

Robbers Cave Study Summary

Michael L. Woodward, Ed.S.,

Lisa L. Persinger, Ph.D., NCSP

Northern Arizona University

In 1949, a group of social psychologists led by Muzafer Sherif began a series of experiments looking into the origin of group conflict and prejudice within groups of 11-12 year old boys. Social psychologists had previously focused research on patterns of discrimination, conflict, and prejudice. However, few empirical investigations had been devoted to examining how these divisive thoughts and behaviors develop, and why. The goal of the project was to naturally create prejudice within controlled environments where no prejudice had existed before. The study also examined methods for eliminating prejudice once it had been created.

Three experimental studies were conducted in 1949, 1953, and 1954. Each study aimed to create controlled, yet naturalistic environments where prejudice and group conflict could emerge. Researchers created summer camps for 11-12 year old boys that allowed for informal relationships to evolve naturally and without the impact of external forces. Participants were selected after a screening process that involved reviews of familial history, medical records, school reports, and personality testing. The goal was to find healthy and well-adjusted boys from homogeneous backgrounds. This would reduce extraneous forms of prejudice based upon individual differences between subjects. The participants were unaware of their participation in a research study. Researchers set up

situations that created high levels of engagement and interest in order to reduce the possibility of subjects becoming aware of the true intentions of the study.

Researchers first observed how the boys formed into groups. In 1949, they placed all boys in one bunkhouse and allowed them to bond naturally to each other. After a few days they informally asked each boy who their best friend was. The researchers then split the boys into separate groups attempting to place best friends in opposite groups. This was to reduce personal attraction as a factor within group formation. Once the boys were in separate groups, they were given activities that required collaboration and reaching a common goal. During these experiences, each group split up the work and tasks based upon each individual's abilities. Common dynamics often seen within group formation soon emerged. A leader and lieutenants emerged. Each group formed roles and duties for each member. They created nicknames, jargon, jokes, secrets, and routines. Each group also created a name and symbol. The 1954 camp was conducted near a hideaway of the famous outlaw Jesse James, called Robber's Cave. The two groups at this camp named themselves the Rattlers and Eagles.

After each group became solidified, the experimenters proceeded to conduct experiments of intergroup conflict. Their hypothesis was that when two groups had conflicting goals, and only one can succeed at the expense of the other, hostility would emerge. To test this hypothesis a tournament of games was created, including tug-of-war, football, baseball, and a treasure hunt. Initially, the groups interacted pleasantly and with good sportsmanship. However, these initial feelings were not long lasting. Hostile

behavior began with simple name-calling, and antagonistic behavior. This escalated into creating threatening posters, burning opposition banners, and raiding the other group with apples as ammunition. As intergroup conflict worsened, solidarity within each group strengthened. Cooperation and morale increased within groups, and a few groups made changes in leadership in order to maintain group cohesion.

Researchers then turned their focus to the question of how groups in conflict could be brought together into cooperation and accord. The first attempt to bring groups together was via a “social contract.” Opposing groups were brought together for movies, eating together, and other social events. These social contracts had the opposite affect, and provided opportunities for groups to attack and verbally abuse each other. Next, the researchers attempted the opposite of their initial hypothesis on group conflict. When opposing groups are brought together, and required to work in collaboration towards a mutually desired goal, group harmony should emerge. Different problems were created where the groups needed to work together, and could not reach a successful outcome alone. This included a breakdown in the camp water supply, needing to raise money to afford a movie, and reaching a destination after their vehicle broke down. Gradually, these cooperative events led to a decrease in tension between groups. In addition, individuals within groups were more likely to intermingle. Interviews at the end of the camp indicated favorable ratings towards members of opposing groups.

Overall, these studies revealed environmental factors that facilitated both group conflict, and group harmony. Situations that require competition and the advancement of

one group at the defeat of the other led to well-adjusted children engaging in discriminative behavior. Contrary to this, situations that required group cooperation towards a common goal reduced divisiveness and increased harmony between groups. Simply bringing opposing groups together did not reduce prejudice and discrimination, but exacerbated it.

Further Reading

Sherif, M. & Sherif, C.W. (1953). *Groups in harmony and tension*. New York: Harper & Brothers.