

The Robber's Cave Studies

Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues conducted three famous field experiments known as the Robber's Cave or Summer Camp studies (1954, 1958, 1961) in order to demonstrate RGCT. These experiments are often considered together because of their contributions to the understanding of group dynamics and competition as they relate to RGCT.

The field studies were longitudinal and lasted three weeks which was sufficient time to observe the changes in group dynamics. The experiments included three stages: group formation, inter-group conflict and conflict reduction.

The context of a summer camp provided a realistic setting in which to observe these processes. The boys participating in the experiments engaged in activities that were typical of a summer camp such as baseball, tug of war, football and cabin inspections.

During the course of the three weeks, the researchers, posing as camp leaders, made careful observations of all the boys' activities. It was, of course, important for the boys to feel that the camp was real and that all events took place naturally. Parents paid a small fee to send the boys to the camp and the researchers asked parents to stay away for the duration of the study.

The experiments were designed to test two hypotheses:

- 1) When individuals with no prior relationships are brought together to interact in group activities with common goals, they will produce a group structure with a clear hierarchy and roles.
- 2) If two existing groups are brought into contact with each other under conditions of competition and group frustration, each group will develop hostile attitudes and actions in relation to the outgroup and its members in relation to their existing ingroup norms.

Twenty-four white, lower middle-class boys from a Protestant background were brought to the campsite. The boys were not friends before the experiment and were all from stable home environments.

In **stage 1**, boys were placed into 2 groups in which they were matched as closely as possible to other boys in the group. The researchers observed who the boys related to and who became friends during the first few days. In two of the experiments, it was then arranged for the boys to be in different groups to the majority of their closest friends. So, their friends would be in the outgroup for the next phase of the experiment. In the third of the experiments, the boys had no initial meeting and were placed directly into their groups. They were initially unaware of the other group's existence as they were camping at opposite ends of the campsite.

The groups, soon to be known as the Rattlers and the Eagles, develop ingroup norms, structure and rituals very quickly and upon learning of the other group's existence, the boys made comparisons between the two groups in which the edge was given to one's own ingroup. It was interesting to note that this inter-group rivalry occurred before the boys were engaged in any real competition with each other.

In **stage 2**, the boys were engaged in a series of competitions such as tug of war. The winners of the competition would receive a trophy and a much-desired penknife. The losers received nothing. The groups were, therefore, working in opposition to each other and RGCT predicted conflict would be likely to occur.

The boys' behavior changed dramatically as a result of this imposed competition and once peaceful boys became hostile and violent. They openly ridiculed and belittled the other group even though their best friends were in the outgroup.

Sherif highlighted that this was evidence for RGCT in that the introduction of group competition affected the group dynamics by developing the following:

- Ingroup favoritism- the boys became a tightknit group, focusing on their similarities and strengths; they stopped socializing with outgroup members. This ingroup favoritism and lack of contact with the outgroup is crucial to the maintenance of negative stereotypes and discrimination against an outgroup.
- Outgroup discrimination-the boys burnt the flags of the outgroup, ridiculed each other and traded insults. They even raided the cabins of the other team.

For **stage 3**, after having successfully created conflict, the researchers acted to reduce it. They would reverse the groups from being negatively interdependent to being positively interdependent. The experimenters created situations which would require the boys to cooperate with each other if they wanted to succeed. One such situation involved a heavy truck breaking down in the camp. This truck was used to drive the boys around the camp. It was too heavy for one group to "bump start" the truck on their own but if they worked together, they could do it. The boys collaborated and fixed the truck.

In another situation, the boys had to work collaboratively to repair a disrupted water supply. By having to work together, the individual group identities were broken down and a new, more inclusive, group identity was created causing the boys to cooperate peacefully.

Over time, the positive inter-group contact, facilitated by the emergence of a subordinate goal, did succeed in reducing the inter-group conflict providing support for RGCT.