

Camps, conflict and collectivism

Sixty years after the Robbers Cave study, **Stephen Reicher** and **S. Alexander Haslam** introduce an appreciation of a Sherif for today and for tomorrow

Sixty years ago, Muzafer Sherif conducted his Robbers Cave Boys' Camp study – one of the most significant psychological experiments ever conducted. The collection of articles in this special feature examine why those studies – and Sherif's larger body of work – remain of enduring significance. To begin, we provide an overview of the conceptual, methodological and societal implications of Sherif's work. Three further articles then address his life and how it affected his ideas; the experience of the boys in the camps; and the importance of the studies in understanding the collective dimension of behaviour.

questions

Is conflict between groups inevitable? If you wanted to demonstrate the impact of intergroup relations on behaviour, and you had unlimited resources, what sort of study would you design?

resources

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Not long ago, we suggested a feature to the editor of *The Psychologist* called 'Desert Island Texts', in which an invitee would select the top books and papers they would take to the mythical island. Well, here is a variant: 'Desert Island Quotes'. If we were choosing, then a quote of Muzafer Sherif and his wife Carolyn would definitely be on our list, perhaps at the top.

The relevant passage relates to perhaps the most famous phase of Sherif's most famous work – the 1954 Robbers Cave Boys' Camp Study. In this study boys were brought from their homes to the camp in Oklahoma. After a period of getting to know each other they were separated into two groups that then took part in a series of competitive games. The Sherifs narrate how this led to a series of 'spontaneous frustrations' arising from the clash between groups. They describe how suspicion and hostility grew between the groups. They meticulously document the rise of negative stereotypes and biased judgements against the other group. They provide graphic accounts of all the subtle and less subtle forms of conflict that developed: each group stole and vandalised the property of the other, at meal times the groups used food as a weapon to hurl at each other (in what they referred to as 'garbage wars'), and when the member of one group accidentally brushed against a member of the other he was admonished for having put 'dirt' on his clothes. The Sherifs sum all this up by writing:

If an outside observer had entered the situation after the conflict began... he could only have concluded on the basis of their behaviour that these boys (who were the 'cream of the crop' in their communities) were either disturbed, vicious or wicked youngsters (Sherif & Sherif, 1969, p.254).

This quote encapsulates for us why the work of the Sherifs, and of Muzafer in particular, is of such importance today, why it is worthy of reconsideration, and hence why we were motivated to produce this special feature on Sherif 60 years on

from Robbers Cave. For, of course, the import of these words is that the observer would be wrong in attributing violence to the violent nature of the individuals involved. What is more, this error derives from the spatial and temporal positioning of the observer: as an *outsider* to the process who only apprehends it *after the conflict began*. Such an observer would not have seen the process of conflict develop over time, would not have seen how changes in structural context wrought psychological changes in the perceptions, feelings and actions of the boys, and therefore could only relate conflict to what was currently before his or her eyes – the boys themselves.

Such positioning is typical of the way in which we generally come across violence in our society – and hence of the explanations that predominate. We see a riot, because it is sufficiently dramatic to appear on our screens. But we don't see the long, slow processes and the nature of the interactions that led up to it. We therefore easily conclude that those involved are inherently bad people, gang members, products of dysfunctional families, morally incapable, disturbed, vicious or otherwise wicked in some way. This, for example, is seen clearly in political reaction to the 2011 English riots (see Reicher & Stott, 2011; and tinyurl.com/mo6rgbx).

Sherif's genius was to produce research that repositioned us as observers. He brings time back into the process. He allows us to see events unfold and to see how initially undisturbed, gentle and good people can be led into conflict. By creating and manipulating immersive social worlds, he demonstrates the remarkable power of context in creating who we are and what we do. As a result, our reaction to the studies is not to say 'what horrible people, we must target them', but rather 'what a horrible world, it must be changed'. In this way, our own moral and political sensibilities are transformed.

More broadly, Sherif's work is important to us in at least four interlinked ways. First, at a conceptual level, he guides us towards seeing what Michael Platow and John Hunter (later in this issue) term the 'necessarily collectivistic' nature of human psychology. Second, at a methodological level, he shows the importance of conducting research that can apprehend the impact of the social world. Third, at a political and moral level, he demonstrates the inescapable interconnections between our psychological models of social issues and our sense of how to respond to those issues. As Aysel Kayaoglu and her

colleagues reveal in their contribution to this special feature, this objective was at the root of Sherif's endeavours from the start to the end of his career.

There is a fourth point, however, which relates to the fact that in revisiting Sherif our aim is not only to look backwards but also to find ways of moving forward. Like any body of research, Sherif's was not flawless and does not provide a final word. Rather, looking closely at what he did (as Gina



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Sherif found plausible and effective ways of varying the structure of social worlds

Perry does in her article) reveals unresolved issues and suggests new avenues to explore. Let us briefly consider each of these four points in turn.

Conceptual impact

In a paper written in 1977, towards the very end of his career, Sherif confronted the seemingly perennial crisis of confidence in social psychology. The paper could have been written today and deserves to be read by us all. In it, he demolishes the notion that technical solutions (e.g. tighter methods and better statistics) will, in and of themselves, move us forward. All the statistical sophistication in the world can never save us from irrelevance. Indeed, the danger is that we focus so much on our methods of model building that we ignore the fact that they are oriented to trivial problems.

Instead Sherif counsels that we start by asking some 'unthinkable' questions, the very first of which is 'What is the nature of the social system?'. In the same way that those who study vision recognise that they need to study the physics of light, so those who study social behaviour must interrogate the structure and functioning of society. Only in this

way can they ask sensible questions about how society impacts the individual.

The premise here is that the proper concern of social psychology is precisely how the social world relates to the psychological field of the individual. This was central to his work in the 1930s on the autokinetic effect – where he showed that basic perceptual judgements are shaped by social norms. As Platow and Hunter show us, it was equally central to the Boys' Camp Studies where he didn't just provide general descriptions of conflict but provided detailed and exhaustive analysis of multiple aspects of group functioning.

In effect, Sherif overcomes a common error in psychology – that of confusing *explanandum* with *explanans* (the phenomenon that needs explanation and the explanation itself). That is, individualists assume that because we are explaining individual minds our explanations must be in terms of individual characteristics, while anti-individualists retort that since social factors are critical we must look at aggregate rather than individual phenomena. Sherif was firmly fixed on explaining what individual actors think and do. He insisted, however, that this is only possible by looking at the way that people are placed in relation to each other in society.

This indeed was the true radicalism of the realistic conflict theory that Sherif developed to make sense of the Boys' Camp Studies. He argued that psychological relations between individual group members depend upon the nature of functional interdependencies between groups. How we see and how we treat the other depends upon whether one group's gain is also the other's gain (positive interdependence) or whether one group's gain is the other's loss (negative interdependence). In simpler terms, cooperative group relations lead to harmony and competitive group relations lead to conflict. Of course in one sense this might seem so obvious as to be trite. But in another it forces us to ask questions about human psychology in terms of what is going on between groups rather than what is fixed in individuals. This presented a profound challenge to theories that were popular at the time, but it still remains a challenge to theories that are becoming increasingly popular today.

Methodological impact

It is often remarked that method is the practice of theory. It reflects our

assumptions about the nature of the subject we are studying and hence how it should be studied. Far too often, however, things work the other way round. We start by fetishising a particular method as the mark of scientific credibility, and this then comes to shape the way that we theorise the human subject. One consequence is that methods that ignore context and that exclude temporal development lead to a desocialised and static psychology.

Once again, Sherif provides an alternative for us. In order to show how social context shapes our psychology, he (and Carolyn) created rich and compelling social worlds. He found plausible and effective ways of varying the structure of those worlds. He allowed the consequences to play out over an extended time period. And, by doing so, he provided compelling evidence of the importance of time and place.

As Perry convincingly documents, such methods present huge logistical challenges and raise huge ethical issues. But, as Platow and Hunter suggest with equal force, the costs of ignoring such epic methods may be even greater. We have argued before on a number of occasions, if one rules out sufficiently powerful investigations of the social variability in human action, one is left only to study sources of individual variability. This privileging of the individual over the social leads to a lop-sided account of human psychology.

Of course, it is important to address the cognitive capacities and neural architecture that make human action possible. But next time someone suggests that they have found the 'violence region' in the brain, or the violence gene, or the violence neurotransmitter, as if to do so allows us to explain the phenomenon, remember how Sherif transformed the cream of his crop and exercise caution.

Social impact

Kayaoglu and her fellow Turkish colleagues reveal to us the integrity and the continuity of Sherif's psychological, social and political thought. He was a radical critic of the social relations in contemporary society. For him, it is these contingent relations rather than a timeless human nature that are the source of human ills. His psychology, essentially, was designed to substantiate the links.

For some, Sherif's radicalism (a complex mixture of Marxist, modernist and gestalt ideas as Kayaoglu and colleagues point out) may be off-putting and may dent their willingness to embrace Sherif's arguments. But if Sherif

incorporates Marx into his perspective, this is primarily to do with an understanding of the human condition that is rooted in historical forms of social reality. This is exemplified in Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach where he famously wrote: 'the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of social relations' (cited in Geras, 1983, p.29).

In effect, Sherif gives psychological substance to this philosophical claim. Is violence part of the human essence? Not at all. Does it derive from the character of our social relations? Absolutely. And what are those social relations? Relations of competition in which different groups are pitted against each other.

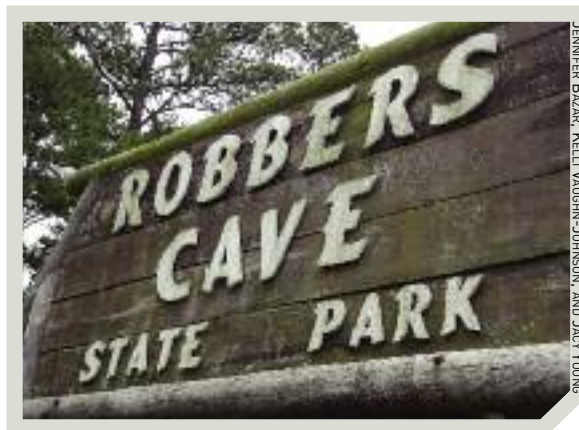
This is a profoundly optimistic, emancipatory and activist psychology.

It tells us that humanity is not doomed to conflict, that human brutality is not something that we might bemoan but must reluctantly accept because life is necessarily nasty, brutal and short. It also points to the group level at which we must operate in order to bring about positive forms of social change – enjoining us to transform the social relations of competition between groups in society. Indeed, Sherif's corpus of work was not just a reflection on how society (and hence human psychology) is, it is a passionate advocacy for how society (and hence human psychology) *should be*.

One can accept all of this without necessarily taking the further step that claims that capitalist market relations are the root of such competition and that such competition is inherent in capitalist market relations. But, having said that, there is surely mileage in investigating such claims. In a period where every relationship is becoming commodified – so that not only are customers in shops regarded as consumers but also patients in hospitals and students in lecture theatres – it is important to examine how this impacts relationships, how it brings people together or sets them against each other, and how it creates conflict or else harmony. In short, Sherif leads us to address the costs of treating the whole world like a marketplace and (worse) of trying to turn the whole world into a marketplace.

Moving forward

The astute reader will have noted a contradiction – or at least a tension – between the various elements of our argument. For if social context is such



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a strong determinant of the human subject, how can those subjects act to reshape the social context? This is a classic issue, not only in Marxist thought but in the social sciences more generally (where it is framed as the structure–agency debate). Sherif was well aware of this problem. In theory, at least, he recognised that people actively deliberate over the way they relate to others (their frame of reference). But it is also fair to say that he prioritised the way in which an imposed frame of reference affects our deliberations. Certainly his theorisation of the Boys' Camp Studies leaves little place for the active subject and suggests that we cannot but conform to the structures layered upon us.

One consequence of this theoretical focus is a tendency to ignore, or at least to underplay, discrepant empirical phenomena. Two elements in particular stand out. The first is highlighted by Perry later in this feature, on the basis of her fascinating interviews with Sherif's original participants. It has to do with the issue of leadership and the role of experimenters as leaders (something we have identified as an important feature of other 'classic' studies). However hard they tried to be neutral, the mere fact that the adults in the camp did nothing when conflict arose signalled an implicit norm that conflictual behaviour was acceptable. Thus, a competitive structure was complemented by an interpretative process as to how one should view and respond to others – a process in which leaders played a key part.

Yet second, and relatedly, however much the experimenters tried to create a competitive environment, and however much they contributed to the interpretation of that environment, the boys did not always accept that interpretation. At times, they resisted rather than conformed. This is where Sherif's abandoned study of 1953

becomes critical. The study is relatively unknown, it was never written up in detail, precisely because the boys' construction of social relations was at odds with that which the experimenters wanted to impose. Nonetheless, one of those involved, Herbert Kelman, wrote detailed (unpublished) notes about what happened. He recounts the multiple ways in which the experimenters sought to induce competition and conflict between the groups. But the more they tried, the

more the boys became suspicious that the experimenters were the real outgroup, trying to set them against each other – and the more this brought the boys together. Sherif concluded that any further intervention would simply solidify this suspicion and hence he concluded the experiment.

But what Sherif saw as a failure raises critical questions about how people construe groups and intergroup relations. It provides a way into the question of how the frame of reference is understood and Kelman, in his notes, provides important clues to answers. In particular, he points to the importance not only of leadership, but also of communication structures within and between the boys, and of their previous experiences and understandings.

In sum, Sherif's work takes us beyond Sherif. As well as providing a model of how powerful, persuasive and impactful social psychology should be done, it also allows us to understand and appreciate what still needs to be done. In this special feature, then, we come neither simply to praise Sherif, nor to bury him. Rather, we hope to provide a balanced and timely assessment of his work and to inspire others to take up the reins where he left off.



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