II. SOME RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS OF THE FRUSTRATION CONCEPT AS RELATED TO SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS

O. H. MOWRER*
Yale University

The common conception of the phenomenon of frustration is heavily charged with negative connotations. By definition, frustration is a state of affairs against which the affected individual's energies are more or less strongly mobilized, which he seeks to eliminate or, if possible, entirely to avoid. If happiness may fairly be said to represent the ultimate goal of all human endeavor, frustration is its antithesis.

One step removed from this individualistic, subjective evaluation of frustration—but no less negative—is what may be termed the clinical perspective. Modern researches into the etiology and meaning of the psychoneuroses, on the one hand, and delinquency and criminality, on the other, have revealed relatively severe and persistent frustration as an unvarying antecedent;[1] successful therapy in both fields accordingly presupposes the elimination of this underlying factor. In the mind of the clinician, frustration thus looms large, a condition to be alleviated, forestalled, opposed.

But the fact that fire can consume and destroy does not lessen its capacity to create and conserve. Likewise, the fact that frustration, in even mild degree, is always objectionable from the narrow, individualistic point of view and when more severe may lead to some of the most painful and devastating suffering of which man is capable does not necessarily justify the conclusion that it is an unmitigated evil. In two very important respects, frustration functions

* Although no one but myself can be held responsible for the specific contents of this paper, I must acknowledge the profound degree in which my views in this connection have been shaped by my colleagues in the Institute of Human Relations. For a fuller account of many of the concepts which are here expressed or implied, I refer the reader to a forthcoming joint publication: *The frustration-aggression hypothesis* (New Haven, 1939).

[1] Cf. K. Horney, *The neurotic personality of our time* (New York, 1937); and W. Healy and A. Bronner, *New light on delinquency* (New Haven, 1936).

in a most useful, constructive manner; if it is here an evil, it is indeed a very necessary one.

When human beings come into the world they are not equipped with the repertoire of responses which their particular culture will demand of them. Nor are they at first capable of acquiring these responses. For a time, reflexive and the most easily learned ways of gratifying their basic needs are tolerated, even encouraged. But this period of indulgence is short. As the child's physical and mental capacities enlarge, the adults in his environment begin to manifest dissatisfaction with his infantile ways. Early modes of response which perhaps brought the most profound satisfactions to the child himself but which taxed the patience and energies of others now have to be abandoned and new, more arduous ways acquired. Each new level of adjustment is achieved only to be in turn abandoned as the child is pushed on by increasingly complex demands. From the point of view of the highest evolution of the individual and the welfare of the group this is an imperative process. But we blind ourselves to facts of the greatest importance if we assume that there is anything desirable about it from the standpoint of the child's own inclinations and wishes.[2]

The view that the mental and social development of the individual child comes about more or less automatically, due to the unfolding or so-called maturing of innately given tendencies, obscures the fundamentally dynamic character of this process and provides no basis for the understanding of the numerous aberrations which may beset the growth of personality or later threaten its integrity. More fruitful is the view that this development is always achieved under pressure, pressure constituted of innumerable deprivations, thwartings, and penalties which may be gross or subtle but without which education does not go forward. Although the imposition of frustration is no guarantee that education will result, it seems to be an elemental fact that education cannot be achieved without it.

Although acutely aware of the dire consequences to which frustration sometimes leads, Sigmund Freud has nevertheless repeatedly emphasized the importance of frustration in personality development. In such random remarks as the following, Freud has made it clear that he fully appreciates the necessity for blocking old modes of response if new ones are to be superimposed. "Anyone," he

[2] For a discussion of some of the implications of the child's reaction to this process, see O. H. Mowrer and W. M. Mowrer, Enuresis—A method for its study and treatment, *Amer. J. of Orthopsychiat.*, 1938, **8**, 436-459.

says, "who knows anything of the mental life of human beings is aware that hardly anything is more difficult for them than to give up a pleasure they have once tasted."[3] "It may be universally observed that man never willingly abandons a libido-position [i.e., an habitual mode of gratification], not even when a substitute is already beckoning to him."[4] "'Spoiling' young children has the undesirable result that . . . [it] encourages persistence in that childhood state of which both motor and psychic helplessness is characteristic."[5] And in yet another place Freud remarks that "The power which has enforced this development upon mankind, and still today maintains its pressure in the same course, is . . . the frustration exacted by reality. . . . Neurotics are those . . . children upon whom this severity has had evil effects, but that risk is inevitable in any education."[6]

Capable of leading either to highly desirable or to highly undesirable results, frustration is thus a force to be reckoned with; and it stands as one of the important current problems of the behavioral sciences to ascertain and state the conditions and principles which determine which of these two opposed types of consequences will occur. On the basis of careful clinical studies, it is already known that, by and large, frustration which leads to *habit progression,* i.e., to the acquisition of a new mode of adjustment, is not likely to be pathogenic and that frustration which leads to *habit regression,* i.e., to a return to a previously abandoned mode of adjustment, *is* likely to be pathogenic, although this is not necessarily the case.[7] With this general observation as a starting-point, the problem as to whether frustration will result in favorable or unfavorable consequences can be broken down into the following list of questions which, although variously formulated, seem to be foremost in the minds of research workers and writers in this field today.

1. How does the particular nature of the frustration which causes an established mode of response to be abandoned affect the probability of regression to it when a subsequently acquired, superimposed response is in turn frustrated?

2. How does the strength of an abandoned habit (i.e., the degree

[3] S. Freud, The poet and day-dreaming, *Collected papers* (London, 1934), IV, 175.
[4] S. Freud, Mourning and melancholia, *Collected papers* (London, 1934), IV, 154.
[5] S. Freud, *New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis* (New York, 1933), p. 151.
[6] S. Freud, *A general introduction to psycho-analysis* (New York, 1920), p. 310.
[7] Cf. F. W. Wells, Social maladjustments: adaptive regression (Chap. 18), in Murchison's *Handbook of social psychology* (Worcester, 1935), pp. 845-915.

of its "fixation") affect the probability of subsequent regression to it?

3. What are the factors which determine when regression will be pathogenic and when it will not?

4. Does the particular nature of the frustration encountered by a given response play any role in determining whether habit progression or habit regression will follow?

5. How does the strength of a habit affect its capacity to withstand frustration?

6. What determines whether frustration will be followed by habit progression or regression or simply by aggression?

7. Do progressive, regressive, and aggressive reaction tendencies become generalized; e.g., does the fact that regression has occurred in one situation increase its probability of occurring in other situations?

8. How do age, sex, constitutional factors, and species differences affect the individual organism's reaction to frustration?

9. How do the individual's prior experiences with the person or object perceived as the source of a given frustration affect that individual's reactions to the frustration?

10. How do the strength and other characteristics of the drive underlying a given pattern of behavior which is frustrated affect the resulting reactions to the frustration?

The answers to the foregoing queries, when they are obtained, will be of the utmost importance to pedagogy and mental hygiene. The central problem in these fields today is how can children be educated for modern life, adequately and efficiently, yet with the minimum of danger to the present as well as future integrity of their personalities. Much depends upon the ability and willingness of scientific students of behavior to solve this challenging problem; and the field is so broad and the need for sound information so urgent that it is scarcely conceivable that too much time or thought can be devoted to it.

Our considerations thus far have dealt only with the first way in which frustration plays a useful, necessary role in the lives of human beings; our discussion has centered upon the frustration which is imposed with a view to bringing about the higher evolution and development of the individual. In its second major role, frustration is somewhat more difficult to justify from the individual's point of view but is nonetheless essential from the broad social standpoint. I refer to those more or less permanent renun-

ciations which are demanded of all members of a group as the price they must pay for the gains of social living. These are the thou-shalt-nots which are essential or are believed to be essential to the preservation of group harmony and stability, notable among which are taboos against manifestations of in-group hostility and aggression, against unrestrained sexuality, and against violations of individual or group rights of possession and use.[8] Freud has repeatedly shown that these "cultural privations," as he has called them, are endured by human beings only with more or less strain, suffering, and protest. In his aptly titled book, *Civilization and Its Discontents,* this writer has formulated the problem as follows: "Human life in communities only becomes possible when a number of men unite together in strength superior to any individual and remain united against all single individuals. . . . This substitution of the power of a united number for the power of a single man is the decisive step towards civilization. The essence of it lies in the circumstance that the members of the community have restricted their possibilities of gratification, whereas the individual recognized no such restrictions."[9]

Elsewhere Freud says: "Now what we have recognized as true of the sexual instincts holds to the same extent, and perhaps to an even greater extent, for the other instincts, for those of aggression. It is they above all that make communal existence difficult, and threaten its permanence. The limitation of aggression is the first and perhaps the hardest sacrifice which society demands from each individual."[10]

Unlike the frustrations imposed for purely pedagogical purposes, which are likely to be relatively temporary and passing, the frustrations which are imposed for the purpose of preserving group solidity are usually persistent.[11] They remain as a perpetual source of

[8] It will be observed that the two forms of human frustration here discussed correspond to the two major aspects of culture, viz., the transmission from generation to generation of useful techniques and skills and the perpetuation and enforcement of regulations and codes governing social conduct.

[9] S. Freud, *Civilization and its discontents* (London, 1930), p. 59.

[10] Cf. S. Freud, *New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis* (New York, 1933), p. 151.

[11] Sometimes, of course, the pedagogical and the regulatory functions of frustration merge, as in the case of the sexual restrictions placed upon adolescents in our culture. On the assumption that marriage in such youthful individuals is socially inexpedient, mature expressions of their sexual impulses is forbidden, with the result that the underlying energies tend to become sublimated and rendered serviceable not only in educational pursuits but in art, science, literature and other creative enterprises. The distinction between the two types of frustration suggested above is nevertheless valid and useful.

human discontent and motivate the never-ending struggle between the individual and society, the enduring antagonism between the one and the many.

Out of this setting emerge a host of problems calling for the most earnest, painstaking scientific attention. A few of these problems are listed below.

1. What are the limits of renunciation which the human organism can tolerate without becoming functionally incapacitated in some way?

2. Which drives and impulses can be denied gratification with relative safety and which ones cannot?

3. Where does socially essential frustration end and human exploitation begin?

4. Do all forms of leadership and government imply some degree of exploitation as well as essential frustration?

5. How does the existence of classes within a society affect the amount of renunciation demanded of the average individual?

6. How is the stability of a society related to the margin of difference between the gains resulting from participation in the group and the amount of frustration which has to be endured?

7. How does an individual's level of aspiration or expectation affect the amount of frustration experienced as a consequence of a given degree of privation or failure?

8. How can the aggressive reactions engendered by those frustrations which are socially essential be best managed and diverted into socially constructive, individually harmless channels?

9. What is the best means of assuring acceptance of socially essential frustrations yet permitting stout-hearted opposition to socially unessential frustrations?

10. To what extent can more direct expression of aggression between individuals within a society be safely tolerated than is now considered admissible in our culture?

11. Can the incidence of criminality, demoralization, and mental breakdown within a culture be controlled by scientific planning of the culture?[12]

12. How do competitive as opposed to co-operative cultures[13] affect the amount of frustration experienced by the constituent individuals and the nature of their reactions thereto?

[12] Cf. J. Dollard, Mental hygiene and a "scientific culture," *Int. J. Ethics*, 1935, **45**, 431-439.

[13] Cf. M. A. May and L. W. Doob, Competition and cooperation, *Social Science Research Council Bulletin*, 1937, No. 25, pp. 191.

There are, of course, other major sources of human frustration besides the two which have been selected as the basis for the foregoing discussion. Man must still bow to certain natural catastrophies, to the necessity to labor in order to live, and to the dissolution of his body by disease and death. There is, however, apparently no necessary reason why these latter sources of frustration should exist, and they may one day be largely eliminated; but the frustrations incident to education and to social regulation must remain. Fortunately, they are of man's own making and, when sufficiently understood, should be capable of being controlled in such a way as to have only the effects which are desired and none, or at least fewer, of the devastating consequences to which they now all too often lead.