An Exploratory Study of the Meanings of Injustice and Frustration

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Abstract. A study was conducted to examine differences in the experiences of injustice and frustration. Ninety-seven high school students were administered four instruments involving word association, incident description, drawing, and completion of forced choice questionnaire items. The data indicate that the sense of injustice is more social while frustration is more personal. Ss reported that an injustice to another was personally experienced by themselves as more painful, more immoral, and more harmful to society than a frustration of another. An injustice also makes them feel more ugly, more angry, more guilty and more motivated to do something about it.

This study is an exploratory investigation of the subjective meanings of "injustice" and "frustration." We have selected these concepts for comparison because we believe they have interesting differences as well as similarities and that their comparison will shed light on each other.

Both "frustration" and "injustice" imply conflict—as defined by Deutsch (1973). The conflict, however, associated with frustration does not necessarily have a social character; a person may be thwarted by his own inability to achieve something. Moreover, an individual's frustration does not necessarily have implications for others. It is a personal experience in the sense that the frustrated person does not necessarily expect that others should or would be affected by his frustration. In contrast, the experience of injustice always seems to have a social character because the social norms (the values, rules, and procedures) defining what is just and unjust have been violated. As a consequence, the experience of injustice is more than personal; injustice is also experienced psychically as a member and representative of one's group or community. Not only is one personally affected, but so is one's group whose norms are being flouted. Others who share these norms with oneself are also implicated by the injustice. With regard to injustice, "no man is an island entire unto himself." Members of a group who accept common norms of justice also share obligations to protect these norms and to respond to their violation. Although one might anticipate that the experience of frustration is often "lonelier" than that of injustice, the experience of an injustice, which is not acknowledged and responded to by one's fellow group members, is apt to leave one feeling very alien and alienated.

Frustration and injustice are associated with similar emotions. Yet, there appear to be suggestive differences in the emotional terms associated with each concept. Consider, for example, the following pairs: rage-outrage, anger-indignation, feelings of inadequacy—feelings of worthlessness, and sadness—resentment. We assume that most readers would agree that the first emotion in each pair is more likely to be associated with frustration and the second with injustice. The emotions associated with injustice appear to have more of a "moral" aspect while those connected with frustration seem more linked with personal "efficacy."

Durkheim (1912/1933), Freud (1933/1965), and Mead (1934) have indicated that the sense of justice is based upon the internalization of social norms and requires a greater cognitive complexity than the experience of frustration. Moral development entails an advance from the "pleasure" to the "reality" principle. Lerner, Miller, and Holmes (1976) suggest that this advance is predicated upon the development of a personal and social contract
which indicates that "earning" or "deserving" is an effective way to obtain
what one wants. Injustice to others as well as to oneself, they state,
would threaten the integrity of the contract and call into question "one's
own prior commitments, efforts, unfulfilled investments, present beliefs
and allow one's immediate impulses and desires to surface."

Our discussion of frustration and injustice so far would suggest that,
although the subjective experiences of frustration and injustice would
overlap considerably, there would be characteristic differences between
them. These differences hinge on the more social-moral aspect of injustice
and the more personal-efficacy nature of frustration. Given this distinc-
tive feature, one would expect the greatest differences in subjective
reactions to emerge when the person experiencing a frustration or injustice
is someone else rather than oneself. Our discussion would also suggest
that the greater social-moral aspect of injustice would make it more obli-
gatory to do something about injustice than would be the case for frustra-
tion and that this difference would be reflected in the subjective meanings
of the two types of experience. Finally, it could be expected that the
more personal nature of frustration as compared to the relatively more
social quality of injustice will lead to a greater feeling of personal
vulnerability in connection with the experience of frustration except
when injustice is perceived to be inflicted on one by one's own group.

The present study was undertaken to investigate the subjective meanings
of frustration and injustice. Because the study was considered to be an
exploratory one, a variety of techniques were employed: word association,
incident description, questionnaire, and drawings. The techniques were
selected so as to provide data relevant to the major ideas advanced in
our preceding discussion and also to allow unanticipated findings to emerge
from the data themselves.

Method

Subjects. Subjects were 97 exurban high school students from 4 English honors
classes. They were 44 males, 53 females; 53 sophomores and 44 seniors
ranging in age from 14 to 18 years, with a mean age of 16 years.
Procedures. The study was conducted in the students’ classroom during sche-
duled class times. The two investigators (one male, one female) told the
students they were interested in learning "what people think and how they
feel about two concepts: frustration and injustice." Students were assured
there were no "right" or "wrong" answers and that what they wrote would
remain completely anonymous. Students were randomly assigned to one of the
two concepts—frustration or injustice.

Instruments. The four instruments were administered as follows:

1. Word Association. Separate forms (containing the appropriate stimulus
word for the condition) were distributed to the 53 subjects in the injustice
condition and the 44 subjects in the frustration condition. These forms
directed the subjects to "write down as many words as come to mind when
you think of the word INJUSTICE (FRUSTRATION)." Approximately three minutes
were allotted to allow all students to complete their lists.

2. Incident Description. Separate forms were distributed asking subjects
to "Please write a short description of an incident in your school in which
your sense of INJUSTICE (FRUSTRATION) was aroused. Indicate what happened,
how you felt about it, and why you think what happened was UNJUST (FRUSTRATING).
If you can't recall an incident try to imagine one, but please indicate that
the incident is imaginary."

3. Three-condition Questionnaire. Subjects in both conditions received
the same three page questionnaire. The first two pages contained the same
forced choice completion items. The third page contained 11 of the same
12 items. The first page of the questionnaire asked:

If you experience a frustration or an injustice,

a. Which would you feel as: more painful____ more depressing____
more immoral____ more harmful to society____

If you experience a frustration or an injustice,
b. Which would make you feel: more ugly, more angry, more ashamed, more alienated, more guilty, more motivated to do something about it, weaker.

Subjects were directed to indicate their response by filling in the blank with either an F (for frustration) or an I (for injustice).

The second page contained the same 12 forced choice completion items and asked the same questions about the S's feelings but in the context of someone else experiencing the frustration or injustice. Thus, the subject was asked, "If someone else experiences a frustration or an injustice, a. which would you feel as . . . . The third page of the questionnaire omitted question 2, but contained the same other 11 items and asked the same questions but in terms of how the S's "best friend" would feel in relation to the subject's experience of a frustration or an injustice. Students were explicitly encouraged to take the time required in order to complete the exercise carefully and thoughtfully.

4. Drawings. Boxes of eight crayola crayons (containing the colors brown, red, blue, black, yellow, purple, orange, and green) and pieces of 8 X 12 white construction paper were distributed to the students who were then asked to remember the concept to which they had been assigned and to "Draw something that expresses what comes to mind or how you feel when you think of the concept you've been working on--frustration or injustice." Students were told that they did not have to draw a picture but could express themselves abstractly, and were discouraged, though not prohibited from drawing the incident they had described in exercise two.

Coding. Word Associations. Frequency counts were done to ascertain the five words most frequently associated with each concept and the word which most frequently appeared first in relation to each concept.

Incident Description. Two coders blind to both condition and hypotheses rated the 97 descriptions on a number of criteria including story length; presence or absence of conflict; nature of the conflict (i.e., internal or external); presence or absence of moral evaluation; nature of the moral evaluation (implicit or explicit); type of injustice if present (injustice of values, injustice of implementation, injustice of rules, injustice of decision making, other injustice, or no injustice); the agents of injustice or frustration (self, self and others, other, others); the subject of the injustice or frustration (self, self and others, other, others); whether the subjects and agents were general or specific; and story focus. In addition, the stories were coded in relation to "outcomes," i.e., was the frustration or injustice related to outcomes the subjects portrayed as wanted, expected, needed, earned, or deserved?

Drawings. The two coders, blind to condition and hypotheses, rated the drawings on several categorical criteria including: (1) number of people present (none, one, more than one); (2) level of abstractness (concrete, symbolic, abstract); (3) size (small, medium, large) and (4) colors used. In addition, the drawings were rated on 7 bipolar adjective scales (strong-weak; dark-light; organized-disorganized; simple-complex; excited-calm; active-passive; emotional-detached). Coders were instructed to use their "personal impressions" or "gut reactions" in rating the bipolar adjective scales.

Results
Word Association. The word "anger" was associated with "frustration" by the largest percentage of subjects in the frustration condition, (47%); followed by "mad" (24%); "confused" (18%); "anxiety" (15%); and "hate" (13%). Anger was also the most frequently appearing first word, (listed first by 22% of the subjects in the frustration condition). The word "unfair" was associated with "injustice" by the largest percentage of subjects in the injustice condition (48%) followed by "wrong" (28%), "court" (26%), "crime" (25%) and "prejudice" (21%). Unfair was also the most frequently appearing first word (listed by 29% of the subjects). Subjects wrote more words in association to injustice than frustration (p < .05).
Incident Description. Conflict. Conflict was rated as present in all of the incidents whether descriptions of frustration or descriptions of injustice. Frustration stories, however, were more frequently coded as describing internal conflict (27 of the 44) while injustice stories were more frequently coded as describing external conflict (51 of the 53 stories) (p < .001).

Moral Evaluation. Moral evaluation was present in all of the injustice but less than half of the frustration stories (p < .001). In those frustration stories in which moral evaluation was present the evaluation was most often implicit rather than explicit (15 out of 20); whereas the moral evaluation in injustice stories was more often rated as explicit than implicit (40 out of 53) (p < .001).

Outcomes. Failure to receive outcomes that were wanted (p < .005), needed (p < .01), expected (p < .05) were more associated with frustration than injustice stories. Failure to receive outcomes one deserved (p < .001) or receiving outcomes one did not deserve, were more associated with injustice than frustration stories.

Agents. The perpetrator of injustice was always portrayed as "other" or "others"; never, "self" or "self and others," and was more frequently coded as "general" rather than "specific." In contrast, "self" or "self and others" were the agents in 43% of the frustration stories (p < .001) and agents were more often coded "specific" than "general" (p < .02).

Subjects. "Self" was coded as the subject of the situation in 91% of the frustration incidents; but "self" as well as "self and others" were the subject of the situation in only 52% of the injustice incidents (p < .0001).

Type of Injustice. Stories were also coded into 6 categories four of which were derived from Deutsch's (1974) categories of injustice. As one might expect over half of the frustration stories were coded as having no relation to injustice; in contrast, all of the injustice stories were coded as being related to injustice (p < .0001). Of the injustice stories, "injustice of implementation" appeared most frequently (in 34% of the stories), followed closely by "injustice of decision-making" (32%) and "injustice of values" (30%). "Injustice of values" (p < .05) and "injustice of decision making" (p < .03) were more associated with injustice than frustration stories.

Foci. The most frequent foci of injustice stories were unfair treatment by teachers (32% of the stories); unfair implementation of rules (25%), and unfair grades (15%). The most frequent foci of frustration stories were poor performance on tests (18%) and conflicts in peer relationships (16%).

Drawings. "One person" was most frequently present in drawings of frustration while "more than one person" were most frequently present in drawings of injustice (p < .001). While drawings from both conditions were more often "concrete" than "symbolic" or "abstract," drawings of injustice were rated as more "symbolic" than drawings of frustration; and drawings of frustration were rated as more "abstract" than drawings of injustice (p < .01). Neither size nor use of colors were discriminating.

Despite low intercoder reliability, drawings of frustration were rated as more disorganized (p < .002), more excited (p < .003), more active (p < .003) and more emotional (p < .01) than drawings of injustice. Strong-weak, light-dark, and simple-complex were not discriminating.

Three-Condition Questionnaire. In all conditions, (whether Condition I, you experience, you feel; Condition II, someone else experiences, you feel; or Condition III, you experience, your best friend feels), injustice is reportedly viewed as more immoral (p < .001); more harmful to society (p < .001) and making subjects feel more motivated to do something about it (p < .001). Frustration, as compared to injustice, makes the subjects feel weaker (p < .001) and is perceived as happening more often (p < .01) in all three conditions. However, only in relation to their own experiences do the subjects feel more alienated (p < .0001) by the experience of injustice than of frustration.

In addition, subjects report experiencing many more emotions in relation to "someone else's" encounters with injustice than to "someone else's" encounters with frustration. Thus, in Condition II, when someone else experiences
an injustice rather than a frustration, subjects report that they feel the injustice as more painful (p < .001), more immoral (p < .0001), and more harmful to society (p < .00001) and report that it makes them feel more ugly (p < .001), more angry (p < .001), more guilty (p < .001), and more motivated to do something about it (p < .001). However, they report feeling "weaker" in relation to another's experience of frustration and believe that others experience frustration more often than injustice. In Condition III, one's best friend is also expected to feel more negative emotions to one's experience of injustice than of frustration. Injustice elicits the widest range of negative emotions in Condition II, the next widest in Condition III, and the least wide in Condition I, where the subject is responding to his own experience of injustice. Frustration and injustice to the self are equally distressing; but injustice to others is more distressing to self than is frustration to others.

Discussion

The results of this exploratory study of the phenomenology of injustice are quite promising. The high school sophomores and seniors in our limited sample differentially characterize their experiences of frustration and injustice in a way which seems internally consistent and is congruent with the ideas advanced in our introductory discussion.

Our subjects experience injustice as more social and frustration as more personal. Injustice evokes more motivation "to do something about it" than does frustration; frustration is experienced as more weakening and disorganizing than injustice. Of particular interest is the broader range of emotions subjects say they personally experience on behalf of another, when another experiences an injustice as compared to a frustration. Thus, feeling "ugly" which subjects associate more with frustration (p < .009) when an injustice or frustration happens to themselves, shifts to injustice (p < .001) when an injustice or frustration happens to someone else.

The prime features which appear to underlie the contrasting responses of our subjects to injustice and frustration are: (1) An experienced injustice, whether to oneself or to another, involves one not only personally but also as a member of a moral community whose moral norms are being violated and it evokes an obligation to restore justice. (2) An experienced frustration (which is not viewed as unjust) makes salient the limitations in one's power to obtain what one wants or needs and, as a consequence, makes one feel weaker.

Both concepts imply conflict. The experience of injustice implies conflict between oneself and the violator of one's moral norms. Frustration implies conflict between one's desires or needs and what limits one's possibilities for obtaining what one wants. If one's possibilities for gratification are limited unjustly, the experiences of injustice and of frustration will co-occur. But the two experiences need not coincide. I may be unjustly deprived of something to which I am entitled but which I do not want; the consequence is that I experience injustice but not frustration. Or I may lose a fair competition that I desire to win and feel frustrated but not experience an injustice.

It should be apparent that not all people will distinguish between injustice and frustration as have our subjects. Our methodology prompted the subjects to highlight the distinctions between the two concepts. Moreover, it seems reasonable to suppose that the meanings of frustration and injustice are influenced by many variables which were not investigated in this exploratory study: variables which relate to the social context in which the experiences occur, the social and cultural characteristics of the subjects, their personality dispositions, and the substantive nature of the injustice or frustration. Nevertheless, it appears to us that this study has highlighted some central differences between the experiences of frustration and injustice which merit further investigation with a wider array of variables.

References


Footnotes

1This study was supported by the National Science Foundation Grants (BNS 76-16011, BNS-77-16017) and done under the direction of Morton Deutsch, the Principal Investigator.
2The method of randomization, asking students to develop codes of letters and numbers, and assigning them to condition on the basis of whether their first number was odd or even, resulted in unequal numbers.
3After two training sessions and discussion of their disagreements, independent rating led to intercoder agreement of about .75. Those items where agreement had not been reached were given to new coders, blind to condition. In this way, consensus was achieved on 95% of all items.
4This resulted in intercoder agreement averaging .55; ratings were averaged for data analysis procedures. Intercoder reliability on categorical data averaged .75. These items were given to other coders, blind to condition, and as only 3 choices existed in each category, this easily led to majority consensus on all items.
5Deutsch (1974): "The sense of injustice with regard to the distribution of 'benefits' and 'harm,' 'rewards and costs' or other things which affect individual wellbeing may be directed at: (1) the values underlying the rules governing the distribution (injustice of values); (2) the rules which are employed to represent the values (injustice of rules); (3) the ways that the rules are implemented (injustice of implementation); (4) the way decisions are made about any of the foregoing (injustice of decision-making procedures)."