Developmental Changes in the Sense of Injustice and Frustration

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Footnote

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A study was conducted to empirically investigate developmental changes in the phenomenological experience of the sense of injustice and the sense of frustration. One hundred sixty one students from three grade levels were administered instruments involving word association, incident description, and completion of a forced choice questionnaire. While for all grade levels the sense of injustice is more interpersonal and motivating as the sense of frustration is more personal and weakening, significant differences emerged among the three age groups. High school students evidenced a greater awareness of the societal implications and also report a wider range of reciprocal expectations in response to an injustice than junior high and elementary school students. High school students were more likely to report a personal experience of injustice as harmful to society, and were also more likely to report an injustice to another as more wrong and more personally angering. Reciprocally, the older students were also more likely to expect their "best friend" to experience injustices to them as both "wrong" and "harmful to society" than were their younger counterparts. In response to a personal experience of injustice, younger students were more apt to feel guilty, than angry, while older students were more likely to feel angry than guilty.
A previous study (Steil, Tuchman and Deutsch, 1978) investigated differences in the response of 97 high school students to the concepts of injustice and frustration. The sense of injustice was compared with the sense of frustration because we believed that the two had interesting similarities as well as important differences that would help to clarify the subjective meaning of each. The findings of that study highlighted the social and motivational aspects of injustice as compared to the personal and weakening aspects of frustration. Further, subjects reported a wider range of emotions in response to another's experience of injustice than to another's experience of frustration.

Changes in the sense of justice are generally viewed as age related due to the paralleling of moral development with cognitive development and opportunities for social role taking. Kohlberg (1969), Mead (1934), Piaget (1965) and Seiman (1976), among others, view achievement of a sense of reciprocity and equality, facilitated by social role taking, as a prerequisite to enabling the child to abandon his egocentric view; this achievement facilitates the child's understanding of social interdependence and the societal implications of immoral acts. Lerner, et al. (1976) also emphasize the importance of developing a sense of equality and assert that recognition of an "equivalence" between self and others is crucial for the child's developing and maintaining a "personal contract" in which earning and deserving become the basis for our notions of justice and for the equitable attainment of one's wants. For Lerner, injustice to others as well as to oneself threatens the integrity of the personal contract. For Piaget, violation of the social norms becomes a "breach of the social bond itself" (1965, p. 204). Thus, the experience of injustice is more than personal. Injustice is also experienced psychically as a member or representative of one's group or community. Others,
then, who share these norms with oneself are also implicated by the injustice.

The present investigation replicates the earlier study and in addition investigates developmental changes in the sense of injustice and the sense of frustration in students across three grade levels. As the sense of injustice is generally believed to entail greater cognitive complexity than the sense of frustration, we would expect any differences to be more related to subjects' increasingly sophisticated sense of injustice than to changes in the sense of frustration. The theoretical frameworks cited above suggest that even our youngest group of subjects (aged 10 to 12) should be able to differentiate the basic social aspects of injustice from the personal aspects of frustration. These youngest subjects, however, are clearly in a transitional stage and so we would expect them to manifest a greater interest in expiatory justice than the older students. We would also expect differences to emerge in the older student's increasing ability to take the perspective of one another and also of the social system. In particular, we would expect the older students to evidence both a greater awareness of the societal implications of injustice as well as a fuller sense of the reciprocal obligations activated by an injustice, whether to oneself or to another. This, in turn, should be reflected in a more differentiated affective component of the sense of injustice as compared to the sense of frustration.
Method

Subjects. Subjects were 161 urban private school students. They were 101 males and 60 females from three grade levels: 51 elementary school students aged 10 to 12, 55 junior high school students aged 13 to 15, and 55 high school students aged 16 to 18.

Procedures. The study was conducted in the students' classrooms during scheduled class times. The investigator told the students he was interested in learning "what people think and how they feel about two concepts: frustration and injustice." Students were assured that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers and that what they wrote would remain completely anonymous. Students were then randomly assigned to work on one of the two concepts: frustration or injustice.

Instruments. The three instruments were administered in the following order:

1. Word Association. Separate forms were distributed (containing the appropriate stimulus word for the condition) to the 81 subjects in the injustice condition and the 80 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")". 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 was more: painful, depressing, immoral, harmful to society?

b. Which would make *you* feel more: ugly, angry, ashamed, distant, guilty, motivated to do something about it, weak?

c. Which happens to you more often (frustration or injustice)?

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 subject'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 c, 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 questionnaire carefully and thoughtfully.

**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 161 descriptions on a number of criteria including: presence of conflict; nature of the conflict (intrapsychic or interpersonal); presence of a moral evaluation; nature of the moral evaluation (i.e. implicit or explicit); type of injustice if present (injustice of values, implementation, rules, decision making, other); agents and subjects of the injustice or frustration (self, self and others, other, others); whether the story was real or imaginary; the focus of the story; the nature of the outcome distributed in the story (positive or negative); the relation of the subject to the outcome (did or did not need, want, expect, deserve, or earn).
RESULTS

The data were analyzed for differences between condition (injustice, frustration), grade (elementary, junior high, high school), and sex. Data were non-continuous and were analyzed by either Pearson $x^2$ or Binomial Probability tests. There were no significant differences on any variable by sex.

INCIDENT DESCRIPTION.

Significant differences by grade emerged on the following variables: the identity of the subjects of the injustice or frustration, the attitude toward the outcome distributed in the incident, and the type of injustice portrayed in the incident.

Subjects. "Self" or "self and others" were portrayed as the subjects in 96% of the frustration descriptions but only 74% of the injustice descriptions ($p < .001$). High school and Junior high school students were significantly more likely to portray an "other" or "others" as the subject of an injustice (8/28 and 11/27 respectively) than were elementary school students (1/25) ($p = .01$).

Outcomes. Receiving outcomes that were not expected, or not receiving outcomes that were expected was more associated with frustration by senior high school students (8/27), but with injustice by elementary (1/26) and junior high school students (3/27) ($p < .05$). The following two incident descriptions may serve to illustrate this point. A high school student wrote:

"The coach of the tennis team told us we had a match on a particular day. We all got psyched for the match and we prepared for it. After talking to the Athletic Director we found that the match was called off...I was mad about this because I prepared myself for the match mentally.... This type of incident is frustrating because you don't know what to do."
In contrast, an elementary school student offered this description of injustice:

"Today we played wiffall ball (sic) and everyone said we would win. So we started the game and it looked like we were going to win but at the end we were losing and we lost and the game meant (sic) a lot to me and we are now out of wiffall ball."

These two stories provide an interesting contrast between two different responses to similar experiences of unfulfilled expectations. In the first example the high school student responds with a feeling of helplessness and frustration. The elementary school student, in contrast, responds with the feeling that an injustice has occurred. This suggests that some younger students have not yet achieved the ability to differentiate the concept of expectation from deserving as the older students have.

As in the previous study failure to receive outcomes that were wanted or receiving outcomes that were not wanted was more associated with frustration (43/81). Failure to receive outcomes that were deserved or receiving outcomes that were not deserved was more associated with injustice (65/80) (p = .001).

**Type of Injustice.** Incident descriptions were again coded into the six categories of injustice derived from Deutsch (1974). As might be expected, injustice descriptions were significantly more likely to be coded as containing some injustice (91%) than were frustration descriptions (38%) (p = .0001).

Elementary school students' descriptions of injustice experiences were more likely to be coded as containing no injustice (20%) than were junior high school students' descriptions (0%) or high school students' descriptions (7%). While this difference was not statistically significant, this may be due to the small sample size and the difference still suggests an interesting trend.

"Injustice of implementation" was present in more than half of the incident descriptions of each age group. "Injustice of values" and "injustice of rules" were significantly more likely to be portrayed in the incident descriptions of high school students (7 and 4/23 respectively) than in those of the junior
high school students (2 and 2/17 respectively) or elementary school students  
(1 and 0/25 respectively). (Table I)

TABLE I

PERCENTAGE OF TYPE OF INJUSTICE CODED AS PRESENT IN INJUSTICE DESCRIPTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Rules</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELEMENTARY</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUNIOR HIGH</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P .05

A typical story portraying the "injustice of implementation" described  
an incident in which a teacher's interpretation and application of the agreed  
upon rule or standard varied significantly from the subject's interpretation  
and thus violated his or her sense of fairness.

Incident descriptions coded as portraying an "injustice of values"  
typically dealt with the issue of equity vs. equality as the basis for the  
distribution of punishment within a group. For example, should a whole class  
be punished for the misdeeds of some of its members, or should the punishment  
only apply to the members who had "earned" it through their misbehavior.  
This theme was found with great frequency among the high school students  
incident descriptions. A second major theme of the "injustice of values"  
stories is concerned with teachers' racial prejudice resulting in unequal
treatment of minority group students. In contrast to the relative prevalence of these themes in the stories of the older students, only one elementary school student wrote an incident coded as portraying an "injustice of values".

All of the other categories in which the incident descriptions were coded essentially replicate the results of the previous study. There were no significant differences among the three age groups on the following variables. Conflict. Conflict was rated present in all but one incident. Injustice stories, however, more frequently described interpersonal conflict (74/79) than did frustration stories (43/80) (p .0001).

Moral Evaluation. Moral evaluation was present in almost all Injustice stories (78/80) but less than half the frustration stories (35/81). In addition, the moral evaluation contained in injustice stories was more often explicitly stated than implied (51/78). In contrast the moral evaluation contained in frustration stories was more often implied than explicitly stated (28/35) (p .0001).

Agents. The perpetrator on injustice was always portrayed as an "other" or "others", never as "self" or "self and others". In contrast, "self or self and others" were the agents in 30% of the frustration stories. (p .0001).

Real or Imaginary. There were no differences either by grade or by condition in whether subjects chose to portray a real or imaginary incident in which they experienced a sense of injustice or frustration.

Foci. The most frequent foci of injustice stories were "unfair treatment by teachers" (38%), "poor peer relations" (16%), and "unfair implementation of rules" (14%). The most frequent foci of frustration stories were "poor peer relations" (21%), "unfair treatment by teachers" (17%), and "poor performance on a test" (16%) (p .0001).
THREE CONDITION QUESTIONNAIRE.

For all age groups 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 was more frequently seen as immoral or wrong (p .001), harmful to society (p .001) and motivating (p .001). Frustration, in contrast, was more frequently reported as making the subjects feel depressed (p .001), ugly (p .001) and weak (p .001), and was also reported as happening more frequently (p .001).

Consistent with the findings of the earlier study, subjects reported experiencing many more emotions on behalf of another's encounters with injustice than with frustration. Thus, subjects more frequently associated the responses painful (p .01), wrong or immoral (p .001) and harmful to society (p .001) with an injustice to another rather than to another's frustration. They also more frequently associated anger (p .001) and motivation to do something (p .01) with another's experience of injustice rather than frustration.

Reciprocally, in Condition III, subjects more frequently expected their best friend to experience an injustice to the subject as wrong or immoral (p .01) harmful to society (p .001) and consequently to feel angry (p .01) and motivated to do something about it (p .001) than they would in response to the subject's experience of frustration.

Significant differences were found in the response to injustice and frustration among the three age groups in all three conditions. Personal experiences of injustice were more frequently reported as painful than were experiences of frustration by high school students (33/55). In contrast, elementary school students more frequently reported a personal experience of frustration as painful than injustice (38/51) (p .01). Guilt was more frequently associated with experiences of injustice than frustration by
elementary school students (37/51). In contrast, guilt was associated more with frustration than injustice by high school students (34/54) (p .001).

All other developmental differences are of degree rather than direction. Thus one's own experience of injustice is more frequently seen as harmful to society (p .15) and angering (p .05) by high school students than by elementary school students. High school students also more frequently reported an injustice to another as wrong or immoral (p .01) and as making them feel angry (p .001) than did elementary school students. Furthermore, high school students more frequently expected their best friends to feel that their experience of injustice is wrong or immoral (p .001), and harmful to society (p .01) than did elementary school students. (Table II ABOUT HERE)

WORD ASSOCIATIONS.

Consistent with the results of the previous study, the word "anger" was both the most frequent as well as the most frequent first association to "frustration" among all three age groups: high school students (35% and 35% respectively), junior high school students (55% and 25% respectively) and elementary school students (40% and 23% respectively).

Also consistent with the results of the previous study, the word "unfair" was both the most frequent as well as the most frequent first association to "injustice" for both the high school students (56% and 18% respectively) and the junior high school students (64% and 18%). Elementary school students most frequent association to injustice was "court" (32%); their most frequent first association was "crime" (12%).
DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the concepts of injustice and frustration are clearly differentiated in children by the time they reach the upper elementary grades. Even the youngest group of subjects, aged 10 to 12, were able to distinguish the basic social and evaluative aspects of injustice from the more personal aspects of frustration. They more frequently described an experience of injustice as interpersonal, wrong, harmful to society and motivating than they did an experience of frustration. In contrast, and experience of frustration was more frequently described as making subjects feel depressed, weak, ugly and happening more often. These findings essentially replicate those of the previous study. In light of the clear differences between the two samples (exurban, lower middle class public school students as compared to urban, upper middle class, selective private school students) this replication serves to strengthen the validity of the earlier findings. One of the important findings of this study is the wide range of affective responses associated with an injustice across all three age groups. Even the youngest group of subjects more frequently reported an injustice to another as more painful, more angering and more motivating than they did a frustration experienced by another. They also expect another to respond to their own experience of an injustice as angering and motivating. However, these affective responses to injustice occur significantly more frequently among high school students than they do among elementary school students, suggesting that as the subject's role and perspective taking skills develop and his ability to empathize increases, so does his ability to respond to another's experience of injustice, and finally so does his expectation that another will respond in a similar fashion to his own experience of injustice.

One of the most striking differences across the age groups occurs in the subject's affective responses to personal experiences of injustice. High
school subjects more frequently report an experience of injustice as painful and an experience of frustration as making them feel guilty. These findings are reversed in the elementary school students. Thus the younger subjects report a frustration as painful and an experience of injustice as making them feel guilty. In addition elementary school students also less frequently associate anger with injustice than do high school students. While it is possible that the youngest students are not yet able to differentiate among various "bad" feelings or their verbal labels, it seems more likely that their responses reflect a less psychologically differentiated position from an agent of injustice especially when the agent is seen as an authority figure. Consequently, they may internalize a "bad" self-concept even when in the role of victim. This lack of psychological differentiation may prevent the younger subjects from fully attributing the responsibility for an injustice to its agent, and may lead them instead to direct their anger internally with the result of greater feelings of guilt. The experience of frustration for the older students, on the other hand, may arise from their failure to meet internal standards or expectations. Feeling more responsible for this failure, they direct their anger internally, feel more guilty, and consequently weaker.

Interestingly, while elementary school students are as likely as the older students to portray another as a perpetrator of injustice, the findings indicate that the older students are more likely to portray others as victims of an injustice.

While one might argue that the older students are less often the victims of an injustice there is no evidence in the study to support such an argument. Although subjects were asked to provide a description of a real or imaginary incident in which their sense of injustice was aroused, there
were no significant differences between the number of imaginary descriptions, of injustice by elementary and high school subjects. Another possible explanation of this finding is that the increasing awareness of the social approbation associated with the acknowledgment of one's having been victimized (Lerner, 1978) causes a greater reluctance on the part of the older students to portray themselves as victims of an injustice. A third interpretation more consistent with both the theoretical literature and other findings in this study suggests that as the subject's role taking and empathic abilities develop, they undergo a shift from an egocentric, personal view of injustice to a view which incorporates a broader moral community which acknowledges the likelihood that others, too, can be the victims of injustice. While consonant with the literature on moral development, this is still an interesting finding which clearly merits further investigation.
|-------------------|****|**|**|**|**|**|**|**|**|**|**|**|**|**|
| High School       | 99 | 66 | 61 | 93 | 96 | 96 | 96 | 37 | 99 | 70 | 95 |
| Junior High       | 98 | 96 | 61 | 96 | 96 | 96 | 98 | 71 | 99 | 89 | 95 |
| Elementary        | 76 | 98 | 65 | 96 | 96 | 96 | 53 | 82 | 83 | 73 | 99 |

Group in Anxiety: Important, Grief, Harmful, Partly, Anxiety, Important, Grief, Harmful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Best Parent</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Best Parent</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Influence of Subject of</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Best Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>I</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table II*

**Per centage of Subjects Associating Various Responses with Influence Rather than Puzzlement**

**Table II**

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*Significance of level of education:*
NOTES

1. This imbalance reflects the male/female ratio in the school's student population.
References


