

THEORY OF REGRESSION IN FRUSTRATION

by Kurt Lewin, Roger Barker & Tamara Dembo (1941)

(Extract from: *Frustration and Regression. An Experiment with Young Children*, by Roger Barker, Tamara Dembo, and Kurt Lewin.

Studies in Topological and Vector Psychology II, University of Iowa Press, Iowa 1941, pp. 216-219; page numbers referring to this original publication are given in square brackets - example: [p. 217:]

Regression and Developmental Stages

[p. 216:]

Regression has been defined here as a change which is opposite to development. Development includes some or all of the following changes (Chapter I, p. 14): increase in variety of behavior, increase in degree of hierarchical organizations, extension of area of activities and interests including time perspective, and increased weight of organizational dependence relative to simple dependence. Regression, therefore, can be related to some or all of these changes in the opposite direction.

To understand how temporary regression is brought about by situational factors, it is necessary to refer to certain constructs, for example, to those concerning degree of differentiation, organization, and unity of a whole which have been discussed in Chapter I (p. 22) and Appendix 1. Originally, our experiment was designed to test the prediction that tension in strong frustration leads to a dedifferentiation of the person and therefore to regression. The regression has been found. However, the experiments have shown that, aside from dedifferentiation, other factors may enter. In other words, there are several possibilities of explaining the observed regression in a situation such as the one studied here. We will leave it open which single factor or which specific constellation of factors has caused the results. Probably different factors were important for different subjects.

Dedifferentiation

One of the best symptoms for the increasing differentiation of the life space (including the person and the psychological environment) during development is the increasing variety of behavior.

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In the frustration situation the richness of the play activity definitely decreases. Stereotypy is increased particularly in the case of barrier behavior. This indicates a narrowing down and dedifferentiation of the psychological environment.

If the regression is caused by dedifferentiation of the individual, the dedifferentiation is probably brought about by the emotional tension (Dembo 12). We will see that the degree of differentiation of a whole is inversely related to the strength of pressure of tension (formula 10a, p. 242) when the tension passes certain limits which are determined by the strength of the boundaries of the natural parts of the whole. Constructiveness in play also decreases with the strength (potency) of frustration.

A decrease in the variety of behavior must also be expected if a part of the whole is kept in a fixed state. This follows from certain properties of a dynamic whole (Appendix 1, p 254). The amount of decrease depends upon the extent of the fixed areas, their degree of centrality, and their divergence from the normal level. Frustration involving a particular goal keeps a certain area of the person in a state of more or less permanent tension. The variety of pattern should therefore decrease in the case of other activities. This decrease should be greater with the involvement of a larger number of parts of the person with a higher degree of centrality, and with a heightened tension. The experimental results are well in line with these theoretical considerations. It has been shown that emotionality increases with increasing potency of frustration. This would indicate that a decreasing variety of behavior may be due to dedifferentiation of the person as the result of emotional tension, or to the "freezing" of certain parts of the person as a result of preoccupation.

Disorganization

One of the outstanding characteristics of emotionality is the increase in the weight of simple dependence (spreading of tension) relative to organizational processes which are in line with requirements of reality (are adaptive in nature). If formula (8) is correct such a change can be viewed as one form of regression. Indeed, both the emotionality and the amount of regression change with the potency of frustration.

In a somewhat different way the disorganization can be derived from the overlapping situation between play and barrier behavior.

[p.218:]

To be governed by two strong goals is equivalent to the existence of two conflicting heads within the organism. This should lead to a decrease in organizational unity according to our theoretical considerations (formula (36), p. 260).

Finally, a certain disorganization should result from the fact that the motor system loses to some degree its character of a good medium because of these conflicting heads. It ceases to be in a state of near equilibrium. The demands on the motor system made by one head have to counteract the influence of the demands of the other head. This is an additional factor which hampers organizational processes.

Lack of Time Perspective: Insecurity

The extension of the life space, particularly in the psychological time dimension, is one of the essential properties of development. We have seen that planning presupposes time perspective. On the average, constructiveness is higher in the long than in the short play units. Therefore a decrease in the extension of time perspective might properly be regarded as a regression.

In the frustration experiment, the experimenter interrupted the elaborate play with the beautiful toys and ordered the child to move to the other side of the partition. In the previous free play situation and in prefrustration, the child had not been interrupted. In some degree the child had probably become confident that his play would not be interfered with, and his security was such that he was able to make relatively long-range plans.

The interference at the end of the prefrustration situation may have shattered the belief of the child in the security and stability of his situation. If the possibility of a superior power, such as that

of the experimenter, interfering at any moment continued, it might not seem worth while to start a long-range plan. This should lead to a weakening of the connection between the reality and irreality levels and to a narrowing of the life space with respect to the extension of the level of reality (level of expectation) into the psychological future. It is possible to attribute regression in the frustration situation at least partly to the lack of security.

Closely related to this aspect of the situation is the change in "freedom of expression." The child's relation with the experimenter, as well as his other symptoms indicate that the child in the [p. 219:] frustration situation feels more restricted. This is tantamount to saying that the child feels he is not permitted to reconstruct his reality level according to the wish level or to his more intimate needs. We have seen that this should lead to a lowering of the constructiveness level.

The decrease in time perspective during play can be related in part directly to the greater emotionality in frustration. It is known that a strong emotion tends to narrow the extension of the psychological situation.

Regression and Substitution

Freud has linked regression closely to substitution. It may be appropriate therefore to relate the results of our experiments to this theory. [It should be remembered that the Freudian concept of regression includes retrogression in addition to regression as defined here. The two concepts have somewhat different implications.]

We do not deny the possibility that regression may under certain conditions result from a tendency to substitution. However, this is hardly the cause of regression in this experiment. Of course, it can be maintained that the accessible toys are a substitute for the inaccessible toys. However, even if the accessible toys did have the character of substitute toys, there is nothing to prevent the children from playing on the same constructiveness level as before. Regression, in this case at least, is not an attempt to satisfy a need on a lower level because it cannot be satisfied on a higher level. It is rather the effect of a change of the state of the person resulting from tension or from any of the changes in the life space which we have discussed. [This view is somewhat in line with that of McDougall (60).]

When play with the accessible toys had the character of a real substitute for play with the inaccessible toys the constructiveness increased; it did not regress to a lower level.

Bibliographical References in this Text

DEMBO 12: Dembo, Tamara: Der Ärger als dynamisches Problem [Anger as a dynamic problem]. *Psychol. Forsch.*, 1931, 15, 1-144. [English translation of this article in: Joseph de Rivera, *Field Theory as Human Science*, New York: Gardner Press 1976, pp. 324-422.].

McDOUGALL 60: McDougall, William: *Outline of abnormal psychology*. New York: Macmillan, 1922. Pp. 383.

Recommended further reading

Abraham S. LUCHINS & Edith H. LUCHINS, **Rigidity of Behavior**. Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Books, 1959