



SHERIF ET AL. (1954)

Aim: To study the origin of prejudice arising from the formation of social groups

Sherif carried out research into groups, leadership and the effect groups had on attitudes and behaviour. The **Robbers Cave Study** built upon his previous work. He thought that social behaviour could not be studied properly by looking at individuals in isolation. He recognised how social organisation differs between cultures and affects group practices, so he claimed that groups have to be understood as part of a social structure. The Robbers Cave Study used two groups of young boys to find: how the groups developed; if and how conflict between the groups arose; and how to reduce any such friction. Three terms defined according to Sherif are:

small group individuals share a common goal that fosters interaction; individuals are affected differently by being in a group; an in-group develops with its own hierarchy and a set of norms is standardised

norm a product of group interaction that regulates member behaviour in terms of expected or ideal behaviour
group a social unit with a number of individuals who are interdependent and have a set of norms and values for self regulation; individuals have roles within the unit

PROCEDURE

PARTICIPANTS

22 young boys, aged 11, who did not know each other prior to the study. All from Protestant Oklahoma families to eliminate family problems and match the kids as much as possible. They were also matched based on a rating, including their IQ, from their teachers and were finally reassessed and matched, including issues such as sporting ability, before the experiment began. A nominal fee was charged for the children to attend the camp and they were not informed that they were being used for a piece of research in order to obtain "true" results

THE CAMP

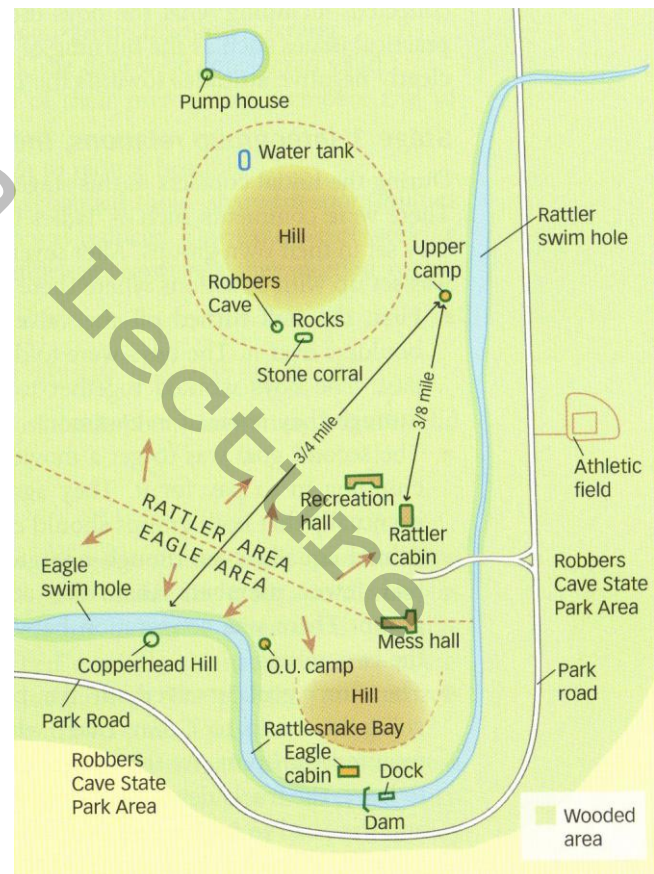
The experiment is called the Robbers Cave Study because it took place in a camp at Robbers Cave State Park, Oklahoma. The location was a 200-acre Boy Scouts of America camp completely surrounded by the State Park. The site was isolated and keeping the two groups apart (at first) was easy because of the layout of the site, as shown in the diagram

DATA COLLECTION

There was a wide range of data collection methods:

- **observer** – participant observer allocated to each group for 12 hours a day
- **sociometric analysis** – issues such as friendship patterns were noted and studied
- **experiment** – boys had to collect beans and estimate how many each boy had collected
- **tape recordings** – words and phrases used to describe their own group were studied

The observers were trained not to influence the boys' decisions but to help them once a decision was reached



THREE STAGE EXPERIMENT

- 1 The two groups were formed and set up norms and hierarchies (to see how they became in-groups)
- 2 The two groups were introduced and competition was set up, as a tournament (to test for friction, name-calling and hostility to the out-group)
- 3 The two groups were set goals that they needed each other to achieve

[youtube.com/c/MegaLecture/](https://www.youtube.com/c/MegaLecture/)

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Stage 1: in-group formation

The two groups were kept apart for one week to help the formation of group norms and relations. They had to work as a group to achieve common goals that required cooperation. Data was gathered by observation, including rating of emerging relationships, sociometric measures and experimental judgements. Status positions and roles in the groups were studied. There is much detail about how hierarchies within each group developed. The measurements were thought to be both valid and reliable because different data collection methods produced similar results. For example, in the bean-collecting task, the boys tended to overestimate the number of beans their own group members had collected and underestimate the number collected by the other group (the number of beans was actually the same).

Stage 2: inter-group relations, the friction phase

After the first week, the two groups were told about one another and a tournament was set up with competitive activities. Points could be earned for the group and there were rewards. As soon as they heard about each other, the two groups became hostile. They wanted to play each other at baseball, so they effectively set up their own tournament, which was what the researchers wanted.

The aim of the experiment was to make one group frustrated because of the other group, to see if negative attitudes developed. Adjectives and phrases were recorded to see if they were derogatory and behaviour was observed as previously. The researchers introduced the collecting the beans experiment: the boys had to collect beans and then judge how many each boy had collected. This was to see if the boys overestimated the abilities of the in-group members and minimised the abilities of the out-group members. As was mentioned before, this was the case.

Stage 3: inter-group relations, the integration

The researchers wanted to achieve harmony between the two groups, which they did by introducing **superordinate goals**. This meant that the groups would have to work together to achieve the goals. At first, they introduced tasks that simply brought the two groups together so that they could communicate. They then introduced the superordinate goals, which included:

- ✓ fixing the water tank and pump when the water supply was threatened
- ✓ a truck that would not start, so they had to pull together to try and start it
- ✓ pooling resources so that they could afford a film that they all wanted to watch

The researchers measured the use of derogatory terms and used observation and rating of stereotyping.

Superordinate Goal -

a goal which the resources and energies of a single group are not adequate to attain, to achieve the goal, the groups must work together

RESULTS

Stage 1: in-group formation

By the end of the first Stage, the boys had given themselves names: the **Rattlers** and the **Eagles**. The groups developed similarly, but this was expected due to how carefully they had been matched. Any differences present were most likely due to the different decisions they had to make based on their cabins being located in different areas. For both groups, status positions were settled over days five and six of the first week, and a clear group leader was in place.

The Rattlers often discussed the situation of the Eagles, saying things such as "They had better not be swimming in our swimming hole". Although the Eagles did not refer to the Rattlers so often, they wanted to play a competition game with them. It seems that even only knowing another group existed was enough reason for hostility to develop, even though neither group had been introduced yet.

Stage 2: inter-group relations, the friction phase

As soon as the groups found out about each other, they wanted to play baseball in a group competition: and so both groups had naturally moved onto Stage 2. The Rattlers were excited, and discussed such issues such as protecting their flag. The Eagles weren't as excited, but made such comments as "we will beat them". The Eagle selected as baseball captain for the baseball competition became the group leader of the Eagles for all of Stage 2, even though he was not the group leader at the end of Stage 1.

When the two groups first met, there was a lot of name calling. There is evidence collected, including what the boys said, who they were friends with and practical issues (such as the burning of a flag). It was found that there were clearly negative attitudes towards the out-group members.

Stage 3: inter-group relations, the integration

During the initial contacts of this Stage, the hostility remained. There were comments such as “ladies first” and when they watched a group movie together, they sat separated in their individual groups. After seven contact activities, there were superordinate goals set up:

- 1 The staff turned off the valve to the water pump and placed two large boulders over it. The children were informed that vandals had damaged it in the past. They worked together to fix the damage and rejoiced in common when they were successful
- 2 The second goal was to watch a movie together, but both groups had to chip in to pay for it. They eventually agreed to go halves even though one group had fewer members than the others. However, this agreement showed that the two groups cooperated to arrive at one final decision which they both were happy with
- 3 The boys all went on an organised trip to Cedar Lake, where the truck suddenly ‘developed’ a problem meaning the boys had to use the tug-of-war rope to try and pull it out and get it started

It was noticeable how friendships differed between Stage 2 and 3. More out-group members were chosen as friends by the end of Stage 3, which is evidence that friction was reduced by the superordinate goals outlined.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the hypotheses put forward by the researchers at the beginning of the study were confirmed. Some of the conclusions drawn from the experiment include:

- ✎ The groups developed social hierarchies and group norms, even though they were not stable throughout the study
- ✎ Each group had a clear leadership structure by the end of the first week
- ✎ When the two groups meet for competition, in-group solidarity and cooperation increases and inter-group hostility is strong
- ✎ People tend to overestimate the abilities of their own group members and to minimise the abilities of out-group members
- ✎ Contact between two groups is not enough to reduce hostility
- ✎ When groups needed to work together, exchanged tools, shared responsibilities and agreed how to solve problems, friction was reduced – working towards a superordinate goal once was not sufficient, there needed to be numerous cooperation tasks to achieve this

EVALUATION

Strengths

- ✎ There were controls, such as the careful sampling and the briefing observers so they all followed the same procedures, this meant that cause-and-effect conclusions could be drawn more justifiably than when observing naturally-occurring groups
- ✎ There were several data collection methods and the findings agreed, so validity was claimed – for example, derogatory behaviour and recordings found derogatory remarks against the out-group
- ✎ The group conflict could be seen as prejudice; reduction of friction would be reducing the prejudice, therefore the study has a practical application

Weaknesses

- ✎ It was unethical in the sense that there was no informed consent obtained, there was no right to withdraw for the participants (also, the boys’ parents were not allowed to visit – to prevent them feeling homesick – but this meant they could not check on their children’s welfare)
- ✎ It was hard to generalise to other situations because the sample was restricted to boys with a specific background