend further support for the apparent universality of RD effects. They test Canadians (both French- and English-speakers), Dutch, the Maoris of New Zealand, Mongols, Singaporeans, and South Africans (both Blacks and Whites). At the same time, these papers document how the antecedents and the consequences of RD are the product of specific historical, cultural and in the case of the van den Bos and van Veldhuizen paper, experimental contexts.

Specification of Deservingness

As previously noted, an affective reaction to a perceived individual or group deprivation is fundamental to the RD phenomenon. Basic to this reaction is a sense of *deservingness* and *entitlement*. But the RD literature has given scant attention to this aspect of the theory. Feather provides a needed detailed analysis of the subtle differences between the concepts of anger, resentment, deservingness, and entitlement. Drawing on decades of research from his long and distinguished career as a leader of Australian social psychology, Feather unites these many closely related concepts and ties together RD with his own theory of deservingness. In particular, he notes two characteristics often neglected by RD researchers; (1) the relative distance between the positions of the perceiver and the target and (2) the role of blended emotions in people's reactions.

RD Emotions and Political Beliefs

In their survey study of RD and the political beliefs of New Zealand's Maoris, Osborne and Sibley underline further the importance of emotions as mediators of RD effects. They focus on GRD and show that it predicts increased warmth toward the ingroup and reduced warmth toward the outgroup (New Zealand's Europeans). This emotional difference in turn predicts numerous political attitudes—from conservatism to satisfaction with the government. Osborne and Sibley begin with paradoxical evidence that members of disadvantaged groups often support ideologies that undermine the group's collective interest. They then show how the treatment of ideology as an outcome (as opposed to an antecedent or control variable) can reveal ways in which these beliefs could change.

The Role of Culture

Van den Bos and van Veldhuizen explore the role of culture in RD effects with an ingenious experimental design. Testing for both GRD and IRD, they use subjects from their native Netherlands, with its basically individualistic cultural mindset, and from Singapore, with its basically collectivistic cultural mindset. They exposed these groups to a prime that elicited countercultural psychological mindsets— collectivistic mindsets with the Dutch subjects and individualistic mindsets with the Singaporean subjects. They also asked other Dutch and Singaporean subjects to complete the study under neutral conditions. In individualistic settings, subjects responded more negatively to IRD than GRD and more positively to being personally advantaged than group advantaged. By contrast, in collectivistic settings, subjects responded more negatively to being deprived at both the individual (IRD) and group (GRD) levels. Not only do they demonstrate the extent to which cultural mindsets are not fixed, the authors offer researchers an experimental method for investigating the ways in which culture shapes RD reactions.

Skilled Immigrants and Political Protest

Grant and colleagues present another creative research design by surveying a group of immigrant Canadians who are structurally caught in a classic RD social situation. Because numerous employers do not recognize foreign qualifications, many skilled immigrants encounter difficulty in obtaining appropriate jobs in their chosen profession. Thus, they are likely to feel both IRD and GRD.

Grant and colleagues combine GRD with social identity and collective efficacy in an effective model to predict participation in past and future protest actions. They find that anger and frustration about the perceived discrimination predicted collective action 3 to 6 months later. But, unexpectedly, the simple perception of discrimination alone did not predict protest. Once again, we see the critical role of angry resentment in the RD process. Interestingly, the extent to which skilled immigrants protested was associated with (1) their perceptions of their group's status as illegitimate and/or stable and (2) their identification with Canadian society. By measuring multiple levels of group identification and perceptions of the group's position within the larger society, Grant and his colleagues offer a nuanced understanding of political protest.

The Trajectory of Change

Time is a critical component of RD effects (Albert, 1977) as recognized by many early sociological investigations of RD (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970). However, much of this early research suffers from the ecological fallacy (Pettigrew, 2015). Researchers used aggregate measures of deprivation (e.g., patterns of economic growth) to predict national differences in riots and rebellions (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970). De la Sablonniere and her colleagues show how these early ideas can be investigated with direct measures of people's perceptions during times of dramatic social change in both South Africa and Mongolia. Members of disadvantaged groups in both countries who reported high levels of past RD but who harbored expectations for low future RD had higher levels of well-being. Ironically, White South Africans (arguably a highly advantaged group) reported higher levels of well-being if they believed that RD levels would remain steady (and low) than if they thought high past RD levels might decrease over time.

Students of authoritarianism should note that this study employs openness to change as its measure of well-being. As has been often replicated, openness to change and experience—one of the "big five" major personality dimensions—is also a major personality correlate of authoritarianism and prejudice (e.g., Butler, 2000; Ekehammar, Akrami, Gylje, & Zakrisson, 2004; Sibley & Duckitt, 2000). Seen from this perspective, the de la Sablonniere et al., paper is directly relevant to authoritarianism and prejudice. This result is consistent with other papers in this collection and previous RD research (e.g., Pettigrew et al., 2008). Reduced IRD and GRD are uniformly associated with diminished authoritarianism and prejudice.

Race and Class as Comparisons

In his paper, Klandermans also draws upon longitudinal data from South Africa—in this case, he reviews representative survey data from both Black and White respondents from 1994 to 2000. Klandermans explores the types of comparisons that lead to grievances at both the individual and group levels. Not surprisingly, given the present situation in South Africa, Black South Africans feel more aggrieved than White South Africans at the individual level (IRD). But White respondents feel more aggrieved at the group level (GRD). Finally, as the original political transition receded into the past, class-based comparisons gained in importance and ethnicity-based comparisons became slightly less important. In contrast to almost all other RD research, Klandermans draws upon South Africans' responses to open-ended questions about their comparison choices. These analyses show the extent to which both individual and group grievances are informed by comparisons to other people from different classes, ethnic backgrounds, and other countries.

Relative Gratification: The Inverse of RD

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the inverse of RD—namely, relative gratification (Guimond & Dambrun, 2002). LeBlanc and colleagues first define relative group gratification (GRG) as feeling entitled to one's privileged status. They then show that for university undergraduates who learned that the better employment opportunities for their university graduates in comparison to graduates from a rival university were legitimate, perceived intergroup improvement was associated with greater traditional prejudice toward ethnic minority groups. A second experiment shows that if students believed that their advantaged ingroup status in comparison to a rival university was declining, GRG was again related to increased prejudice.

   These investigators also replicated an important phenomenon—the close links among different types of prejudice. Even though the source of GRG was a comparison to a rival university, participants reported greater prejudice to ethnic minority groups. Ever since Hartley (1946) and Allport (1954) uncovered "generalized prejudice," a great variety of studies have replicated this phenomenon—both for increased prejudice (Duckitt, 1992) and increased tolerance (Pettigrew, 2009).

A Final Word

Many social scientists (Brush, 1996; Finkel & Rule, 1987; Gurney & Tierney, 1982) have been quick to dismiss RD as soon as its weaknesses as a post hoc explanation for unexpected relationships were revealed. But any post hoc explanation is limited. These seven papers show that if RD and its counterpart, RG, are defined carefully, at the right level of analysis and employed within larger theoretical models, the

concept offers invaluable insight to how people respond to often dramatic changes in their objective circumstances.

Public policy and the popular press in the United States are full of references to problems associated with growing economic inequality. But as more than 60 years of RD research and these seven papers document, it is how people subjectively interpret their (and their reference group's) position in the larger society that shapes their emotional and behavioral reactions. These seven papers offer sophisticated theoretical analyses, experimental tests, and longitudinal investigations of people's comparison choices and well-being to illustrate how people interpret and react to their objective circumstances. But many questions remain. We hope this issue of *Social Justice Research* will encourage renewed interest in RD theory.

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