

VI. A GENERAL OUTLINE OF FRUSTRATION

SAUL ROSENZWEIG

Worcester State Hospital, Worcester, Massachusetts

In bringing this session to a close I wish to integrate in some measure what has been said here with certain of the work which has been done or may in the future be done with frustration as its orientation. You will of course realize that I am speaking only in the most general terms because of time limitations.

TYPES OF FRUSTRATING SITUATIONS

If frustration is broadly defined as failure in biological adjustment, the first general question which arises in a systematic analysis of the phenomenon concerns the general classes of frustrating situations to which human beings may succumb. Three such broad classes may be distinguished—privations, deprivations, and conflicts—each of which may be further characterized as having its source without or within the individual. First, there is a type of frustrating situation in which the individual needs or wants some general object or end-state which is ordinarily supplied by the external world but which is now not to be found there—general negative exogenous frustration or *external privation*. For example, a man on a desert island is sexually in a state of tension but no woman is available to him, or he is hungry but can find no food. In the second place may be distinguished a type of frustration in which the individual suffers not because some general property is lacking in the external world but rather in himself—general negative endogenous frustration or *internal privation*. A common example in the sexual sphere would be the situation of a person who has insufficient attractiveness for the satisfaction of his mating drive. Next are two types of frustrating situations which are also negative but in the sense of a rather specific loss rather than a general lack. One such situation is characterized by the loss of some environmental object or end-state to which strong specific attachments have been formed in the past—specific negative exogenous frustration or *external deprivation*. Thus, a man is deprived by death of the woman with

whom he is in love, or the house he has lived in for many years is destroyed by fire. A fourth situation involves the loss not of anything environmental but of some specific attribute formerly possessed by the individual and inextricably interwoven with his previous habits—specific negative endogenous frustration or *internal deprivation*. For instance, Abelard is castrated by the jealous guardian of Heloise; Samson's hair is shorn and he loses his great strength. In the fifth place may be distinguished a type of frustrating situation in which it is not the absence of something in the external world but rather its unfortunate presence which tends to thwart the subject—positive exogenous frustration or *external conflict*. For instance, suffering from unsatisfied sexual cravings, a man meets an attractive woman only to find that she is the faithful wife of someone else. The presence of the marriage pact, representing social sanctions and regulations, stands in the way of satisfaction by arousing certain needs for security and integrity which conflict with the sexual needs. Sixth, and last, is a type of frustrating situation in which an obstacle is present in the individual's own personality by virtue of its organization which prevents the attainment of certain satisfactions—positive endogenous frustration or *internal conflict*. For example, a man is much attracted by a woman erotically but cannot find satisfaction because, whether with more or less consciousness, she is identified in his mind with his mother or sister and thus arouses certain needs for integrity or security which conflict with the sexual needs. In this class are found the sort of psychological conflict with which psychoanalysts are usually concerned; for instance, the so-called Oedipus Complex. It should be noted in passing that both external and internal conflict situations are here regarded as varieties of frustration, but differ from privations and deprivations in that conflict involves the frustration of one need by another need.

It will be readily seen that, making due allowance for combinations, blends and transitional varieties of these "pure cultures," the foregoing types of frustrating situations are logically exhaustive. What is more, they seem also to be exhaustive psychobiologically. How true this is may be seen from the ease with which the various kinds of human unhappiness for which the aid of the psychiatrists is or should be sought may be assigned to these categories: the destitute (external privation or deprivation), the delinquent (external conflict), the defective (internal privation or deprivation), and the disordered (internal conflict).

FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE

The second natural question in an analysis of frustration may be put as follows: Given an individual in any one of the frustrating situations just described, with what degree of tolerance is he apt to meet it? A concept like frustration tolerance has long been implicit in the thinking of abnormal psychologists and of psychiatrists, but the explicit recognition of it would seem to have considerable value. With this purpose in mind frustration tolerance might as a first approximation be defined as the capacity of the individual to withstand a given frustrating situation without distorting the so-called "objective" facts of the life situation. One must recognize that the frustration tolerance of an individual need not exist at the same level throughout his personality; in other words, areas of low or high frustration tolerance may be hypothetically posited. Such an hypothesis might even provide a working definition of the difference between the psychotic—in whom a generalized low frustration tolerance would be said to obtain; the neurotic—in whom certain circumscribed areas of low frustration tolerance (complexes) might be posited; and the normal individual—in whom a relatively high frustration tolerance would usually be found throughout the personality.

Individuals presumably differ, either constitutionally or as a result of experience, in the possession of this capacity. It would be easy to make it plausible that the educational process in childhood, especially as related to discipline, consists largely in the building up of frustration tolerance or the encouragement of its natural maturation. Frustration tolerance appears to be fostered by allowing the child to experience small amounts of frustration—amounts which he can negotiate without reacting inadequately. Such optimal doses of frustration are probably indispensable as an incentive to learning of any kind. But if, on the one hand, less than this ideal amount of frustration is experienced over a long period of the individual's early life, insufficient frustration tolerance will be developed for meeting the frustrations of later years. Such persons are said to be immature because "spoiled" or overindulged. If, on the other hand, the child is frustrated much beyond his resistance, areas of low frustration tolerance (complexes) may be created and the ground prepared for behavior disorders. The psychoanalysts have taken cognizance of some of these facts in describing a transition from the primary to the secondary functions or from the pleasure to the

reality principles. However, the concept of frustration tolerance seems preferable because it is quantitative rather than dichotomous, and has definite implications for experimental measurement. Some day we may be able to report frustration tolerance quotients as we now attempt intelligence quotients.

Some of the research problems connected with frustration tolerance have been outlined by Dr. Mowrer in his paper. Dr. Haslerud has given experimental examples of the increase of frustration tolerance in chimpanzees with age, and some of my own work¹ with children corroborates his findings.

Re-education or psychotherapy is readily interpreted as a process of building up frustration tolerance by allowing the patient, as in the psychoanalytic situation where frustrations are constantly discussed, to experience small or tolerable doses of frustration until resistance is gradually developed and the areas of low frustration tolerance disappear.² The recent experiments of Keister and Updegraff³ are examples of such re-education.

A more critical definition of the concept of frustration tolerance emerges from the answer to the third and last general question which an analysis of frustration involves—the question as to the ways in which an individual may react to frustrating situations.

TYPES OF REACTION TO FRUSTRATION

Adequate—Inadequate

In discussing frustration tolerance it has been pointed out that reactions to frustration may differ in their degree of adequacy. The higher the frustration tolerance, the greater the presumed adequacy of the reaction. It now becomes necessary to define somewhat more exactly the criteria by which adequacy is to be evaluated.

One of these criteria is social in reference. From this standpoint a response is regarded as adequate in so far as it does not misrepresent the facts of the frustrating situation as understood by the majority of those individuals who are in a position to observe

¹ Preferences in the repetition of successful and unsuccessful activities as a function of age and personality, *J. Genet. Psychol.*, 1933, 42, 423-441; The preferential repetition of successful and unsuccessful activities, *Psychol. Bull.*, 1936, 33, 797.

² See S. Rosenzweig, A dynamic interpretation of psychotherapy oriented towards research, a forthcoming publication.

³ M. Keister and R. A. Updegraff, A study of children's reactions to failure and an experimental attempt to modify them, *Child Development*, 1937, 8, 241-248.

but are not involved in the frustration. An ideal substitute for such a consensus would be some one omniscient individual who views the situation in complete detachment. A criterion of this social sort is invoked in extreme instances for deciding whether a person should be committed to a mental hospital—whether, for example, he has hallucinations or delusions.

A second criterion centers attention upon the individual's behavior as such. According to this individual criterion, reactions are regarded as adequate in so far as they are progressive rather than retrogressive in implication. Responses which tend to bind the subject to his past unduly or which interfere with reactions in later situations are less adequate than those which leave the individual free to meet new situations as they occur. Retrogressive responses in a frustrating situation make for inappropriate reactions on later occasions. Progressive behavior, on the other hand, favors the natural development of the individual in accordance with his own potentialities and with the demands of the environment as these arise.

An instance of an adequate reaction would be found in the countering of an argument against one's ideas by legitimate attempts to uphold one's views instead, say, of backing down through excessive fear of striking out inappropriately through rage. It should be clear that fear and rage are not always to be regarded as inadequate modes of response; sometimes they are well warranted by the facts of the environmental situation. While such emotion may in one sense interfere with effective adjustive response, it may in other respects, e.g., through appropriate autonomic mobilization, facilitate such behavior. Similarly it would not be an inadequate mode of response if a person who was starving suffered pangs of hunger due to stomach contractions—however much this might be a confession of physical inadequacy against environmental odds—because no inappropriate reaction would here be involved. If, on the other hand, a person suffering hunger began to blame someone in his social environment when the condition had arisen from factors over which this accused person had no control, and if this reaction were actually based upon the hungry person's low frustration tolerance—he might secretly feel it a reflection upon his capability that he had no food but might lack the ego-strength openly to accept this fact—then a truly inadequate reaction to frustration would be involved.

It hardly requires to be pointed out that from the biological

standpoint even inadequate modes of response are to be regarded as adjustive in aim—the best of which the organism is capable under the existing conditions, internal as well as external. Presumably an attempt is being made even in cases of psychologically inadequate reaction to preserve integrated functioning by keeping the so-called “ego” intact or by re-establishing equilibrium through the satisfaction of perseverating needs. When these ends cannot be achieved in a psychologically more adequate way, less adequate ones are resorted to. Similarly the body in its resistance to infectious diseases avails itself of nondisruptive protective reactions as long as this is possible but may eventually have to utilize defenses which as symptoms of the disease seriously interfere with the patient’s normal behavior.

It should be recognized that the above criteria of adequacy require further definition. An important problem for research is here involved.

Direct—Indirect

A second question regarding reactions to frustration concerns their directness. Some responses are patterned after the frustrating situation in a relatively straightforward way, whereas others have in greater or less degree the character of a substitute. Such substitutes are sometimes easy to identify, but are often highly indirect and symbolic. Factors which make for the inhibition of the direct response at the same time prepare the ground for such substitute reactions. It is understandable that many inadequate modes of response to frustration will have such an indirect character. It is not to be overlooked, however, that many adequate reactions are also substitutive.

Defensive—Perseverative

A third important characteristic of reactions to frustration is concerned with their role in the economy of the organism. In some instances the response is defensive in nature; the integrity of the so-called “ego,” the organization of the personality, is at stake and is protected. Such behavior has recently been subjected to a certain amount of experimental study.⁴ Other reactions to frustration are

⁴Cf. S. Rosenzweig, The experimental study of repression, in H. A. Murray, *et al.*, *Explorations in personality* (New York, 1938); R. R. Sears, Initiation of the repression sequence by experienced failure, *J. Exp. Psychol.*, 1938, **20**, 570-580; Experimental studies of projection: I. Attribution of traits, *J. Soc. Psychol.*, 1936, **7**, 151-163; II. Ideas of reference, *ibid.*, 1937, **8**, 389-400.

perseverative (perseverant or persistent) in character; they seem to have the function of obtaining ultimate gratification for frustrated needs in spite of the immediate impasse that may have been encountered.

Defensive reactions may, of course, be adequate or inadequate and direct or indirect. Examples of direct adequate and inadequate responses have already been given in the discussion of adequacy. An indirect adequate reaction of defense would, for instance, be involved if a person threatened by an armed burglar called upon the police for help instead of attempting to cope directly with the situation single-handed. Of much greater import, however, are the inadequate forms of indirect defense reaction. On the basis of certain observations elsewhere reported⁵ such behavior in frustrating situations may be tentatively classified as follows: (1) Extrapunitive⁶—when the individual tends to blame the external world, reacts with anger and hostility, and psychologically defends himself by what the psychoanalyst describes as the mechanism of projection. An ego which fears blame from others thus protects itself by blaming others instead. The most striking examples of this type of reaction to frustration are found among paranoid patients. (2) Intropunitive—when the individual tends to blame himself, reacts with feelings of remorse and guilt, and employs the mechanisms of defense called by the analyst displacement, isolation, and undoing. An ego which fears blaming others thus gains security by blaming itself instead. Classical examples of this type of reaction are found among obsessional and compulsive neurotics. (3) Impunitive—when the individual tends to pass over frustrating situations lightly, as if they represented unavoidable accidents for which no one was to blame. Here the motive of conciliation predominates, and the commonest mechanisms of defense are self-deception and “repression.” An ego which fears loss of love thus protects itself from alienation by refusing to blame anyone or anything, emphasizing the inevitable and the excusable instead. Examples of this type of reaction are most strikingly found among hysterical patients.

⁵ S. Rosenzweig, A test for types of reaction to frustration, *Amer. J. Ortho psychiat.*, 1935, 4, 395-403.

⁶ The terms *extrapunitive*, *intropunitive*, and *impunitive* have been used and are here used to describe inadequate defense reactions. It must not, however, be forgotten that all of these inadequate responses have their adequate counterparts. It even seems desirable to employ the above terms generically instead of preempting them for the inadequate types of response. By this usage the reaction would be described not only as extrapunitive, for example, but also as adequately or inadequately so.

Besides these defensive types of reaction to frustration there are the perseverative ones already mentioned. Such reactions aim not so much at protection of the ego as at the ultimate satisfaction of the frustrated need in spite of the immediate frustrating circumstances. While the aim of the defensive responses is to preserve the integrated organization of the personality as a whole, perseverative reactions are more concerned with the consummation of particular drives. Behavior of the latter sort may be either directly or indirectly perseverative, i.e., the striving may be in the very terms of the frustrating situation or frustrated activity, or may be only secondarily or remotely related to these. Direct perseverative reactions may be in the nature of persistent or perseverant goal-oriented behavior which has some possibility of success, in which case they are to be regarded as adequate; or they may resemble what Hamilton⁷ has called "persistent non-adjustive reactions," in which case they are clearly inadequate. Indirect perseverative reactions to frustration, on the other hand, comprise what are often characterized as substitute modes of gratification. These may also be regarded from the point of view of their adequacy, particularly from the standpoint of the progressive-retrogressive or individual criterion. At the adequate end of such a continuum stands sublimation, as understood by the psychoanalysts, and at the inadequate end regression. Other substitute gratification mechanisms would fall somewhere between these two end-points. A number of experiments done in the setting of Lewin's psychology⁸ furnish concrete data in this connection. Some of David Levy's⁹ experiments on dogs and chickens are also pertinent here.

Specific—Nonspecific

There is a fourth important distinction to be noted among responses to frustration. In addition to the *specific* defensive and perseverative reactions already described, there are certain *nonspecific* ones. Nonspecific reactions to frustration, unlike specific ones, do not have a clearly elaborated symbolic relationship to the frustrating situation in question. They are more physiologically structural than psychologically dynamic in nature. They too may

⁷G. V. Hamilton, *An introduction to objective psychopathology* (St. Louis, 1925), p. 251.

⁸K. Lewin, *A dynamic theory of personality*, trans. D. K. Adams and K. E. Zener (New York, 1935), chap. vi.

⁹D. M. Levy, Experiments on the sucking reflex and social behavior of dogs, *Amer. J. Orthopsychiat.*, 1934, 4, 203-224; On instinct-satiation: an experiment on the pecking behavior of chickens, *J. Gen. Psychol.*, 1938, 18, 327-348.

be described as defensive or perseverative, adequate or inadequate, direct or indirect. Instances of nonspecific, defensive direct reactions to frustration are perhaps found in the phenomena of fatigue, inhibition, and sleep as interpreted by Pavlov. The normal daily cycle of sleep and wakefulness may serve to illustrate the adequate types of such defensive reactions of the organism. When, as presumably occurs in neurasthenia, fatigue begins to be a substitutive reaction to frustration, the indirect and at the same time, in this instance, the inadequate modes of nonspecific response are exemplified. Nonspecific perseverative direct reactions are illustrated by the phenomena of distraction and reduced efficiency which supervene upon frustration. A failure of inhibition is probably involved here, but the criteria of adequacy and inadequacy are not yet clear. Indirect reactions of this category may be said to occur when, for example, distractions are exploited as substitute outlets for frustrations in other spheres of activity. It is possible that an instance of such surrogate behavior of the inadequate sort underlies the impulsive reaction to frustration and if so one would here find an interesting coalescence of a nonspecific perseverative reaction with a specific defensive one.

The studies just reported by Dr. Barker would appear to fall in part at least under the heading of nonspecific reactions, as would also those discussed by Dr. Curtis. The difference between their findings is obviously due to the singling out of more strictly psychological or more strictly physiological reactions for observation.

The above description of reactions to frustration should not be construed as an attempt at formalistic classification. The four characteristics discussed are obviously not dependent upon each other in any categorical way, nor are they the only aspects that might have been accorded special treatment. We are just at the beginning of experimental research in the field of frustration, and the value of our classifications and analyses must ultimately be tested by controlled observation. If the preceding outline suggests problems for such research and gives at least a semblance of integration to the complexity of the factors with which we have to deal, it will have served its purpose.

In so far as success may in the future be achieved with the aid of the frustration formulation, the co-operation of psychopathological, especially psychoanalytic, principles with experimental methods should testify to it. From such a *rapprochement* the con-

cepts of psychoanalysis ought to profit by new precision and consistency which will add to their rich connotation that greater definiteness of denotation so long desired by certain psychologists and psychiatrists. This reorientation should also benefit academic psychology by bringing within its purview problems which are of crucial importance in everyday life.

From an even broader perspective one might hope that a psychology of frustration would tend to lessen the artificial division which now separates normal from abnormal psychology, and abnormal psychology from theoretical psychiatry. Once psychopathologists begin to employ experimental methods as envisaged here and psychologists of the normal begin to deal seriously with problems other than sensation, perception, and rote learning, one common set of dynamic principles should naturally emerge.

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