

PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Topic 3: Group dynamics

Content: Co-operation and competition. Origins of conflict and conflict resolution.

Key Idea: How psychological theory can explain inter-group and intra-group relationships, including cooperation, competition, prejudice, discrimination and conflict.

KEY STUDY: *Sherif et al. (1961). Intergroup conflict and cooperation: The Robbers' Cave experiment (Vol. 10).*

Links to:

- **Sociocultural approach:** the individual and the group – social identity theory.

Brief Summary

Sherif proposed realistic conflict theory in 1966 after this experiment and earlier ones. Known as the 'Robber's Cave' field experiment, this study investigated intergroup relations in the presence of competition for scarce resources. The results showed that 12-year-old boys at summer camp could be manipulated into conflict when groups were competing for scarce resources, and then manipulated into cooperation when a shared superordinate goal was introduced.

Aim

To investigate intergroup relations in the presence of competition for scarce resources (leading to conflict) and then cooperation induced through a common goal.

Participants

An opportunity sample of 22 boys aged around 12 years old who happened to be attending the Robber's Cave summer camp in Oklahoma, USA during the period of the research. The boys were from white, middle-class, Protestant, two-parent families. They did not know each other before the onset of the study.

Procedure

The boys were randomly assigned to one of two groups but they were not told of the existence of the other group. The camp was run by the experimenters, (although the boys were not aware that this was the case). The two groups of boys were initially kept apart from each other and were encouraged to form strong in-group bonds and a clear group identity.

Once the two groups had formed strong group identities the researchers introduced the idea of competition between them as the boys were made aware that another group existed at the camp. In fact, the boys had been asking for competitions to be put in place even before the experimenters introduced the 4-6 day competition phase. A series of competitive games and tasks followed, with the winning team receiving a trophy and individual prizes and the losers getting nothing.

Results

The boys very quickly formed strong group identities, for example creating group names: the Eagles for one group and the Rattlers for the other group. Each group created a flag to denote their identity and each group showed strong out-group prejudice, treating the other group with

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disrespect, hostility and negativity. The experimenters then attempted to unite the groups by getting them involved in activities such as watching a film or engaging in 'getting to know you' games but this was unsuccessful: the boys still held strong to their 'Eagles' or 'Rattlers' identities. At this point the experimenters created some 'problems' (e.g. a water tank that needed fixing, money for a movie that night, a truck that was stuck) which would inconvenience the whole camp and which presented an issue that went beyond in-group and out-group concerns. Sherif stated that these tasks represented superordinate goals, put in place to create a common motive and to trigger intergroup cooperation. This is exactly what happened: the boys came together to solve the problems and intergroup relations improved to the point that the two separate groups forged a new group identity and cast aside intergroup rivalries and prejudice. In short, where there was once conflict and competition there now existed co-operation between the groups.

Conclusion

Intergroup conflict created through competition may be resolved by the introduction of a superordinate goal that is shared by both groups, showing that both competition and co-operation can be manipulated.

Evaluation of Sherif et al. (1961)

Strengths

- ✓ The issue of demand characteristics would not have arisen as the boys were unaware that they were taking part in a study, enhancing the validity of the
- ✓ This study is high in ecological validity as it took place in a real camp, using the day-to-day activities and tasks that the participants would have considered a natural part of camp life.

Limitations

- X Researcher bias may have affected the findings: the researchers involved in the process may have influenced the boys to behave in ways which were in line with their hypothesis.
- X The study lacks temporal validity, as it is possible that social changes over the last 60 years might produce different results if the study were to be carried out today.
- X This study is unethical, as there was no informed consent, a stressful situation and a high level of deception.

Reference

Sherif, M., Harvey, O. J., White, B. J., Hood, W., & Sherif, C. (1961). Intergroup conflict and cooperation: The Robbers' Cave experiment (Vol. 10 pp. 150-198). Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Institute of Intergroup Relations.