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Relative Deprivation and Revolt: Current and Future Directions

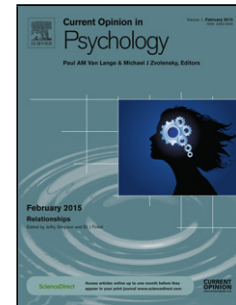
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Relative Deprivation and Revolt: Current and Future Directions

By

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Highlights

- We review transdisciplinary social scientific empirical research using relative deprivation theory.
- We discuss methodologically plural psychological research using relative deprivation concepts, but simultaneously neglecting ethnographic methods.
- Theoretical advancements based on the foundational definition of relative deprivation are advanced in four directions by examining the role of technology in creating feelings of deprivation; by questioning the status of the 1% of income earners; by evaluating moral and cultural challenges of migration; and by developing a temporal account to expand classic relative deprivation theory.
- We argue future research investigating these theoretical propositions would benefit from transdisciplinary perspectives and methodological pluralism to examine how relative deprivation is generated and experienced within holistic contexts.

Abstract:

We review research applying relative deprivation theory to comprehend social, economic, and political phenomena relating to social change. We highlight areas illuminated by relative deprivation and limitations of this contemporary research. Next, we outline four theoretical elaborations of relative deprivation theory to advance understanding of complex socio-economic and political processes of underlying rallies, riots, and revolutions. We end by suggesting methodological approaches and research agendas to understand psychological processes of social change.

Keywords: Cultural Clashes; Fairness; Imagining; Relative Deprivation; Remembering; Morality; 1%.

1. Introduction

Classical formulations of relative deprivation theory guide contemporary empirical investigations. The theory has been generative for comprehending people's frustrations – and their resultant behaviours - from their subjective understandings in the social, cultural, historical, economic, and legal contexts in which they are embedded. In this essay we first

review current empirical literature utilizing this theory. We then articulate four theoretical elaborations and argue this critical expansion offers a framework for future research to examine and understand contemporary forms of relative deprivation manifesting in rallies, riots, and revolutions.

2. Relative deprivation & revolt: Contemporary transdisciplinary research

The theory of relative deprivation states that when an individual or group compares themselves to other salient individuals or groups and in this comparison find themselves lacking, discriminated against, or disadvantaged, this leads to feelings of angry frustration [1]. Relative deprivation highlights the fundamentally comparative nature of human judgment, and uses this as a basis for understanding emotions and social actions. In simple terms, the theory suggests people do not experience satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on whether the material conditions of their life are good versus bad, but rather based on whether these conditions are “better” or “worse” than those experienced by relevant others with whom they compare.

The classic formulation of the theory has been generative of research programs across the social sciences. In sociology, for example, contemporary research suggests feeling relatively deprived helps comprehend numerous social, political, and economic phenomena, including job insecurity [2], health disparities due to perceived inequalities [3] and Hochschild’s documentation of people’s feelings of being ‘left behind’ in the American south [4]. In economics, the theory has recently been used to examine the relationship between income distribution and migration [5], admittance of asylum seekers into a host country [6] and decisions to migrate from sub-Saharan Africa [7]. The political science literature has also applied relative deprivation to examine similar societal phenomena, including migration and prejudice [8], populism [9, 10, 11], poverty [12], the redistribution of income [13], and social and political activism [14]. In anthropology, relative deprivation has received less attention [15] with one exception being its application in understanding Irish water protests [1].

The theory of relative deprivation has also been generative of research programs in psychology on topics related to, underlying, or directly associated with, rallies, riots, and revolutions. Recent applications of the theory include analyses of social injustices [16, 17, 18], social inequity [19, 20], economic disparity [21], income and wealth inequalities [22], terrorist attacks [23], and other forms of violent extremism [24]. Reflecting broader societal trends, and dovetailing with research in political science, a further fruitful line of research has applied the theory to understanding the re-emergence of populism [25]. This line of work illustrates how perceiving divisions between ‘good people’ and ‘corrupt elites’ (in the case of left-wing populism) or ‘migrants’ (in right-wing populism) can set up intergroup dynamics in society; how these perceptions, and related emotions they feed into, can be exploited by populist leaders; and how cultural and economic processes are framed around basic status concerns which relative deprivation theory can help explain.

2.2. Relative deprivation and revolt: Methodological issues

Recent psychological work using relative deprivation theory diverges in the weight placed on social comparisons for explaining the emergence of social movements, protests and collective action. Because feelings of deprivation are inherently subjective, a substantial number of studies conceptualize relative deprivation as a variable in and of itself, operationalized and measured through items in questionnaires and surveys, and treated analytically as mediating or affecting peoples' likelihood of engaging in collective action, protest or rebellion [16, 26, 27, 28]. In this research, variation in measured relative deprivation is used to explain variation in actual or intended actions, for example explaining why some people participate in collective action while others do not. Yet, merely quantifying the *degree* to which people feel relatively deprived does not illuminate which *kinds* of social comparisons are made for such feelings to emerge, nor the process through which changing social and historical conditions produce different reference groups with which people compare themselves. Aligning with broader decontextualized trends in social psychological research [29], this research does not study actual processes of social change but simply codifies 'collective action tendencies' [26], 'intention to rebel' [27], or other similar constructs [16, 28].

Other research applying the theory does situate inquiries within specific social, historical and political contexts. This research focuses on the collective grievances that result from feeling deprived in comparison to others in society and how these grievances might motivate collective action. Examples of this work include research on perceived societal injustices, and perceptions of growing economic inequalities, as well as work that is explicitly conducted under the general umbrella of relative deprivation theory; and these ideas have been used to explain prolonged contemporary protest movements in Ireland [1], Chile [30], France [31, 32, 33] and resistance to them, in places like Sudan [34]. In one particularly revealing analysis, it was suggested that aggregate economic growth, combined with the introduction of a fuel tax, triggered protests in France as ordinary workers came to feel relatively deprived in comparison to those members of society who were seen to be benefiting from wider prosperity [32].

3. From methodological limitations to theoretical advancements

Reviewing the recent psychological literature on relative deprivation, it is clear that present research has moved away from an expansive version of the theory that was grounded in ethnographic methods, including thick description and inter-group observations [1,35]. This trend is in line with contemporary psychological research focusing on the quantification of dynamic social comparisons at the expense of a multi-method, experimental-ethnographic, research programs [36, 37].

In a recent exception, Power [1, 38, 39, 40] drew on ethnographic methods to explore the role of relative deprivation in explaining why people protest during a period of rapid economic growth rather than at times of economic decline. Consistent with the concept of relative deprivation, the perception of unfair economic inequality and people's *subjective* feelings of being deprived relative to salient others – rather than objective economic conditions – was indeed connected to motivations to engage in social protest. Yet, exactly

when, how, and for whom these feelings fomented was intimately tied to the prevailing social and political context, and how this context was interpreted relative to their lived daily experience. In Ireland, for example, people felt relatively deprived during an economic recovery, when a new charge on water services was legalized by the government. Counterintuitively, the context of economic growth was experienced unfairly, as people drew on their memories of the past (of having endured harsh austerity following the 2008 economic collapse together) and their imagined future (of the privatization of essential water services at the expense of the many and the subsequent proliferation of economic inequality) to loop back to the present. These multiple and fluid comparisons led them to feel unfairly deprived relative to a small group of elites – the 1% – who were seen as disproportionately benefitting from the economic regrowth. Attending to the specifics of cases like this, and the rich details of how those subjective feelings emerge and are expressed, opens up avenues for theoretical extension, and empirical elaboration, of relative deprivation theory to create more holistic – and more fully-contextualized – understandings of social movements [41]. In the following section we outline four avenues for extension of relative deprivation theory derived from contextualized ethnographic research.

a. Who compares who to whom? The role of technology in globalization

Answering this question of who compares who to whom is fundamental to understanding the proliferation of global rallies, riots, and revolutions in the latter years of the 2010's. Due to the proliferation of technology, the expansion of the internet and social media platforms across the world, different cultural worlds are now accessible to a greater number of people than ever before. People from all over the world are ever more exposed to idealized representations of others, and ways of life, that are removed from reality. The gap between versions of how life is in other places, how it could, or even should be, and the actuality of daily lives can feed into localised resentments and frustrations.

Evidence shows how people during the Arab Spring developed 'cognitive alternatives' to the current political system based on their imaginations of the future and how their lives could otherwise be. These imaginings were at odds with the corrupt and controlling dictatorships in which they lived [42]. Imagining how life could be, in contrast to how it was on an everyday experiential level, led to frustration, eventually reaching a tipping point with individual self-immolation to protest corruption in Egypt, acts that sparked the wider protest movement of the Arab Spring [43].

Globalization means people compare their circumstances and outcomes to others in ways they were not possible before the technologically interconnected world in which many of us now live. This mediated world may transmit virtual realities, but these have real consequences. Technological advances also inform knowledge of wealth accumulation and frustration with the 1%.

b. Who are the 1%? – The moral challenge of social comparisons

The idea of the 1% - a trope which gained popular appeal during the “Occupy Protests” in the United States that subsequently spread to different global regions – is a manifestation of “angry frustration” caused by feelings of relative deprivation. This trope has become short-hand for concerns about growing inequality [44, 45], but it has yet to receive critical scrutiny. The direction of comparisons between those people who revolt and those with whom they compare invites greater social scientific investigation. The literature focuses on “elites” (with the implicit assumption their accumulation of wealth is immoral, unfair, or unjust) causing “ordinary people” to feel “left behind.” Some researchers highlight rising standards of living, income, and wealth in a historical perspective [40, 46, 47, 48]. Yet these macro-historical perspectives rarely inform empirical research [40]. To be in the global 1% one needs to earn approximately \$34,000* [49], and to be in the US top 1% this figure is c. \$450,000 [50]. Many people who revolt due to feelings of relative deprivation complain about the richer getting richer, yet it remains unknown what role actual living standards, versus subjective interpretations of these, have in their interpretation of economic inequalities (e.g., as legitimate and fair or otherwise; [51]) and the tipping points to protest, despite this contrasting of subjective to objective realities being at the core of relative deprivation theory.

Behind these questions, there is a deeper moral question of whether people ought to be concerned about growing economic inequalities rather than reducing poverty [52]. Those people who protested in Sudan, Chile, Iran, India, Ireland, Brazil, Venezuela, contexts defined by growing economic inequalities and disproportionate taxes and charges placed on ordinary workers, rightly feel deprived relative to others who are seen as benefitting more from the economic growth occurring in those countries.

Recent research highlights the rising aggregate floor of income and wealth for the vast majority of people in a relatively short historical period (46, 47). However, the overall rising floor of living standards is rarely acknowledged. If people compared their wealth and income relative to recent national conditions, perhaps they would not feel as relatively deprived. But the direction of comparison seems more present- or future-orientated and largely directed towards the 1%. They are seen as unfairly and disproportionately accumulating wealth at the expense of “ordinary people.”

Protesters in western liberal democracies, such as Ireland, are often themselves close to, or in, the global 1% of income earners. Yet, when people protest against growing economic inequality and demand more even distribution of economic goods, it is unclear from the present literature whether protesters intend to redistribute wealth such that those poorer than them become less poor (helping alleviate absolute global poverty) or whether the demand is for protesters to have more wealth when compared to their national, not global, 1%, or whether the demand is for the rich to stop disproportionately accumulating wealth.

* The threshold to enter to global 1% of income earners in 2020 is now estimated to be \$53,000 (in terms of purchasing power parity). This figure was calculated by Branko Milanovic (personal communication). It is based on adjustments (to the extent possible) for the top 1% US underestimations.

c. Local comparisons? Splintering and deprivation in a globalized world

In a globalized world, the splintering of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural composition of communities shifts who compares who to whom in localized contexts. Migration is associated with growing economic inequality [38,48] which in turn is associated with less social trust in communities [53]. On a local level cultural clashes concerning values, beliefs, and morals can create disparities, feelings of injustice, unfairness, and ultimately deprivation. Scholars in the social sciences, and psychology in particular, need to pay special attention to the affects migration and increasing cultural – and therefore moral [54] – pluralism in once homogenous countries.

Western liberal democracies, for example, are dealing with cultural and moral pluralism by confronting questions about the scopes and limits for diverse cultural practices in countries where values, beliefs, and behaviours were more uniform [48]. For example, a recent study showed that white Australians reporting high levels of national identification coupled with feelings of in-group and personal deprivation were less supportive of multicultural policy [55]. Denmark, as another example, has strong assimilationist policies. Rather than trying to accommodate diverse cultural and moral ways of life the government ratified a new ‘ghetto law’ – a strong assimilationist policy which has been criticized as disproportionately affecting people in Muslim enclaves by forcing strict educational lessons, police surveillance, and gentrification of particular neighbourhoods [56]. Local level resistance to gentrification has already begun in the form of neighbourhood protests, organized community meetings, legal challenges, and online platforms.

Relative deprivation might not be felt in solely economic terms connected to growing income or wealth inequalities and dissatisfaction with some members of the 1%. It can also be experienced due to perceived discrimination of ones’ historically ingrained, culturally meaningful, ways of life that can clash when migrants from one cultural tradition move to another. One pressing issue for policy makers, governments, legal scholars, is to understand diverse cultural practices and draft sensible legislation to mitigate cultural clashes leading to more harmonious societies where rallies, riots, and revolutions based on ethnic and cultural differences are not felt to be made manifest.

d. Who compares who to whom? Past and future comparisons

The way people remember the past [57] and imagine the future [58, 59] has implications for how people make sense of, and act, in the present [60, 61], processes that appear to be quite central to felt deprivation when explored in richer ethnographic detail.

One recent articulation of these processes in relation to socio-political change presents The Infinity Theory of Social Movements [40]. This theoretical framework situates these developmental processes within two narratives of economic development. The first narrative highlights growing economic inequality [44, 45]. The other narrative highlights the rising floor of global wealth and income in a relatively short period of historical time [46, 47]. Whether social movements form and proliferate to modulate economic hardship, according to the argument, has less to do with objective economic conditions. Rather, it is

people's subjective understandings, informed by their contextualized memories and imaginings, over and above actual economic conditions, that underlie feelings of deprivation and motivation to protest. As such, the Infinity Theory adds a necessary temporal and developmental framework to conceptualize how appraisals of economic (un)fairness are made, and how feelings of relative deprivation, are generated. This theory, developed from in-depth ethnographic research, presents an expansive framework – supported by experimental social psychological evidence – to comprehend the proliferation of global protests due to perceived unfair hardship during increased economic inequality during historical economic growth.

One consequence for social science is to predict economic protests will always occur to modulate perceptions of unfairness regardless of how wealthy or economically egalitarian a society is. Another is to underscore the core assumptions of the “materialist-rationalist” model in economics. From this perspective humans act as “econs” who are rational and consistent in their decision-making. The Infinity Theory of Social Movements helps comprehend recent collective action in diverse cultural contexts such as Chile, France, Ireland, and Sudan. In Chile, [30], for example, people protested en masse in 2019 in the context of aggregate economic growth (as evidenced in growing GDP per capita, a key indicator of economic growth) that was experienced unequally. Consequently, another implication of the model is to highlight to governments, and related institutions, that social movements develop due to the perception of fairness as well as actual economic conditions.

4. Conclusions: Future research and a methodological note

Future research on relative deprivation can more critically assess the role of globalization, and its resultant movement of goods, people, technology as well as cultural values, beliefs, and behaviours, across traditional boundaries. Who compares who to whom is shifting across global and local levels with real consequences for how people understand, position themselves, and represent their social realities and subjective feelings, regardless of objective standards. Changing socio-cultural and economic landscapes, along with shifting comparisons, invite difficult moral questions about the legitimacy of our own and others' ways of life, access to societal resources, and to the spoils of prosperity. As reviewed in this essay, methodological pluralism, and transdisciplinary research, offer generative frameworks to help understand the psychological processes of radical social change resulting in rallies, riots, and revolutions.

Credit statement

<i>Séamus A. Power:</i>	Original conceptualization and drafting, research, writing, editing.
<i>Thomas Madsen:</i>	Conceptualization, research, writing, editing.
<i>Thomas Morton:</i>	Conceptualization, writing, editing.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Sullivan criticizes social psychology's 'mainstream epistemology' for being too focused on generating universal causal "laws" in isolation from sociohistorical conditions. Within this tradition two approaches to theory construction is identified: using theory as respectively a 'tool' and a 'torch'. The former allows researchers to make predictions about how a set of variables will operate. The latter illuminates hidden sources of behavior, attitudes, etc. As an alternative, the 'critical-historical' approach is presented. This approach is committed to explain individual and group experience as part of historically contingent forces and is critically aware of social researchers' role in this process. Here, theory is not only validated empirically through quantitative methods, but through its capacity to holistically explain how specific psychological phenomena emerge out of observed historical circumstances. Concludingly, Sullivan's approach can inspire greater engagement with contemporary political issues such as neoliberalism in social psychological research.

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