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Relative deprivation *and* gratification elicit prejudice: research on the V-curve hypothesis

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We review research related to the role of social comparison in intergroup relations focusing on the effect of collective relative deprivation (when we are worse off than them) and relative gratification (when we are better off than them). As predicted by the V-curve model, there is increasing evidence to suggest that being worse-off than others (RD) *and* being better-off (RG) trigger similar consequences: an increase in intergroup prejudice and hostility. Group identification and pride as well as fear about future wealth are among the factors that are presently considered to account for these findings. A social-psychological analysis of group inequality that considers both deprivation and privilege can bring a renewed understanding of numerous social problems.

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Introduction

A system of group-based inequality is a pervasive feature of life in modern societies [1]. Group inequality implies that some people are well off but others are worse off. As Powell, Branscombe and Schmitt [2] have pointed out: ‘inequality is inherently comparative’. At the societal level, economic inequality was shown to be associated with numerous social problems, regardless of absolute wealth. More inequality means more problems of violence, imprisonment, addiction, obesity and so on [3]. At the psychological level, decades of research on social comparison processes and relative deprivation suggest that, as an individual or as a group member, the sense that one is deprived or privileged can fundamentally depend on the reference standards that one uses [4,5]. Rich people, according to some standards, may not feel that rich when compared with the super rich.

In this paper, we review important new developments in this area of research related to the V-curve hypothesis initially proposed by Grofman and Muller [6^{*}]. This study was conducted in the midst of a period characterized by collective actions involving coercion and violence between groups. As noted by Grofman and Muller [6^{*}], various versions of relative deprivation theory had suggested that people’s readiness to engage in political violence was mainly caused by a discrepancy between a person’s goal (or desired level of achievement) and his or her actual level of achievement. However, Grofman and Muller [6^{*}] made a surprising observation: the potential for political violence was consistently higher for those “who perceive negative change (increasing discrepancy) *and by individuals who perceive positive change* (decreasing discrepancy)” (p. 514, emphasis in original). Whereas it is to be expected that those who experience a negative change in their standard of living would be more likely than others to protest, it is not so intuitive that those who experience an improvement would do the same.

This surprising result had only modest impact on the field and researchers continued their study of relative deprivation only [7]. However, in recent years, an increasing number of studies have been concerned with the issues raised by Grofman and Muller [6^{*}]. We start by considering evidence related to the role of collective RD in the explanation of intergroup attitudes and behaviors. We then consider research that examined also the reverse, RG. We conclude with an assessment of the progress achieved so far and the questions that should be looked at in the future.

Relative deprivation

The concept of RD was first introduced by Stouffer [8] in a classic study of American soldiers. One major subsequent development was Crosby’s [9] proposed model of egoistical relative deprivation, integrating correlational and experimental evidence related to several distinct theories all concerned with reactions to deprivation such as equity theory [10] and social comparison theory [11]. On the basis of available evidence, she suggests that four major sets of consequences can follow from RD: stress symptoms, self-improvement, violence against society and constructive change of society. There are now many studies connecting RD with each of these types of outcomes. For example, a recent study [12] finds that subjective feelings of personal relative deprivation are associated with poorer mental and physical health. However, it is important to note that two sets of outcomes

identified by Crosby [9] are individual-oriented behaviors (i.e., stress and self-improvement) whereas the other two are collective behaviors. Yet, no distinctions were made between the two and it was predicted that all would be the consequence of the same type of RD. As such, this model represents a prime example of the kind of individualistic explanations of intergroup behavior that were strongly criticized by Tajfel [13] and his colleagues [14,15,16]. Specifically, Tajfel [15] argued for the need to distinguish between interpersonal and intergroup behaviors. He emphasized, following Sherif [17], that one should not simply generalize the findings pertaining to interpersonal behavior to explain intergroup behavior.

To understand the psychology of intergroup relations, one needs to go beyond individual psychology in order to develop a collective psychology. The social identity perspective [18] comprising social identity theory [19] and self-categorization theory [20] is well suited to provide such an analysis. However, research on RD has produced one of the best illustrations of what a collective psychology stands for. Drawing on the distinction between egoistical versus fraternal RD [21], several studies have shown that intergroup attitudes and behaviors are best predicted by fraternal or collective RD (CRD), the feeling that the ingroup is worse off than an outgroup, not by individual or egoistical RD (IRD), the feeling that one is worse off than others [7,22,23,24].

Consistent with the interpersonal/intergroup continuum in social behavior [15], subsequent research also documented that individualistic behaviors (i.e. self-improvement, depression) were best predicted by IRD, not CRD whereas collective behaviors were best predicted by CRD, not IRD [25,26]. In fact, many researchers have suggested that in order to explain collective action, the role of CDR can be fruitfully integrated within the social identity perspective [25,27,28,29]. This bridging has given rise to research investigating the characteristics of intergroup emotions ([30,31], see also Smith and Mackie, this issue). Indeed, much support has been found for the hypothesis that intergroup *attitudes* are most strongly related to CRD, not IRD [32]. For example, research by Pettigrew and colleagues shows that prejudice against immigrants in Europe is directly linked with CRD, not IRD [33,34].

Relative gratification: research on the V-curve

Whereas RD refers to situations when one is worse off in comparison with others or with the self over time [35], RG is a situation where one is better off in comparison with others or with the self over time [36]. Yet, systematic research investigating the impact of RG on intergroup relations only started recently. Following the correlational study of Grofman and Muller [6[•]], Guimond and Dambrun [37[•]] reported the results of two experiments contrasting the effects of three conditions on prejudice

against North African immigrants in France: a condition of RD involving unfavorable comparisons in terms of job prospects, a control group, and a condition of RG involving favorable comparison in terms of job prospects, the reverse of the RD condition. Confirming the V-curve hypothesis, in addition to effect of RD, both experiments showed that on multiple indicators the RG condition produced reliably higher levels of negative intergroup attitudes compared to the control group.

Dambrun *et al.* [38[•]] sought to extend the generality of the findings by testing the effects of RD and RG on prejudice against immigrants among a large national sample of South Africans. Again, a curvilinear relationship (V-curve; high RD and high RG) explained prejudice against African and Western immigrants better than a simple linear model. This finding was noteworthy because even though many earlier studies had examined the role of RD in the South African context [39,40], none had considered the potential role of RG. Moreover, because the Dambrun *et al.* study was conducted using a representative sample of 1600 individuals, it provides some evidence that this effect is not limited to university students but can be found in the population at large.

There is now also evidence that the effect is not limited to attitudes toward immigrants. In the context of the relations between two groups of high school students, it has been argued and found that among the high status group, RG can transform ingroup bias into outgroup derogation [36].

Postmes and Smith [41[•]] examined the relevance of the V-curve for the explanation of intergroup oppression. More specifically, they asked: under what conditions do members of a dominant group resort to oppressive actions against an outgroup? Although the first response might be to suggest that this will occur with a threat of a declining status, Postmes and Smith [41[•]] used historical evidence and research on RG to suggest that economic and status improvements may also be connected with oppression. They found support for the V-curve especially when norms toward immigrants were negative (as opposed to positive).

Moscатели *et al.* [42^{••}] tested the effect of RD and RG on intergroup discrimination in the minimal group paradigm and found support for the V-curve on both implicit as well as on explicit measures. More recently, Jetten *et al.* [43^{••}] re-examined the V-curve hypothesis in a set of studies using both correlational and experimental techniques and providing a broader theoretical viewpoint by integrating macro-economic and political science findings [44]. Their analysis revealed converging evidence to suggest that extreme-right wing anti-immigrant movements can develop not only in harsh times but also when the economy is booming and people's economic, financial and social

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