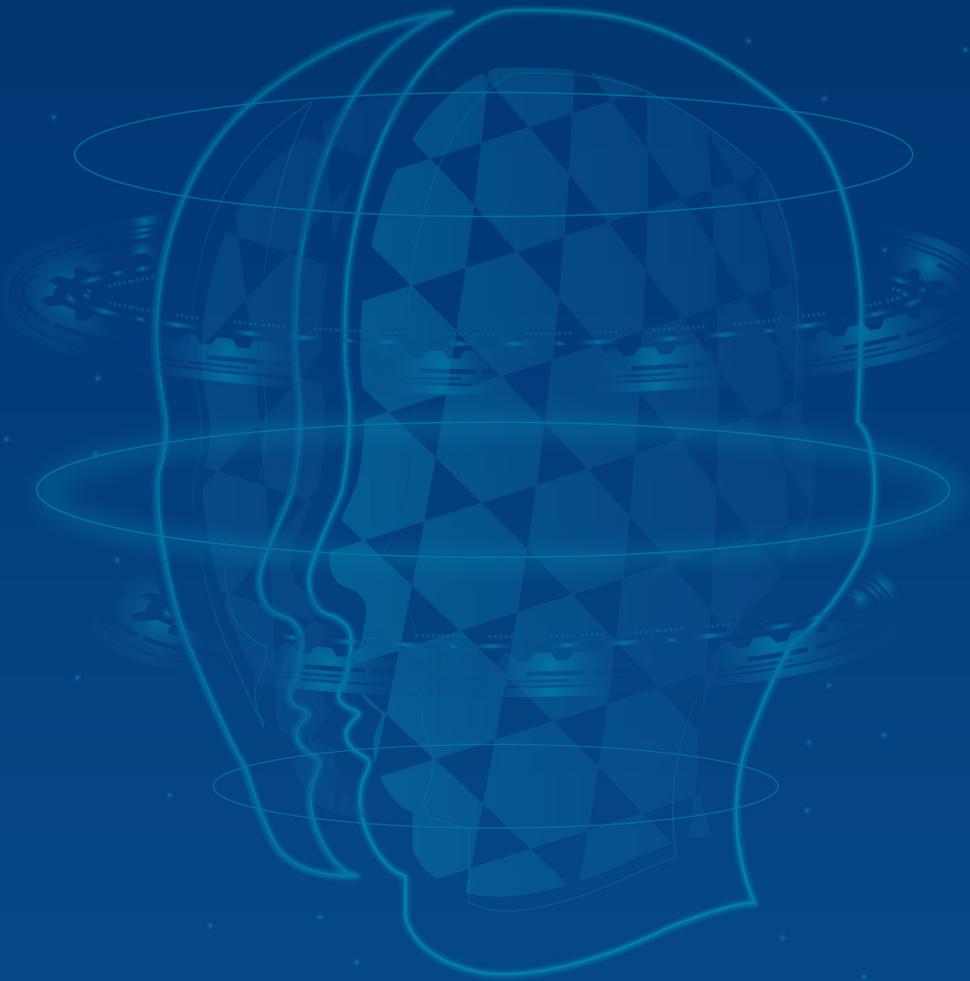




AMERICAN JOURNAL OF HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY (AJHP)

ISSN: 2994-8878 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1 (2023)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA



Reflections on the Robbers Cave Experiment: Finding Lessons on Political Conflict, Racism, Xenophobia, and Business Environments

Vonwicks C. Onyango^{1*}

Article Information

Received: September 25, 2023

Accepted: October 22, 2023

Published: October 27, 2023

Keywords

Realistic Conflict Theory, Robbers Cave Experiment, Intergroup Conflict, In-Group, Out-Group

ABSTRACT

The Robbers Cave Experiment in the mid-1950s by Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues advanced the realistic conflict theory, whose main premise is that conflict is inevitable whenever two (or more) in-groups are brought together in mutual competition for scarce resources. This conflict is driven by prejudice and discrimination, and may take on various forms of hostilities and aggressions towards a competing out-group. However, a resolution of the conflict is possible when the two (or more) competing in-groups are forced to work together to attain mutually beneficial superordinate goals. Whereas the Robbers Cave Experiment suffers from serious questions of ethics and confirmation bias, the lessons that draw from the tested hypotheses have remained germane to the understanding of realistic conflict theory. In this study, the author seeks to reflect on this (in)famous experiment and draw poignant comparisons and lessons as they relate to some contemporary examples in political conflicts, racism, xenophobia, business workplaces, and mergers and acquisitions. The author repeatedly acknowledges the blurring influence of the criticisms of the experiment on the clarity of these reflections.

INTRODUCTION

Realistic conflict theory (RCT) in social psychology is a theory that seeks to explain how intergroup conflict and hostility arise as a result of competition for limited resources. It also highlights how such conflict by one in-group towards an out-group is driven by prejudice, animosity, and discrimination (Baumeister, 2007). This theory was advanced by the psychologist Muzafer Sherif and buttressed in his classical Robbers Cave Experiment in the 1950s (Relations & Sherif, 1961). The scarce resources in contention may be real or perceived and may include such things as political power, territory, money, promotion, land, business control, social status, trade routes, etc. The feelings of resentment, hostility, and prejudice become progressively worse when the groups believe that the scarce resources under their contention must be obtained in a do-or-die scenario (Jackson, 1993). Each of the in-groups in contention often shows varying levels of intragroup organization and mutual cooperation in order to win the resources in contention to the exclusion of the competing out-group. This conflict may lead to serious consequences, including physical fights, loss of property, human dignity, and human lives. The RCT posits that when such two warring groups are forced to pursue superordinate goals (i.e., goals that are beneficial to both groups and which can only be achieved by the mutual cooperation of both groups), then hostilities, discrimination, and prejudice can be overcome and positive relations can be created or restored between the groups (Jackson, 1993).

The Robbers Cave Experiment's Background

Robbers Cave State Park is located in the hilly woodlands

of the San Bois Mountains in Latimer County, in southeast Oklahoma, United States of America. In the 1950s, Dr. Muzafer Sherif, a Turkish-American social psychologist, conducted a famous experiment together with other researchers in this state park to illustrate the phenomenon of realistic conflict theory. The experiment was appropriately called The Robbers Cave Experiment and focused on intergroup conflict and cooperation (Relations & Sherif, 1961). The experiment sought to test two main hypotheses. Firstly, whenever people who don't know each other are brought together to do group activities in pursuit of common goals, they will inevitably form discernible group structures with clear leadership hierarchies and roles. Such a group formed is called an in-group. Secondly, when two or more in-groups are brought into close proximity under conditions of mutual competition for and frustration over similar but limited resources, each in-group will develop hostilities in relation to the competing out-group(s) (Fine, 2004). The members of each in-group will develop standardized attitudes, norms, and actions that will be shared by its members in varying degrees. Subsequently, members of each in-group will hold up such norms, attitudes, and actions as those that distinguish itself from the out-groups, with feelings and sentiments of superiority cementing such in-group interrelationships. This inevitably sets up a conflict between two (or more) in-groups (McLeod, 2008).

Summary of the Robbers Cave Experiment

In the summer of 1954, Sherif and his research team selected 22 white boys who were 11-12 years old and in the fifth grade for this experiment. They all came from a protestant, two-parent middle-class family

¹ Department of Medicine, St. Joseph Rift Valley Hospital, Gilgil, Nakuru County, Kenya

* Corresponding author's e-mail: drvonczelo@gmail.com

background, and each had good school performance with above-average intelligence. Each boy had carefully been screened to be psychologically normal, and they did not know each other at all. They were sent to a remote summer camp location in Robbers Cave State Park. The boys were randomly divided by the researchers (who doubled up as counselors) into two groups, which were essentially balanced on the basis of physical and social characteristics and talents. The researchers carefully ensured that neither group was aware of the existence of the other. Each group was picked up by a bus and taken to the camp, where they lived away from each other and without knowledge of the existence of the other group. The experiment was conducted in three basic phases (McLeod, 2008).

Phase 1: Group Formation (proving the first main hypothesis)

The boys were encouraged to bond among themselves and given tasks that required discussion and cooperation. Over a period of 5-6 days, each group formed its own cultures, norms, leadership structures, and responsibilities as they did common activities like hiking and swimming. The boys became quite attached to their respective groups (in-group) and chose names for each of their groups, i.e., the Eagles and the Rattlers, which they proudly patterned onto their flags and shirts (McLeod, 2008).

Phase 2: Group Conflict/Friction (proving the second main hypothesis)

Over the next 4-5 days, the researchers organized for the two newly formed in-groups to meet each other and participate under conditions that would generate conflict, friction, and prejudice. Competitive games, e.g., baseball, and group challenges, e.g., tug-of-war were organized between the groups, with winners of various group and individual categories getting awards, e.g., a group trophy, medals, multi-bladed pocket knives, etc., based on cumulative points, while the “losers” were not given any consolation prizes! Scenarios were also devised so as to have one group benefit at the expense of the other, e.g., one group was tactfully delayed getting to a picnic site, and when they eventually arrived, the other group had eaten all the food. Members of each in-group expressed their prejudice against the out-group in various ways, which initially involved verbal taunting and name-calling but would later take a more directly confrontational pathway. For example, the Rattlers took over the baseball pitch as their own territory and planted the Rattler flag on the pitch, while threatening dire consequences to anyone from the Eagles who dared to bother their flag. The Eagles burned the flag of the Rattlers! The following day, the Rattlers ransacked the cabin of the Eagles while the latter were away, turned their beds upside down, and made away with their private property as loot. All hell broke loose with counter-raids on cabins, food fights, vandalism, and ever-increasing animosity (McLeod, 2008). Importantly, the researchers subtly manipulated each

scenario of the boys’ conflicts by egging them on, providing the means to provoke one another, e.g., availing the matchsticks to burn the flags, etc. When the conflict became so confrontational, the researchers had to physically separate the opponents.

Phase 3: Conflict Resolution

After a two-day cooling-off period in which each in-group member highly rated themselves on their own perceived virtues and talents while denigrating the out-group in contemptuous and hostile terminology, the researchers tried to reduce the animosity between the two groups by merely increasing contact and communication between them, but this plan failed. However, when the two groups were forced to work together to pursue common goals or superordinate goals (i.e., goals so large that they required more than one group to attain), this significantly reduced conflict and prejudice between the groups. For example, the boys’ water supply was cut off one morning, and the two groups had to work together to locate the water tanks high in the mountain, remove the stones blocking the valve (deliberately put in by the researchers!), and restore water supply. They all also cooperated in choosing a movie to watch between two choices, after which they had no objections to eating supper together and pushing out a truck carrying food for the two groups, which the boys “accidentally” found stuck in a rut. They all achieved these superordinate goals through innovative, receptive, and mutual cooperation amongst themselves (McLeod, 2008).

The Robbers Cave Experiment’s Major Criticisms

The utility of a scientific experiment depends on how rigorously it has been designed and conducted in compliance with internationally acceptable bare minimum standards of research and experiment. At the very least, the experiment must adhere to standards of appropriate methodology and ethics in order to ensure high ecological validity, i.e., the relationship between experimental phenomena and their observation in the real world (Kihlstrom, 2021). A model for conducting social psychological research has been proposed. This encompasses a synthetic approach that augments qualitative and quantitative methods to generate new hypotheses and capture any other experiences that would otherwise evade experimental reductionism (Power *et al.*, 2018).

The Robbers Cave Experiment does not really tell the whole story because the researchers did not disclose that two earlier versions of the same experiment had failed to yield the “desired” results (Perry, 2018). The two groups of boys in the study were artificially selected, as were the various competitions, which does not reflect the randomness of real life. In real life, it is not realistic to believe that middle-school white boys randomly selected into two groups will compare with, say, rival political formations, street gangs, sports rivals, business competitors with hostile takeovers, etc. At any rate, there were no females, adults, or people of other

ethnicities in the experiment! Real-world formations are characterized by wide complexities in race, age groups, culture, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, shared experiences, etc. This raises the validity of trying to generalize the results of the Robbers Cave Experiment to the real world (i.e., the ecological validity of the study). However, one can argue that the experiment happened in a real-world environment and thus has high ecological validity (McLeod, 2008). The boys in the experiment did not know that they were participating in a study; no parental consent was obtained, and no provisions were made to protect the minors against the physical and emotional harm that some of them experienced. The researchers masqueraded as camp counselors and artificially created the challenges while subtly and overtly encouraging the boys towards the results that they wanted. These raise serious ethical issues about the entire experiment due to clear violations of acceptable standards of ethical research (Schaefer & Narimani, 2021), as well as questions of confirmation bias since the researchers artificially set up and manipulated the experiment towards the desired hypotheses (McLeod, 2008).

A Critical Evaluation of the Experiment for Lessons on Contemporary Conflict Management

Notwithstanding these valid criticisms, the observations at the Robbers Cave experiment may find practical utility and examples in many facets of life and society. The experiment essentially demonstrated that conflict and prejudice between various groups are driven by competition for resources that are perceived to be desirable yet are scarce in supply (Fine, 2004). This is the basis of the Realistic Conflict Theory in social psychology. The experiment also demonstrates, albeit inadvertently, that conflicts themselves can artificially be created when groups of people (sometimes total strangers) are brought together to compete for resources whose availability can artificially be made scarce by instigators for any number of noble and ignoble objectives. Ultimately, though, the observations carve out a pathway by which hitherto competitors can be united to pursue common superordinate objectives that advance the welfare and/or interests of all parties.

Lessons from the Experiment in Political Conflict Management

Virtually any conflict in the human arena can be simply viewed through the lenses of the experiment, the clarity of which is blurred by the substantial weaknesses of the experiment as stated above. Political settings where there is contestation for political power (the scarce resource) between two (or more) political formations (in-groups) create possible case studies for intergroup hostilities.

Post-Election Violence in Kenya

In Kenya, such conflict for political power led two political formations or in-groups contending for the presidency (the Party of National Unity and the Orange Democratic Movement Party) to set the country on the precipice of

a civil war, as more than 1,200 people were killed and in excess of 600,000 people were displaced from their homes in the 2007-2008 post-election violence (Johnson *et al.*, 2014). Members of each political in-group in this case were unfortunately manipulated by the chief instigators (or call them “camp counselors”) to perceive the other members of the political out-group as dire competitors for power, land, privilege, and social status (Jennifer, 2009). This created harsh rhetoric, ethnic contempt and jingoism, tribal persecutions, and serious human rights violations that attracted international intervention for purposes of punishment of those instigators (leaders) perceived to bear the greatest responsibility on the one hand (through legal proceedings at the International Criminal Court in the Hague) and eventual resolution of the conflict through the formation of a grand coalition government of the two antagonistic in-group parties inspired by the need to preserve Kenyan statehood from total collapse (a superordinate goal). However, there were clearly a plethora of other complex issues and factors at play (over and above conflict for political power) that led to the violence.

Rwandan Genocide, the War in Darfur, and the Russian-Ukraine War

In other countries, especially where there has been serious political conflict for political power (the scarce resource) with resulting loss of lives and human rights violations, it is possible to identify a pattern of antagonistic in-groups and their various leaders (who could pass as the “researchers masquerading as camp counselors”); e.g., the 1994 Rwanda genocide pitting the two ethnic in-groups (Tutsis vs. Hutus) fighting for political power (Magnarella, 2005); the 2003 war in Darfur, Sudan, pitting the two religious in-groups (Muslims vs. non-Muslims of that region with different fighters coalescing around each group) fighting for political power, and territorial domination, among other reasons (de Waal, 2007); the ongoing war in Ukraine pitting two international in-groups (Russians vs. Ukrainians and their respective separatists and sympathizers) fighting for territorial legitimacy, political power, etc., with devastating consequences (Levy & Leaning, 2022), among many other examples elsewhere in the world. In all cases, the international community has been helping to restore peace by appealing to the superordinate values of national unity and shared prosperity.

Nonetheless, as the criticism of the Robbers Cave Experiment so eloquently points out, even these examples given may be superficial *prima facie* as they do not capture the myriads of complex underlying issues that were uniquely necessary in instigating, initiating, propagating, maintaining, and eventually resolving the mentioned conflicts.

What about Racism and Xenophobia?

During tough economic times when jobs are scarce, the age-old “natives” vs. “immigrants/asylum seekers” in-groups typically witness increasing conflict and prejudice with racial discrimination, in which natives (typically

Caucasians in predominantly white populations) believe that the immigrants (typically of African, Asian, or Middle-East descent) are taking over their jobs (Bianchi *et al.*, 2018). This phenomenon is also true among African in-groups, e.g., the recurrent xenophobic attacks in South Africa pitting native, largely black South Africans against immigrants from other African countries who are often accused of taking over (scarce) jobs that should belong to the natives (Olofinbiyi, 2022). Recently, there has been increasingly toxic political rhetoric and violence between various in-group formations among the Democrats and the Republicans in the United States contending for political power. This has created many other shades and iterations of in-group vs. out-group conflicts, including left-wing vs. right-wing politicians, and political ideologies, etc. They're all ultimately in conflict for political power and influence (Piazza, 2023). A review of these conflicts within the context of the experiment can easily pick out similarities between various actors and characters in real life and the experiment. However, it is to be noted that the complexities surrounding these real-life events are clearly beyond the scope of the experiment.

What About in Business and the Workplace?

Business and workplace environments in which new employees are hired often inevitably set up conflict between two in-groups (the younger vs. the older employees) contending for real and perceived resources, e.g., promotions, bonuses, favors with the bosses, etc. (Yeung *et al.*, 2015). In workplaces where the management makes important but potentially unpopular decisions (e.g., salary deductions) to be implemented in the organization by lower-cadre employees or even among employees of different qualification portfolios (e.g., doctors vs. nurses), in-group vs out-group hostilities soon form (Echebarria-Echabe & Guede, 2003). This has been a weakness tactfully exploited by suave managers to push down unpopular decisions. In this era of business and health care mergers and acquisitions, once the mergers are completed, the organizations often contend with the inevitable cultural clashes and conflicts between the two (or more) in-groups acquired or merged in the process. Deliberate efforts to bring these in-groups together in pursuit of larger business interests (superordinate goals) can and have been deployed successfully (Creasy & Kinard, 2013). Nonetheless, there are often other, more complex, intertwined factors that drive these workplace conflicts.

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, the author chooses to regard the Robbers Cave Experiment as an example of a "forgotten classic" whose lessons carry sufficient fodder to satiate those who would have an appetite for understanding the basic rubrics of realistic conflict as a theory and a reality. The experiment not only highlights the origin of conflict between two (or more) in-groups as a contestation for scarce resources but also demonstrates a potential pathway for conflict resolution through the pursuit of superordinate

goals. It was done almost 70 years ago under research methodology whose veracity and fidelity to (now) known scientific research standards have raised serious questions about its research ethics and confirmation bias, as well as the ecological validity of its conclusions. Nonetheless, it remains a cornerstone in the basic understanding of realistic group conflict theory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The examples given by the author as delineated above are not exhaustive by a long stretch in reflecting on the utility of the lessons that can be drawn from the Robbers Cave Experiment in contemporary reality. The author recommends a pragmatic approach in considering the lessons from the experiment to aid in resolving intergroup conflicts in contemporary life by promoting the pursuit of superordinate goals. This can promote peace and unity. The author also recommends a multivariate approach to conflict management that looks at the entirety of the complexities informing and framing various conflicts in society. Admittedly, more research is needed in the similitude of the Robbers Cave Experiment that adheres to acceptable scientific research standards to drive a clearer understanding of intergroup conflict.

REFERENCES

- Baumeister, R. F. V., K. D. (2007). Encyclopedia of Social Psychology (Vol. 2). SAGE Publications Inc. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/encyclopedia-of-social-psychology/book227442>
- Bianchi, E. C., Hall, E. V., & Lee, S. (2018). Reexamining the Link Between Economic Downturns and Racial Antipathy: Evidence That Prejudice Against Blacks Rises During Recessions. *Psychological Science*, 29(10), 1584-1597. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797618777214>
- Creasy, T., & Kinard, J. (2013). Health care mergers and acquisitions: implications of robbers cave realistic conflict theory and prisoner's dilemma game theory. *Health Care Manag (Frederick)*, 32(1), 58-68. <https://doi.org/10.1097/HCM.0b013e31827edadd>
- De Waal, A. (2007). Darfur and the Failure of the Responsibility to Protect. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 83(6), 1039-1054. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4541909>
- Echebarria-Echabe, A., & Guede, E. F. (2003). Extending the theory of realistic conflict to competition in institutional settings: intergroup status and outcome. *J Soc Psychol*, 143(6), 763-782. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224540309600429>
- Fine, G. A. (2004). Forgotten Classic: The Robbers Cave Experiment [Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment, Muzafer Sherif, O. J. Harvey, B. Jack White, William R. Hood, Carolyn W. Sherif]. *Sociological Forum*, 19(4), 663-666. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148836>
- Jackson, J. W. (1993). Realistic group conflict theory: A review and evaluation of the theoretical and empirical

- literature. *The Psychological Record*, 43(3), 395-413.
- Jennifer, C. (2009). Background on the Post-Election Crisis in Kenya. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved on 29/09/2023 from <https://www.csis.org/blogs/smart-global-health/background-post-election-crisis-kenya>
- Johnson, K., Scott, J., Sasyniuk, T., Ndeti, D., Kisielewski, M., Rouhani, S., Bartels, S., Mutiso, V., Mbwayo, A., Rae, D., & Lawry, L. (2014). A national population-based assessment of 2007–2008 election-related violence in Kenya. *Conflict and Health*, 8(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1752-1505-8-2>
- Kihlstrom, J. F. (2021). Ecological Validity and “Ecological Validity”. *Perspect Psychol Sci*, 16(2), 466-471. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620966791>
- Levy, B. S., & Leaning, J. (2022). Russia’s War in Ukraine — The Devastation of Health and Human Rights. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 387(2), 102-105. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2207415>
- Magnarella, P. J. (2005). The Background and Causes of the Genocide in Rwanda. *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 3(4), 801-822. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqi059>
- McLeod, S. A. (2008, 10/05/2023). Robbers Cave Experiment. SimplyPsychology. Retrieved 28/09/2023 from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/robbers-cave.html>
- Olofinbiyi, S. A. (2022). Anti-immigrant Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Untreated Malady and Potential Snag for National Development. *Insight on Africa*, 14(2), 193-211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09750878221079803>
- Perry, G. (2018). The lost boys : inside Muzafer Sherif’s Robbers Cave experiment / Gina Perry [Social Psychology]. Scribe Publications. <https://scribepublications.com.au/books-authors/books/the-lost-boys-9781925322354> (2018)
- Piazza, J. A. (2023). Drivers of Political Violence in the United States. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 42(1), 11-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07439156221133763>
- Power, S. A., Velez, G., Qadafi, A., & Tennant, J. (2018). The SAGE Model of Social Psychological Research. *Perspect Psychol Sci*, 13(3), 359-372. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617734863>
- Relations, U. o. O. I. o. G., & Sherif, M. (1961). Intergroup conflict and cooperation: The Robbers Cave experiment (Vol. 10). University Book Exchange Norman, OK.
- Schaefer, I., & Narimani, P. (2021). [Ethics in participatory research-reflection on challenges and possible impairments for participants]. *Bundesgesundheitsblatt Gesundheitsforschung Gesundheitschutz*, 64(2), 171-178. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00103-020-03270-0> (Ethische Aspekte in der partizipativen Forschung – Reflexion von Herausforderungen und möglichen Beeinträchtigungen für Teilnehmende.)
- Yeung, D. Y., Fung, H. H., & Chan, D. (2015). Managing conflict at work: Comparison between younger and older managerial employees. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 26(3), 342-364. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-06-2014-0044>