FRUSTRATION AS AN EXPERIMENTAL PROBLEM*

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I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FRUSTRATION AS A PROBLEM OF RESEARCH

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All of us are probably agreed that psychology has yet to prove itself indispensable to the world whether for truthfulness or for usefulness. Its history thus far represents a dilemma: on the one hand, problems of little practical significance have been studied by highly reliable experimental methods; on the other, problems of real importance in everyday life have been approached by inexact or otherwise questionable methods. Today, however, we are going to indulge the belief that the dilemma is not insurmountable—if upon this unfortunate frustration of psychology we can bring to bear a fortunate psychology of frustration.

The first problem that inevitably confronts us in a discussion of frustration is the definition of the term. In general we must rely here as elsewhere upon operational examples, and these will be provided in the papers soon to be heard. From them it will be seen that we are dealing with a phenomenon created either through privation, deprivation, or conflict and involving states ranging all the way from mild craving or unconsummated drive to more acute interference with satisfaction by thwarting, to sudden and extremely shocking or traumatic experiences.

^{*}The following six articles constituted a symposium on Frustration as an Experimental Problem held at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Columbus, Ohio, Sept. 8, 1938. Saul Rosenzweig, Chairman. Remarks by the invited discussants S. W. Cook, J. H. Elder, J. McV. Hunt, and B. F. Skinner are not reproduced here.—Editorial Note.

But a word or two of more theoretical orientation is perhaps not out of place. From such a standpoint it seems helpful to recall the concepts of maladaptation, tension, and disequilibrium or disturbance of homeostasis. The notion of maladaptation as related to frustration points chiefly to environmental factors with which the organism is failing to cope successfully. At the other extreme is the concept of tension, a rise in which is frequently said to be associated with frustration when interest is centered upon the state of the organism. The notion of disequilibrium or disturbance of homeostasis as applied to frustration tends to stress—and correctly—the interdependence of both environmental and organismic factors.

A more adequate treatment of this question, to which it is possible merely to call attention here, would have to consider the definition of need or drive and the significance of biological defenses.

Frustration is such a universal aspect of experience that some philosophers have even woven an entire metaphysical system around it. While we may not wish to share such pessimism, we cannot but recognize the important place which frustration occupies in life. Even if we prefer to look at life optimistically-with Bergson instead of with Schopenhauer—and see in it a creative evolutionary process instead of a battle against inevitable defeat and death, it must be granted that creation itself has its travails—its frustrations. Herein perhaps lies a clue for escaping from the quandary: creation or growth and frustration or thwarting are merely two aspects of the same life process. Were there no needs to satisfy, no positive biological processes of defense, nutrition, sexual activity, and social relationship, there would obviously be nothing that could be frustrated. If interest is centered this afternoon on the darker side of the life process, the reason is simply that it is often easier to understand how a thing goes by finding out what made it stop. Our ultimate interest is, of course, in getting it to go again. Since our discussion is intended to have special implications for abnormal behavior, this emphasis is not very astonishing.

It is more astonishing that the adoption of frustration as a keystone for the experimental treatment of the problems of normal and abnormal motivation has not till recently been seriously attempted.¹ Such an intention was perhaps implicit in American

¹S. Rosenzweig, Frustration as a co-ordinating concept in experimental psychopathology, Report of National Research Council Conference on Experimental Neuroses and Allied Problems, 1937, 38-42 (privately distributed); to be published shortly in more extended form under the title "Frustration as a Basis for Experimental Psychopathology."

functional psychology—its third intention if early experimental animal psychology (with behaviorism as its upshot) and mental testing may be regarded as its first two—but this intention was never realized, at least not before our time. Again, it cannot be denied that frustration, especially of sexual impulses, appears implicitly, if not explicitly, on nearly every page of the psychoanalytic literature. But neither can it be denied that a definitive recognition of the importance of this concept and its systematic exploitation are not to be found there. Perhaps the present movement is to be interpreted as a joint fulfilment of the systematic intentions of functional psychology and the experimental possibilities of psychoanalysis.

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The advantages of taking frustration as a point of departure for a systematic approach to experimental motivation are readily apparent. Such a formulation at once entails an empirical reference that such concepts as the id or the unconscious can never have. Furthermore, it suggests an organization of such available data as are worthy of inclusion in an experimental scheme. Our objective should be to make the most of this happy combination by employing operational definitions wherever it is possible so to do without undue sacrifice of relevance; and by avoiding classifications based upon content alone, e.g., lists of instincts or needs where personal taste would have to be the final arbiter. By throwing the emphasis upon operations and relationships of operations it seems possible to put off until a more propitious moment when more is known, if not to avoid altogether, certain knotty problems that today at any rate are definitely insoluble.

Our chief purpose this afternoon is to consider frustration as an experimental problem. To this end a series of four papers will be offered by the participants of the symposium. The first of these, by O. H. Mowrer, deals with the sociological implications of frustration. Attention is here centered upon the educational aspects of the problem and upon possibilities for the experimental study of the broad social questions involved. The second paper, by George M. Haslerud, presents certain investigations of frustration in chimpanzees in which gross behavorial phenomena were observed. The third contribution, by Quin F. Curtis, discusses certain physiological accompaniments of frustration as exemplified in the so-called "experimental neuroses" (perhaps better called "experimental behavior disorders"). The final paper, by Roger G. Barker, describes work with children in which the cognitive and certain more purely psychological aspects of frustration were studied.

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