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Sherif's Robbers Cave Experiment

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

The experiment focused heavily on the concept of a 'group' and what a perception of belonging to a group can actually do to the relationships of members within it and their relationships with people outside their group.

The same experiment also tried to observe conflicts or 'friction' between two groups and the process of cooperation or 'integration' of two previously conflicting groups.

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Background of the Experiment

Both in the fields of Sociology and Psychology, researchers have been fascinated with the concept of 'group.' This particular concept can be defined as one of the basic social units a person can have. It can consist of a number of individuals who has a definite status or role relationship with other members of the group. Another key feature of a group is that members have a set of norms or values that regulate the behaviour and attitudes of the members. This can be the reason why we usually hear the statement: *"Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are."*

Along with this concept of belonging to a group are several concepts that are vital to the

understanding of this experiment. All the common attitudes, aspirations, hopes and goals that all the members of a group share are social units that can be referred to as in-groups while all the social units that is not part of the group and all the social units that he cannot relate to is called out-groups. Correspondingly, the relation between two or more in-groups along with its members can be called intergroup relations.

Three Phases of the Experiment

1. In-group Formation - this phase involves the experimental creation of in-groups through activities that will promote group identification.
2. Friction Phase - this phase involves bringing two experimentally formed groups into conflict with each other or forming intergroup tension.
3. 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 subjects of the experiment were twenty-two eleven year-old boys of middle-class socioeconomic standing, who have not experienced any unusual degree of frustration in their homes, who are not school or social failures and who have similar educational level. These boys were taken into a summer camp in Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma. Before the start of the experiment, the boys were randomly divided into two groups ending up with eleven boys each.

The two groups were separately transported and housed in cabins within the same park. Ultimately, the groups must not be aware of the existence of the other group during the first phase of the experiment. Otherwise, any functional contact between the two groups would certainly have unwanted consequences both for the in-group formation and for the later phases of the experiment. It is these two groups that formed the basis of group interaction that is the focus of the Robbers Cave Experiment [1].

During the first week of the experiment, the groups did not know the existence of the other group. They basically spend time bonding with each other while hiking in the park or swimming. Each group was tasked to coin a group name which was stencilled on their flags and on their 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. One of the groups chose Eagles as their group name while the other group chose Rattlers. The chief aim of the first phase is to produce in-groups through the interaction of the members within the two separate groups.

Phase 2 (Friction Phase)

During this phase, the two groups were allowed to find out about the existence of the other group. The chief aim of this phase is the production of conflict between the two groups which can be accomplished by a series of competitive activities in the form of a tournament of events which will yield cumulative scores with a reward for the members of the winning group.

This step of the experimenters greatly increased the antagonism between the two groups.

This was significantly evident during the tally of the scores where the Rattlers won the overall trophy. The Rattlers planted their flag in the play field as a reminder of their success. Later on, name calling started and the singing of offending songs were also observed.

Furthermore, after these incidences, the groups refused to eat in the same dining together. The experimenters were so successful at producing friction that they concluded that it was no longer safe to conduct friction-producing activities and phase two was suddenly cut short and phase three commenced.

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 unfavourable 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.

Source URL: <https://explorable.com/robbers-cave-experiment>

Links

[1] <http://www.spring.org.uk/2007/09/war-peace-and-role-of-power-in-sherifs.php>