

Relative Deprivation

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Relative Deprivation

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Social Psychology, Political Science

1. Core Definition

Relative deprivation refers to the subjective psychological state arising from the belief that one is entitled to more or better resources, status, or outcomes than those currently possessed, based on a comparison with a relevant reference group. Unlike **absolute deprivation**, which focuses on lacking the basic necessities of life, relative deprivation is fundamentally about the feeling of being disadvantaged when contrasted with peers or perceived standards. This perception is not necessarily rooted in objective reality; two individuals with identical material assets may experience vastly different levels of deprivation depending on who they choose as their social comparison group. The central emotion fueling relative deprivation is often **frustration**, which can escalate into resentment, anger, and, potentially, mobilization for social change or conflict. The core mechanism involves a cognitive assessment: identifying a gap between one's current situation and a situation deemed attainable and just based on comparison with others.

The concept emphasizes the critical role of **social comparison** in determining satisfaction and well-being. Individuals naturally engage in comparisons (upward, downward, and lateral) to evaluate their standing. Relative deprivation emerges when this comparison is upward--that is, when the individual or group observes the superior condition of the reference group and perceives the discrepancy as illegitimate or unfair. For instance, in the example of the student performing poorly on exams compared to peers, despite similar study effort, they experience relative deprivation because they perceive a disparity between their input (studying) and their outcome (poor grades) relative to their reference group's outcome (good grades). This internal inconsistency and perceived injustice are the psychological catalysts for deprivation, leading to the feeling that one is "worse off" than those around them.

The definition strictly maintains that the feeling is **relative**, meaning it depends entirely on the chosen frame of reference. If an individual compares themselves to a group that is worse off (downward comparison), they are likely to feel relatively satisfied, even if their objective material conditions are poor. Conversely, even wealthy individuals can experience relative deprivation if their reference group consists of the ultra-rich. Consequently, sociologists utilize this framework to explain why discontent and social unrest often arise not during periods of deep, absolute poverty, but rather during times of rising expectations or moderate progress, a phenomenon often termed the "revolution of rising expectations," where the perceived rate of progress lags behind the anticipated rate of improvement seen in comparative groups.

2. Absolute vs. Relative Deprivation

A fundamental distinction in social science is drawn between absolute and relative forms of deprivation. **Absolute deprivation** pertains to a condition of lacking essential needs required for survival and basic functioning, such as food, shelter, and medical care. This condition is objectively measurable against established poverty lines or standards of living. Historically, researchers initially focused on absolute measures to explain poverty and inequality, assuming that the severity of objective material hardship directly correlated with social discontent and the potential for rebellion.

However, the shift toward understanding **relative deprivation** acknowledges that human dissatisfaction is often psychologically and socially mediated rather than purely material. While absolute poverty certainly causes suffering, it is relative deprivation that often drives collective action and social protest. People enduring absolute poverty might be too resource-constrained or preoccupied with immediate survival to mobilize politically, whereas those experiencing relative deprivation--who have sufficient resources to survive but perceive an unjust gap between themselves and a better-off group--are more likely to feel the resentment necessary for organized, collective mobilization aimed at systemic change.

The differentiation underscores a critical sociological insight: suffering is intensified by social context. It is not just how little one possesses, but how that quantity compares to what others possess and what one believes they are entitled to. This perspective allowed researchers to explain phenomena such as the discontent felt by highly educated workers whose salaries lag behind those in other professions, or the frustration of middle-class citizens who perceive that the wealthiest segments of society are disproportionately benefiting from economic policies, leading to a sense of relative decline despite objective stability.

3. Etymology and Historical Development

While the psychological basis of social comparison is ancient, the formal sociological articulation of relative deprivation theory gained decisive prominence following World War II. The foundational empirical work is attributed to the study conducted by Samuel Stouffer and his colleagues, documented in *The American Soldier* (1949). Analyzing survey data from millions of American soldiers, Stouffer's research team observed numerous counterintuitive findings regarding satisfaction and morale. For instance, they noted that soldiers in units with objectively slower promotion rates reported higher levels of satisfaction with promotion opportunities than those in units with objectively faster promotion rates.

Stouffer explained this paradox by arguing that the soldiers were employing different **reference groups** for comparison. In the high-promotion units, soldiers compared themselves to peers who were rapidly promoted, leading to intense frustration (relative deprivation) when they were not

equally successful. Conversely, in the low-promotion units, few peers were being promoted, lowering the expectations and subsequent feeling of deprivation among those who remained unpromoted. This groundbreaking work established that feelings of deprivation are not determined by objective material conditions alone, but by the criteria of comparison, specifically the chosen reference group.

The concept was further refined and formalized by Robert K. Merton in his development of Reference Group Theory, providing a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals select and utilize comparative groups (normative and comparative). However, the most definitive sociological statement on the concept was provided by Walter Runciman in his 1966 work, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*. Runciman systematically delineated the necessary preconditions for relative deprivation, distinguished between egoistic and fraternalistic forms, and applied the concept to analyze issues of class and status within British society, solidifying RDT as a key explanatory tool in the study of social inequality and political mobilization.

4. Typologies: Egoistic and Fraternalistic Deprivation

Runciman's key contribution was the identification of two critical forms of relative deprivation based on the unit of comparison and the resultant social outcome: **egoistic** and **fraternalistic**. Egoistic relative deprivation occurs when an individual compares their own situation unfavorably to other individuals within their own group or to a specific out-group member. This form is personalized and focused on individual failure or disadvantage. It typically results in individualized responses, such as seeking personal advancement, increasing work effort, or psychological withdrawal. The student comparing themselves negatively to their highly successful peers is a classic instance of egoistic deprivation.

In contrast, **fraternalistic relative deprivation** occurs when an individual compares the situation of their entire group (e.g., their social class, ethnicity, or regional faction) unfavorably to a distinct, better-off out-group. This form is collective; the individual perceives that their group as a whole is unjustly deprived relative to another group. The feeling of grievance is shared and directed externally toward the perceived source of systemic injustice. Fraternalistic deprivation is considered the more potent catalyst for large-scale social movements, collective action, and political conflict, as it fosters the necessary shared sense of grievance and solidarity for mobilization.

The distinction between these two types is vital for predicting social outcomes. Egoistic deprivation may lead to competition among individuals, thereby stabilizing the existing hierarchical system, as individuals seek to "catch up" personally. Conversely, fraternalistic deprivation challenges the very legitimacy of the system. If members of a disadvantaged demographic collectively perceive that their group outcomes are systematically inferior to those of a dominant group due to institutional

bias, that shared, collective frustration is a necessary psychological precursor to organized protest and demands for fundamental structural change.

5. Necessary Preconditions for Relative Deprivation

For the feeling of relative deprivation to emerge and persist, several psychological and social preconditions must be met, transforming simple inequality into a motivational grievance. Scholars, including Runciman and Ted Gurr, have detailed these prerequisites. The first requirement is the presence of **comparison**, where the individual or group must observe the condition of the reference group, either directly or through media and social narratives.

The second precondition is the perception of **disparity**. The individual must recognize a significant and salient difference between their current state and the reference group's state regarding resources, status, or outcomes. However, mere disparity is insufficient. The third, and arguably most crucial, precondition is **entitlement** or expectation. The deprived party must believe that they are legitimately entitled to the better outcome experienced by the reference group. This belief often rests on established principles of distributive justice, fairness, or shared inputs (e.g., "we worked just as hard as they did, so we deserve the same reward").

Finally, the deprivation is maximized by the perception of **injustice** or illegitimacy. Relative deprivation is most volatile when the disparity is viewed not just as unfortunate circumstance, but as fundamentally unfair, violating norms of meritocracy or equality. If a group believes that the disparity is the result of external manipulation, discrimination, or systemic bias, their feeling of deprivation is significantly amplified and more likely to lead to collective opposition. The simultaneous presence of these four elements--comparison, disparity, entitlement, and injustice--is what transforms objective resource inequality into a powerful, socially motivating subjective grievance.

6. Applications in Social Movement Theory

Relative deprivation theory serves as a foundational psychological mechanism within the study of social movements and political conflict, providing the motivational link between structural inequality and overt protest behavior. In political science, RDT has been instrumental in explaining outbreaks of political violence and civil strife, notably through Ted Gurr's 1970 work, *Why Men Rebel*. Gurr argued that the intensity and scope of relative deprivation experienced by a population, particularly when perceived as illegitimate (fraternalistic deprivation), is directly proportional to the potential for large-scale internal conflict.

This application is particularly insightful when analyzing large-scale political transformations and crises. For example, RDT helps explain why revolutions often occur after periods of modest economic reform or expansion, rather than during periods of deep depression. As economic

conditions improve slightly, people's expectations (the reference point) rise sharply--the aforementioned revolution of rising expectations. If the actual rate of improvement fails to meet these soaring, justifiable expectations, the intolerable gap between value expectations and value capabilities can ignite widespread fraternalistic deprivation and spark revolutionary action.

While later theories, such as resource mobilization theory, critiqued relative deprivation for focusing too heavily on psychological states without accounting for necessary organizational capacity, RDT remains central to understanding the genesis of grievance. Modern integrated models recognize that while deprivation provides the necessary motivation and shared grievance, resources (funding, leadership, communication networks) are simultaneously necessary to transform that grievance into effective collective action. Thus, relative deprivation is viewed as a prerequisite or catalyst for the successful recruitment and mobilization of participants in social movements aimed at challenging the existing social order.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its considerable explanatory power across various social phenomena, relative deprivation theory faces several important academic criticisms, primarily concerning issues of measurement and the complexities of establishing clear causality. A major critique revolves around the difficulty of empirically measuring the subjective experience of deprivation. Because the feeling relies on internal perception and the fluid choice of a reference group, researchers struggle to operationalize and quantify the phenomenon reliably across different populations and distinct cultural contexts. The enduring methodological challenge is accurately predicting which specific reference group an individual or subgroup will select for comparison, and why certain comparisons become salient at specific historical moments.

Another significant criticism addresses the challenge of **causality**. RDT posits a clear causal chain: objective inequality leads to subjective deprivation, which leads to frustration, culminating in aggression or collective action. However, critics argue that the causal arrow may sometimes point the other way, or that the relationship is heavily mediated by factors RDT overlooks. For instance, individuals who are already prone to aggression or who are actively recruited into a protest group might subsequently adopt the narrative of deprivation to rationalize their existing anger or participation. In this view, the articulated frustration becomes an outcome of mobilization, rather than its primary cause.

Finally, RDT has been criticized for being structurally insufficient on its own to explain collective action outcomes. While it provides the psychological "fuel" (the grievance and motivation) for protest, it fails to account for the necessary external structural conditions, such as the availability of resources, the presence of strong, unifying leadership, existing political opportunities for change, and the repressive capacity of the state. Consequently, contemporary sociological frameworks

seldom use RDT in isolation, instead preferring integrated models that combine motivational factors (relative deprivation) with organizational and political factors (such as resource mobilization theory and political opportunity structures) to provide a more comprehensive account of social conflict and political change.

Further Reading

[Relative Deprivation \(Wikipedia\)](#)

Stouffer, S. A., et al. (1949). *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*. Princeton University Press.

Runciman, W. G. (1966). *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A Study of Attitudes to Social Inequality in Contemporary England*. University of California Press.

Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton University Press.