

SHERIF'S ROBBERS CAVE EXPERIMENT

Sherif's classic social psychology experiment named Robbers Cave Experiment dealt with in-group relations, out-group relations and intergroup relations.

Introduction:

TAKE 22 white, middle-class, 11 year-old boys who did not know each other, send them on a 'summer camp experience' at the Robber's Cave State Park in Oklahoma (USA), and what do you get? A remake of William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies'?

No. Rather, a powerful lesson in peace building.

The boys were unwittingly the stars cast in a classic experiment conducted in the 1950s on building positive inter-group relations, conducted by psychologist Muzafer Sherif. Although they were unaware of it, Sherif had divided the boys into two groups of 11 that were approximately equal in athletic ability and camping experience. He arranged experiences that would amplify, and then resolve, destructive conflict between them. The study was conducted in 3 stages of roughly 1 week each.

THREE PHASES OF THE EXPERIMENT

In-group Formation – this phase involves the experimental creation of in-groups through activities that will promote group identification.

Friction Phase – this phase involves bringing two experimentally formed groups into conflict with each other or forming intergroup tension.

Integration Phase – this phase involves bringing the two previously conflicting groups into cooperation through the attainment of superordinate goals.

PHASE 1 (IN-GROUP FORMATION)

The 22 eleven year-old boys were of middle-class socioeconomic standing, had not experienced any unusual degree of frustration in their homes, were not school or social failures and had similar educational levels. Before the start of the experiment, the boys were randomly divided into two groups, which created two groups that contained eleven boys each.

In the first stage, each group lived in its own cabin and had no knowledge of the other's presence in the park. Each group developed its own swimming hole and hideouts and co-operated in activities such as pitching tents, preparing meals, hiking and treasure hunts. During this stage, each spontaneously developed its own rules, leadership, and identity. One group called itself the 'Rattlers', the other boys dubbed themselves the 'Eagles'. These names were stenciled onto their flags and shirts. (A group name is a good step to allow the members of each group to identify with their respective groups. It grants the members belongingness and group spirit.)

Near the end of this stage, each was made aware of the other's presence in the camp, hearing the other's voices or seeing cups left behind. Strong territorial reactions, such as 'they'd better not be in our swimming hole', were the result. There was an immediate division between 'us' and 'them'. (Which was the chief aim of the first phase - to produce in-groups through the interaction of the members within the two separate groups.)

PHASE 2 (FRICTION PHASE)

By design, Stage Two amplified the competition between the young 'warriors'. The staff announced a series of contests, including baseball games, tugs-of war and counsellor-judged events such as cabin inspections. The scoring was manipulated to keep the two teams close, thereby heightening the sense of competition. The two groups began eating together in a common mess hall, where the tournament's grand prize (a trophy and 11 medals and four bladed knives for individual members of the winning team) was on display for all to see.

Good sportsmanship quickly deteriorated to name-calling during the first baseball game and then in the mess-hall. Following their first loss the dejected Eagles burned the Rattlers' flag, with the group's leader proclaiming 'you can tell those guys I did it ... I'll fight 'em'. The Eagle flag was burned in retaliation the next day. Fighting erupted and the counsellors intervened.

Tensions increased further when the Eagles won the second tug-of-war through a strategy of sitting down and digging in their heels. Judging this unfair, the Rattlers launched a commando style raid on the Eagles' cabin that night. The following morning, the Eagles took revenge on the Rattlers' cabin; then, fearing reprisals, they began to store rocks to stone their new enemies. Once again, the staff intervened.

Skirmishes continued throughout the tournament, which the Eagles eventually won. The defeated Rattlers immediately raided the other group's cabin and stole the prized knives and medals, provoking further fighting. Hostilities at this point ran extremely high.

PHASE 3 (INTEGRATION PHASE)

This stage constitutes the most crucial and significant aspect of the study. In this phase, the experimenters will deliberately attempt to bring about cooperation between the two groups following a stage of friction or conflict. This phase aims to study the process of reducing group tensions.

The first activity for this phase was a problem wherein both the groups must cooperate to solve because the resources and efforts of a single group are inadequate to attain the solution to the problem. Both of the groups were taken to a new location and were told that they are having drinking water shortage. The two groups had to repair the damage done by vandals to their drinking water supply. During the successful repair of their water problems, cooperation was observed between the members of the two groups. This activity was done by the experimenters to create a state of real and tangible interdependence between the members of the two groups.

The second activity was the group needed to interact with each other and they had to pay and decide for a movie that they would like to watch. The groups successfully agreed upon a movie all of them should watch and during the dinner after this activity, all the boys were eating together once again.

OBSERVATIONS

Definite group structures and dynamics consisting of individual status and roles will be formed when a number of individuals without previously established interpersonal relations interact with one another under similar context and events.

During the Friction Phase, uneasy conflicts produce unfavorable stereotypes in relation to the out-group and its members placing the out-group at a certain social distance.

In an event that a number of conflicting groups are brought together with a common superordinate goal and the attainment of which cannot be achieved by the efforts of one group alone, the groups will tend to cooperate towards the achievement of the superordinate goal.

RATTLERS AND EAGLES: INTERGROUP RELATIONS

(STAGE 2)



Eagles' strategy in 2nd Tug-of-war: Sitting down to dig in while rattlers (standing) exhaust themselves.



Rattlers adopt the Eagle strategy: B sides dig in sitting down.

(Below) Intergroup interaction after the introduction of superordinate goals.



Members of both groups climb up to see if the water tank is empty.



Members of both groups cluster around and take turns trying to clear the faucet.