Relative Deprivation

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Relative deprivation is the experience of being deprived of something to which one believes oneself to be entitled to have. It refers to the discontent people feel when they compare their positions to others and realize that they have less than them.

Schaefer defines it as "the conscious experience of a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and present actualities. It is a term used in social sciences to describe feelings or measures of economic, political, or social deprivation that are relative rather than absolute.

The concept of relative deprivation has important consequences for both behavior and attitudes, including feelings of stress, political attitudes, and participation in collective action. It is relevant to researchers studying multiple fields in social sciences. Its origins are from the biological concept of relative fitness, where an organism that successfully outproduces its competitors leaves more copies in the gene pool.

Social scientists, particularly political scientists and sociologists, have cited 'relative deprivation' (especially temporal relative deprivation) as a potential cause of social movements and deviance, leading to extreme situations to political violence such as rioting, terrorism, civil wars and other instances of social deviance such as crime. For example, some scholars of social movements explain their rise by citing grievances of people who feel deprived of what they perceive as being entitled to. Similarly, individuals engage in deviant behaviors when their means do not match their goals.

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Theory

American sociologist Robert K. Merton was among the first (if not the first) to use the concept of relative deprivation in order to understand social deviance, using French sociologist Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie as a starting point.

In one of the first formal definitions of the relative deprivation, Walter Runciman noted that there are four preconditions of relative deprivation (of object X by person A):

Person A does not have X
Person A knows of other persons that have X
Person A wants to have X
Person A believes obtaining X is realistic

Runciman distinguishes between egoistic and fraternalistic relative deprivation. The former is caused by unfavorable social position when compared to other, better off members of a specific group A is the member of) and the latter, by unfavorable comparison to other, better off groups. Egoistic relative deprivation can be seen in the example of a worker who believes he should have been promoted faster and may lead to that person taking actions designed to improve his position

within the group; those actions are however unlikely to affect many people. Fraternalistic can be seen in the example of racial discrimination, and are much more likely to result in the creation and growth of large social movement, like the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Another example of fraternalistic relative deprivation is the envy teenagers feel towards the wealthy characters who are portrayed in movies and on television as being "middle class" or "normal" despite wearing expensive clothes, driving expensive cars, and living in mansions.

Relativeness

Feelings of deprivation are relative, as they come from a comparison to social norms that are not absolute and usually differ from time and place. This differentiates relative deprivation from objective deprivation (also known as absolute deprivation or absolute poverty) - a condition that applies to all underprivileged people. This leads to an important conclusion: while the objective deprivation (poverty) in the world may change over time, relative deprivation will not, as long as social inequality persists and some humans are better off than others.

Consider the following examples: in 1905 cars were a luxury, hence an individual unable to afford one would not feel or be viewed as deprived. In 2010, when cars are common in most societies, an individual unable to afford one is much more likely to feel deprived. In another example, mobile phones are common today, and many people may feel that they deserve to have one. Fifty years ago, when there were no mobile phones, such a sentiment would obviously not exist.

Relative deprivation may be temporal; that is, it can be experienced by people that experience expansion of rights or wealth, followed by stagnation or reversal of those gains. Such phenomena are also known as unfulfilled rising expectations.

In an example from the political realm, the lack the right to vote is more likely to be felt as a deprivation by people who had it once then by the people who never had the opportunity to vote.

Relative and absolute deprivation

Some sociologists, for instance Karl Polanyi, have argued that relative differences in economic wealth are more important than absolute deprivation, and that it is more significant in determining human quality of life. This debate has important consequences for social policy, particularly on whether poverty can be eliminated simply by raising total wealth or whether egalitarian measures are also needed.

A specific form of relative deprivation is relative poverty. A measure of relative poverty defines poverty as being below some relative poverty line, such as households who earn less than 20% of the median income. Notice that if everyone's real income in an economy increases, but the income

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distribution stays the same, the number of people living in relative poverty will not change.

Critique

Critique of this theory has pointed out that this theory fails to explain why some people who feel discontent fail to take action and join social movements. Counter-arguments include that some people are prone to conflict-avoidance, short-term-oriented, and that imminent life difficulties may arise since there is no absolute guarantee that life-improvement will result from social action.

Quotes

Consider also this quote from Karl Marx: "A house may be large or small; as long as the neighboring houses are likewise small, it satisfies all social requirement for a residence. But let there arise next to the little house a palace, and the little house shrinks to a hut. The little house now makes it clear that its inmate has no social position at all to maintain, or but a very insignificant one; and however high it may shoot up in the course of civilization, if the neighboring palace rises in equal of even in greater measure, the occupant of the relatively little house will always find himself more uncomfortable, more dissatisfied, more cramped within his four walls."

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