

LINE ON LIFE

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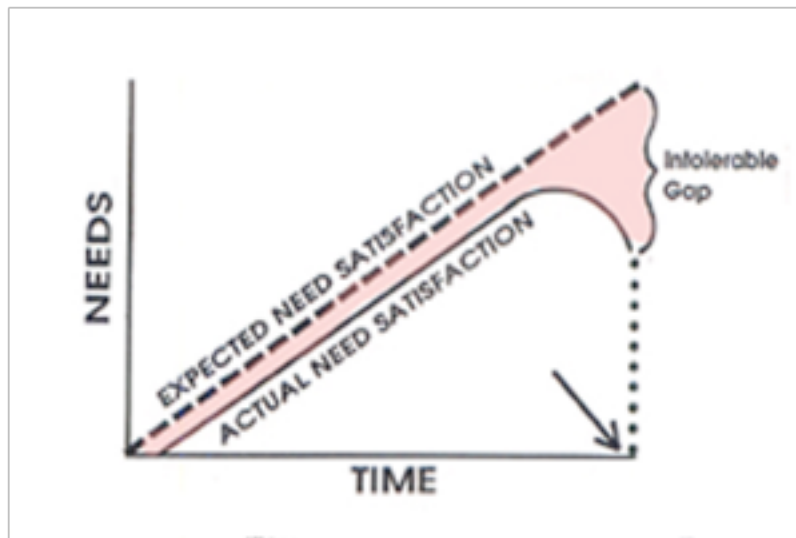
Frustration and Revolution *

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Most people believe that people revolt when things get so bad that they cannot stand it any more. This is the **frustration-aggression hypothesis**. Does this really explain upheavals like the French Revolution of 1789, the American race riots in the late-1960s, or the rebellion that split up Russia?

Some historians argue that downtrodden hopelessness is not the cause of aggressive responses like revolution and riots. In contrast, they see the cause of revolution as **frustrated optimism**. As early as 1856, the famous political writer, Alexis de Tocqueville, tried to analyze the French revolution. He believed that the French revolution was not brought about by a gradual decline from bad to worse. The French people had patiently endured the most overwhelming oppression. Only when the yoke of oppression started to lift did they burst into rebellion.

"Evils which are patiently endured when they seem inevitable become intolerable when once the idea of escape from them is suggested."



In his 1972 work, political scientist James Davies explored several hundred historical examples of revolution, including the French revolution. From these, Davies proposed his "**J-curve**" theory of social revolutions.

As shown in the diagram, the "**J-curve**" theory says that when conditions improve for a relatively long period of time, — and this is followed by a short economic reversal — an intolerable gap occurs between the changes that the people expect (dashed line) and what

they actually get (solid line). Davies predicts that this is when revolution will occur (arrow).

Support for this theory was found in a 1972 study of 84 nations. Researchers found a clear relationship between indications of political instability and economic frustration. "*Frustrated countries*" are those that had poor economic conditions — low economic growth, insufficient food, few telephones and physicians — while being acquainted with the higher living standards of industrialized, urbanized countries.

These studies show that frustration is more likely to develop from **relative frustration** — the gap between their expectations and the reality that does not live up to these expectations. People in poor countries isolated from the outside world do not realize how poor or frustrated they are. Their frustrations are accepted merely as part of living. In contrast, the people in poorer countries exposed to modern standards feel more "*frustrated*." To top this off, deprived people who have experienced some recent progress are more frustrated than those who experienced poverty and oppression.

The concept of *relative frustration* first appeared in studies of American soldiers during World War II. Soldiers receiving quick promotions were still dissatisfied — if they perceived others as getting even quicker promotions. In contrast, soldiers who got fewer promotions felt satisfied — if they believed that others were not being promoted faster. Their frustration was relative to others — not absolute. Paupers may feel rich, if they can eat while others are starving. Corporate executives earning \$100,000 a year may feel "*frustrated*" if their associates earn twice as much.

In the 1960s in the United States, the race riots occurred during a period of improving conditions and increased expectations for blacks. However, as they saw through the mass media, the conditions for whites were improving much faster than those for blacks. In comparison to their expectations related to the changing conditions in the society, blacks seemed to be suffering relative deprivation. This was one of the factors that lead to the race riots of the 1960s.

In Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev's program of "*glasnost*" led to a rise in the expectations of the Russian people. Unfortunately, the actual satisfaction of their needs fell short of their expectations. This "*relative frustration*" is a possible explanation of why the Russian people defied their government — when they had not done so previously.

Even if things do improve, this will raise their expectations again. If these new expectations are not met in the future, and intolerable gap between their new expectations and a less satisfactory reality might lead to still further rioting and revolution.

* Adapted from Richard A. Lippa's *Introduction to Social Psychology*, Wadsworth Publishing, 1990, pages 446-447.