COMMUNICATIONS

ON ARTICLES

Reply to Crosby
(Vol. 73, March 1979, pp. 103–12)

Editor's Note: The following reply was not received in time to be published with Crosby's article. In accordance with Review policy, it was scheduled for publication in the next issue with available space. Faye Crosby responds. James Davies was also invited to comment on this exchange.

TO THE EDITOR:

A recent article in the Review by Faye Crosby (1979) has taken issue with our article (1977), "The J-Curve Theory and the Black Urban Riots: An Empirical Test of Progressive Relative Deprivation Theory." Crosby raises two primary and then several minor objections. Her primary objections are: (1) we fail to define relative deprivation and in so doing misrepresent relative deprivation theory; and (2) we employ inadequate measures of what she calls "felt deprivation."

We welcome Crosby's interest in our research and the opportunity to respond. We shall deal with her criticisms in the order she has established, looking at the primary criticisms first and then at the minor criticisms.

Relative Deprivation: A Theory in Search of a Definition

We find Crosby's concern with definition rather strange; indeed, it becomes even more incomprehensible in the light of the complete corpus of Crosby's own work (1976, 1979; Cook et al., 1977). Her criticism of our work implies that there is an agreed-upon definition of relative deprivation discernible from the literature, that it is empirically applicable to the study of collective violence, and that we sorely erred in not using it. As she and her colleagues (Cook et al., 1977, p. 308) have rather explicitly noted, "Examination of the past literature reveals no single definition common to the major theorists. Indeed definitions remained so loose that it is currently unclear as to whether relative deprivation is to be considered a hypothetical construct or an intervening variable."

Frankly, we are compelled to confess that we do not know either.

Undoubtedly Crosby felt we should have resolved this elusive problem before moving ahead with our research. Aside from the fact that more agile minds have been unsuccessful in this pursuit, we are compelled to note that it was not what we set out to do. In fact, it was not even appropriate for us to have attempted it. Our concern was to test Davies' (1962, 1969) conceptualization of relative deprivation as he applied it to the black urban riots. To have used another definition would hardly prove commensurate with the requirements of validation.

Having faulted us for not engaging in what appears, from a reading of two decades of research, to have been a rather fruitless venture, Crosby further alleges that we never tested relative deprivation theory because Davies' theory is not a form of relative deprivation. It is discernible from this assertion that although no one presumes to agree what relative deprivation theory is, some know what it is not. Crosby thus alleges that whether the J-Curve is an illustration of relative deprivation, in its progressive form, is "a matter of some debate" (Crosby, 1979, p. 6).

Although Crosby does acknowledge that Gurr (1970) clearly sees the J-Curve as a form of relative deprivation, it is alleged that other sources, namely, Geschwender (1964) and Cook et al. (1977) see the matter in other terms.

A careful examination of Geschwender's (1964) somewhat questionable application of "objective" data to five hypotheses concerning what he calls "the Negro revolt" reveals quite a different story. The question of whether Davies' theory was or was not an example of relative deprivation did not concern Geschwender, for he was concerned only with incorporating under a common rubric those hypotheses he was unable to reject. Davies' theory was rejected in Geschwender's analysis. Consequently, he did not concern himself with the question of where Davies' theory fit.

As curious as the inapplicable citation of Geschwender's work is, it is exceeded by Crosby's citation of her co-authored work (Cook et al., 1977), for there is no mention of Davies, neither in the article nor in the references. Consequently, one is compelled to conclude that Davies' work is controversial simply because Crosby alone has alleged that it is. And the reason for this excorium of Davies from relative deprivation theory becomes apparent
when we closely examine another of Crosby's works (1976).

The thrust of Crosby's work has been to establish a precise conceptual definition of relative deprivation. Such attempts at conceptual clarification are laudable. However, what Crosby fails to appreciate is that concepts like language mean what the users have come to make them mean through usage. Science is to no small extent what scientists do, and concepts derive meaning from their actual formulation and measurement as part of the research process. Crosby's work, until very recently, has had no empirical basis, and it comes as a myopic intrusion, ignoring the ongoing research process.

Crosby parts company with Davies for two reasons: (1) he did not posit that individuals must "feel" entitled to possess the item of which they have been deprived; (2) Davies did not deal with the issue of feasibility, i.e., did the individual feel the attainment of the desired commodity was feasible? (It will be noted that it is the absence of an adequate measure of felt deprivation which caused Crosby to take issue with our work, and we will address this concern below in some detail.)

These issues may be important to Crosby but they were obviously not important to Davies. As we were dealing with Davies' conceptualization of relative deprivation and not hers, the issues did not interest us. Crosby may feel that the avoidance of these issues should deprive Davies of his recognition as a relative deprivation theorist and similarly deprive us of any claim to having tested relative deprivation theory which caused Crosby to take issue with our work, and we will address this concern below in some detail.

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Equally irrelevant is Crosby's criticism that we did not properly test Davis' (1959), Runciman's (1966) and most of course her own theories of relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976). In fact, why restrict us to these? Should we have tested every version of relative deprivation theory? Indeed, we are somewhat dismayed that Crosby should require the testing she proposes. In a recent paper (Crosby and Bernstein, 1978), as far as we know, her only effort to subject her attempts at conceptual clarification to empirical verification, her work received only partial confirmation and Runciman's work was disconfirmed. On the other hand, Gurr's (1970) model, which she says we tested, was confirmed.

We are thus accused of not incorporating into our analysis relative deprivation models which were irrelevant to our concerns, which were, until very recently, only conceptual formulations without empirical verification, and which, upon being subjected to empirical testing, have been generally found to be without much substance. This is hardly a sin of omission worthy of intellectual concern.

The crux of Crosby's quarrel with us is really that her understanding of relative deprivation differs from ours and that disconfirming Davies does not disconfirm relative deprivation theory. Her quarrel about the understanding of relative deprivation theory only brings into focus what everyone working in the area sooner or later recognizes, namely, that after at least two decades of researching, conceptualizing and theorizing, social scientists have not reached a commonly agreed-upon theory of relative deprivation or even a consensus as to what the term actually means.

Despite her attempts at resolving this issue, Crosby in her own way has contributed to the confusion. She has set standards without due regard for the ongoing empirical research, or for the realities of data which of necessity must be generated outside the laboratory setting. She has abrogated to herself the role of final arbiter of the dispute, proclaiming that relative deprivation theory is what she says it is, and she has done so while failing to acknowledge the fact that even her empirical research belies her own conceptualization.

Her quarrel is based on our not having set out to do what she has done, or, for that matter, not having seen what she had done as remotely relevant to our work. Our concern was not to fashion a new or even more precise conceptualization of relative deprivation theory but to test its application by Davies to the black urban riots of the 1960s. We were only interested in the overall conceptual problems of relative deprivation theory (with one exception which we shall note below) as they related to this specific case. It is possible when taking our language out of context and removing it from the overall focus of our concern to suggest a more general inquiry into relative deprivation theory. But we do not think this is a fair assessment of our work.

The one area where we did look at a general aspect of relative deprivation theory was in the relationship between current need achievement and future expectations. We did say that the relationship was virtually axiomatic to "all" forms of relative deprivation theory. This was too strong a statement.

What we should have said is that the relationship is important for many forms of relative deprivation theory, especially those which have been applied to civil violence.
Although we are grateful to Crosby for having pointed out this overstatement, we feel that she has confused the issue, having created an even less appropriate overstatement in the opposite direction. As Crosby notes (1979, p. 12), "In plain and simple terms, relative deprivation theory does not (emphasis hers) assume a correspondence between present conditions and future expectations." Crosby is wrong! She has failed to understand that the application of relative deprivation theory to collective violence has of necessity concentrated on a dynamic process. As Gurr (1970, p. 46) notes in describing this dynamic process of relative deprivation, "Dynamic analysis requires conceptual tools that take account patterns of change in value capabilities over time." In such analyses, future expectations have been either explicitly or implicitly seen as a result of current need fulfillment (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970, p. 74). In fact, Fierabend et al. (1969) go so far as to explicate graphically this very assumption. As we noted (Miller et al., 1977, p. 977, n. 25), Gurr thinks this assumption is so fundamental to the application of relative deprivation theory to the study of collective violence that he and Raymond Duvall undertook research to make the relationship even more precise. Crosby's interpretation of relative deprivation may not assume a correspondence between present conditions and future expectations, but this is hardly the basis for alleging that relative deprivation theory does not make such an assumption.

The Issue of Felt Deprivation

The second of Crosby's major objections is directed against what she calls our inadequate assessment of "felt" deprivation. It will be recalled that it was this failure that she noted in her assessment of Davies, and one which caused her to excise him from the field of relative deprivation theorists. We happily followed Davies' lead in this matter, for it is, after all, his theory that we were testing. We are unable to ascertain what is gained by Crosby's insistence on defining relative deprivation as an emotion roughly synonymous with a type of anger, dissatisfaction, resentment or grievance. This hardly contributes to the explicit and succinct definition of relative deprivation for which Crosby continues to call. The issue of "felt" deprivation of course is not unrelated to the issue of how one measures relative deprivation. If relative deprivation is described as a cognition (as we do, following Davies) it will tend to be assessed through perceptual measures of achievements, expectations and gratifications. On the other hand, if one conceives of relative deprivation as Crosby does—as an emotion—then it will be measured through feelings of anger or resentment. But from Davies' perspective, and incidentally Gurr's, these emotions are clearly consequences and not causes of relative deprivation.

This disagreement leads to Crosby's objection to our measures, which she describes as "clear indicators of one of the hypothesized preconditions of felt deprivation" (1979, p. 17). What she apparently is unable to comprehend is that neither we nor Davies was concerned with whether blacks "felt" deprived, resentful, or frustrated. After all, people can feel deprived, resentful, or frustrated for a variety of reasons. Our concern was to assess whether or not the black population experienced, over a number of years, a pattern of relative deprivation illustrative of the J-Curve. Our three perceptual items measured fundamental components of relative deprivation theory—expectations, perceived gratifications and perceived attainments—as a means of assessing the J-Curve pattern. Their ability to measure felt deprivation was completely irrelevant to our concerns, as they were irrelevant to Davies' concerns.

Rejoinder to Crosby's Small Critique

The best that can be said of Crosby's small critique (1979, pp. 109-10) is that it couples casual reading with serious misunderstanding; much of the latter would have been eliminated had she paid more attention to our work. Her questions about the sampling procedure are illustrative. We plainly noted that our sample came from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center election studies. That rather simple knowledge should have answered Crosby's questions about design, comparability of sample size and grouping by region.

While Crosby's attempts at theoretical criticism are maladroit, her attempts at methodological criticism show a naivete about even rudimentary principles of data analysis. Thus her assertion that we should have aggregated our data rather than Davies' data in order to compare the differences between individual and aggregate data is astounding. Davies' (1969) aggregate data came from the U.S. census; consequently, they were far and away superior to any aggregation of sample data. To have tested the aggregate characteristics from our
sample data would have obviously been a less accurate, less meaningful and less appropriate test. Indeed, if Crosby were serious about such a test, she should have performed it. As Bross (1960) has noted, the appropriate role of a critic is not simply to cast assertions but empirically to test the validity of counter-hypotheses. Obviously, Crosby preferred not to do this.

This erroneous methodological assertion is followed by another. Crosby conducts a heterogeneity-of-variance test to determine if the pattern of our curve is other than would be expected by chance. The nature and shape of a curve cannot be tested by an analysis of the statistical significance of the individual points of the curve. This is a common methodological error but its frequency of occurrence does not make it correct. We take little comfort in Crosby's observation that our work received some modest degree of confirmation by this inappropriate procedure.

Some Additional Confirmation of Our Findings

We find nothing in Crosby's work to cause us to reconsider our substantive findings or our conclusions. The progressive form of relative deprivation theory does not explain the urban riots of the 1960s. Our data do suggest that the ambiguity and uncertainty that blacks perceive about their current and future financial well-being may have created the conditions for the riots.

To test further the comparative ability of these theories to explain the black urban riots, we conducted some additional testing. We view these tests as supplementary to the ones presented in our research. They are less direct and look at a static rather than a dynamic process. Consequently, they are less powerful, but their value resides in the additional confirmation that they provide.

We took “hostility toward whites” as a dependent variable and looked at seven composite explanatory variables. The data were derived from the 1968 Michigan Survey Research Center Election Study. The dependent variable was the SRC feeling thermometer (degree of feeling toward whites). The independent variables consisted of social uncertainty; personal uncertainty; political cynicism; personal political efficacy; system unresponsiveness; status uncertainty; government trust; and relative deprivation. The relative deprivation index consisted of a composite of three other composite variables. These consisted of: (1) individual relative deprivation, a measure that scored relative deprivation when an individual indicated that he anticipated the future to be worse than the present; (2) an individual's present relative deprivation compared to that of blacks as a group, a measure which assesses the respondent's comparative perceptions of these two phenomena; and (3) expectations of individual future deprivation relative to the future status of blacks as a group. A complete description of all the measurements and tests for item intercorrelation can be found in Bolce (1976, pp. 180–83).

It should be noted that Crosby (1979, pp. 18–19), after some misinterpretation of Davies, suggested a measure of Davies' operationalization that would incorporate two perceptions: (1) respondents who see the current year as better than the year before and (2) those who expect a deterioration of conditions in the future. The operationalization of relative deprivation described above incorporates the notions suggested by Crosby as well as group and individual frames of reference.

These indices were placed in a stepwise regression with hostility toward whites as the dependent variable. The data from this procedure, shown in Table 1, are presented in rank order, in terms of their ability to explain variance in the dependent variable. Not only is relative deprivation the weakest explanatory variable but also its contribution is negative. Personal uncertainty was found to explain more variance than any other variable.

These data are consistent with our earlier findings which illustrated that relative deprivation was not an explanation of the black urban riots. We stand by those results.

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University of Cincinnati

LOUIS H. BOLCE
Fordham University, Lincoln Center

References


Table 1. Coefficients for Stepwise Regression with Hostility towards Whites as Dependent Variable, Northern Black Sample, 1968

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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Multiple R</th>
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<th>RSQ Change</th>
<th>Simple R</th>
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<td>Personal Uncertainty</td>
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<td>.052</td>
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<td>.342</td>
<td>.193</td>
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<td>.011</td>
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<td>.113</td>
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<td>.001</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.161</td>
<td>.080</td>
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<td>.001</td>
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<td>-.086</td>
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Rejoinder

TO THE EDITOR:

Thank you for the invitation to respond to the communication by Miller and Bolce. I shall divide the reply into three sections: (1) restatement of my general position, (2) examination of a series of specific issues, and (3) musings.

General Issues

Judging from the first paragraph of their communication, Miller and Bolce did not clearly understand my central point. Allow me to reiterate it here. The point of my article (Crosby, 1979) was that Miller, Bolce, and Halligan (1977) were not logically correct in rejecting relative deprivation theory as the explanation of black urban unrest on the basis of their data and analyses. I did not claim that relative deprivation theory provides the correct explanation. Nor did I claim that the J-curve theory may not be considered to constitute one form of relative deprivation theory. Rather, I asserted that the data they presented did not lead logically to a refutation of relative deprivation theory. Their claim to the contrary appeared to spring from a lack of familiarity with the relative deprivation literature and from a looseness of operationalization.

My position is, I think, supported by the Miller-Bolce communication. In several instances (e.g., paragraphs 4, 11, 14, 16, and 19, pp. 818-20), Miller and Bolce announce that, in their 1977 article, they were concerned only with Davies' J-curve theory. Obviously, the J-curve is one formulation of relative deprivation theory. Because they were concerned with only one version of the theory, they were prevented, logically, from drawing conclusions