

Sherif (1954)

This experiment aimed to investigate the effects of **intergroup conflict** and **discrimination**, and how **superordinate goals** can be used to reduce **hostility** between **competing groups**.

This study was carried out as a field experiment at Robber's Cave State Park, Oklahoma, America.

22 boys aged 11-years-old from established Protestant families of middle-class, all unknown to each other. All were well adjusted both in school and at home, according to observations, school and home interviews. According to school records, all the subjects were doing average or above schoolwork (none was failing or had a history of failures). They were mostly above average in intelligence test scores.

After matching the boys from each group on a series of characteristics (e.g. height; weight; sports ability), the boys were randomly assigned to one of two groups. They were then, as individual groups, picked up by bus on successive days in the summer of 1954 and transported to a 200-acre Boy Scouts of America camp in the Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma.

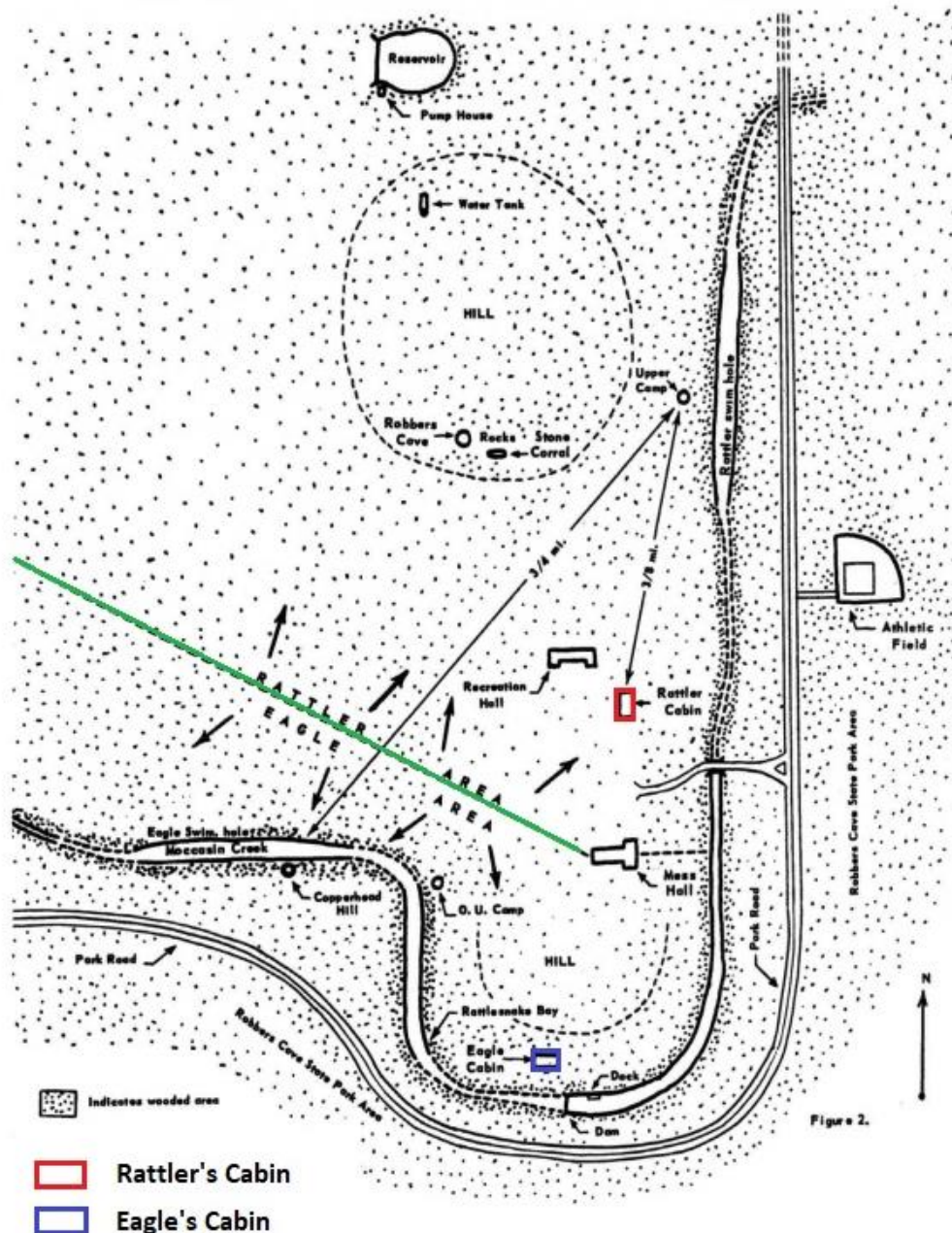
As the experimental site itself (surrounding park and the mountainous areas) were within a sixty mile radius, it was possible to plan activities for both in-group and intergroup stages. Within easy walking distance from each group cabin, and in opposite directions, were swimming, boating and camping areas which were available for the exclusive use of each group. Campfires could be held near the cabins, at the "hideout" areas, or in a natural stone corral which was near Robbers Cave on the hill above camp. A very isolated reservoir in the hills above the camp supplied its water and offered facilities within hiking distance for overnight campouts. An athletic field was located across the park road, outside camp property, and nearest to the north cabin. The field was accessible by two different routes for the two groups. Therefore, when and where contact between groups would take place during competition situations could be controlled.

STAGE ONE: In-group Formation

As the groups were kept separate from each other, they were encouraged to bond as two individual groups through the pursuit of common goals that required co-operative discussion, planning and execution. During this first phase, the groups did not know of the other group's existence. The boys developed an attachment to their groups throughout the first week of the camp, quickly establishing their own cultures and group norms, by doing various activities together like hiking, swimming, etc. The boys chose names for their groups, **The Eagles** and **The Rattlers**, and stencilled them onto shirts and flags.

One group was brought to the site on June 19th, 1954, and the other on June 20th at a time when the first group was out of the immediate campgrounds on a cookout. Because of the size and layout of the site, it was possible to centre activities of the two groups in different areas simultaneously.

GENERAL LAYOUT OF THE CAMPSITE AND RESPECTIVE AREAS OF THE TWO GROUPS



The data was collected by staff members who were allocated to each camp, they were asked to always be close to their respective groups. Each participant observer spent at least twelve hours a day in observing their respective groups. The hours spent in observation of each group by the participant observers alone (not counting observation time of other staff members) were 240 and 252 hours respectively, or a total of 492 hours for both groups. The participant observers jotted down any interactions or conversations as soon as possible after they occurred. They then expanded their notes during the afternoon rest period and after the boys went to sleep around 9:30pm. At that time, a complete report of observations for the day was written and ratings made by the observer. An additional source of data at some crucial points consisted of answers and reactions of subjects about events in response to naive questions by staff members who could appropriately ask such questions because they had not been present when the events occurred. In addition to the observational reports, 1200 pictures were taken during the three-week period. Conversations were recorded by a hidden tape recorder at some choice points without the awareness of the participants. This was to maintain authenticity of their behaviour.

The Eagles were informed that another group was in camp three days before the end of Stage 1. Discovery of another group of campers brought heightened awareness of "us" and "ours" as contrasted with "outsiders" and "intruders," an intense desire to compete with the other group in team games, and enthusiastic preparation to do so. These developments set the scene for Stage 2.

STAGE TWO: Intergroup Friction

During the last days of Stage 1, both the Rattlers and Eagles became insistent in their desire to challenge the other group of boys to play competitive games, especially baseball. When the Rattlers heard the other group playing on "their" ball field, they made remarks expressing the feeling that they considered others playing there as intrusion. Even without coming into physical contact with "those boys at the other end of the camp," the Rattlers had built up a highly competitive mood in relation to them.

Sherif now arranged the competition stage where friction between the groups was to occur over the next 4-6 days. In this phase it was intended to bring the two groups into competition with each other in conditions that would create frustration between them. A series of competitive activities (e.g. baseball, tug-of-war etc.) were arranged with a trophy being awarded on the basis of accumulated team score. There were also individual prizes for the winning group such as a medal and a multi-bladed pocketknife with no consolation prizes being given to the "losers."

The Rattlers' reaction to the informal announcement of a series of contests was absolute confidence in their victory! They spent the day talking about the contests and making improvements on the ball field, which they took over as their own to such an extent that they spoke of putting a "Keep Off" sign there! They ended up putting their Rattler flag on the pitch. At this time, several Rattlers made threatening remarks about what they would do if anybody from The Eagles bothered their flag.

The Eagles did not exhibit as much enthusiasm as the Rattlers when they first learned about the tournament in this informal way, even though there were a few "Oh, boy!" expressions. They were interested to learn if the other boys were practicing.

Situations were also devised whereby one group gained at the expense of the other. For example, one group was delayed getting to a picnic and when they arrived the other group had eaten their food.

The boys were told about a series of events that would take place where they could compete against the other group. After agreement with boy groups, these were arranged over 7 days.

Events whose outcomes could be checked by contestants:

1. First baseball game (Day 2)*
2. First tug-of-war (Day 2)*
3. Second baseball game (Day 3)
4. Second tug-of-war (Day 3)
5. Touch football game (Day 4)
6. First tent pitching (Day 4)*
7. Third baseball game (Day 4)
8. Third tug-of-war (Day 5)
9. Second tent pitching (Day 5)
10. Third tent pitching (Day 5)

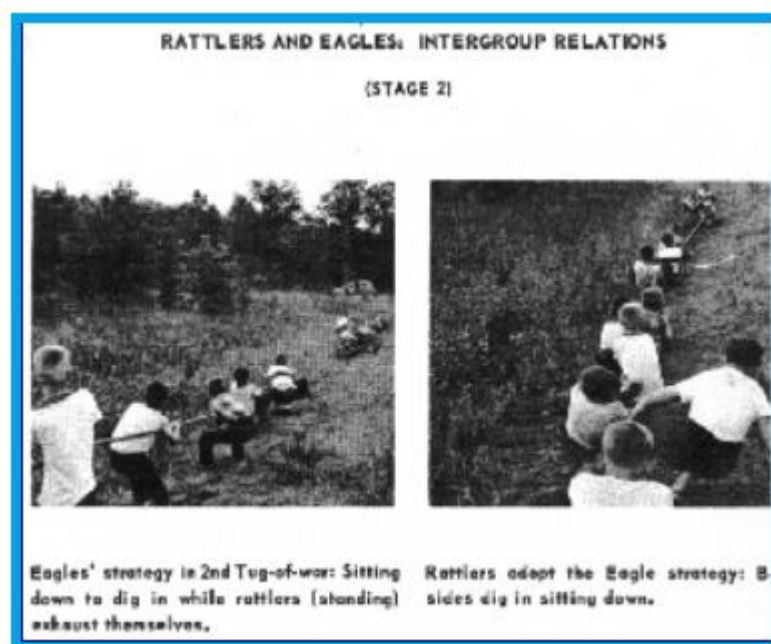
*Victors had to win 2 contests out of 3 for the marked activities.

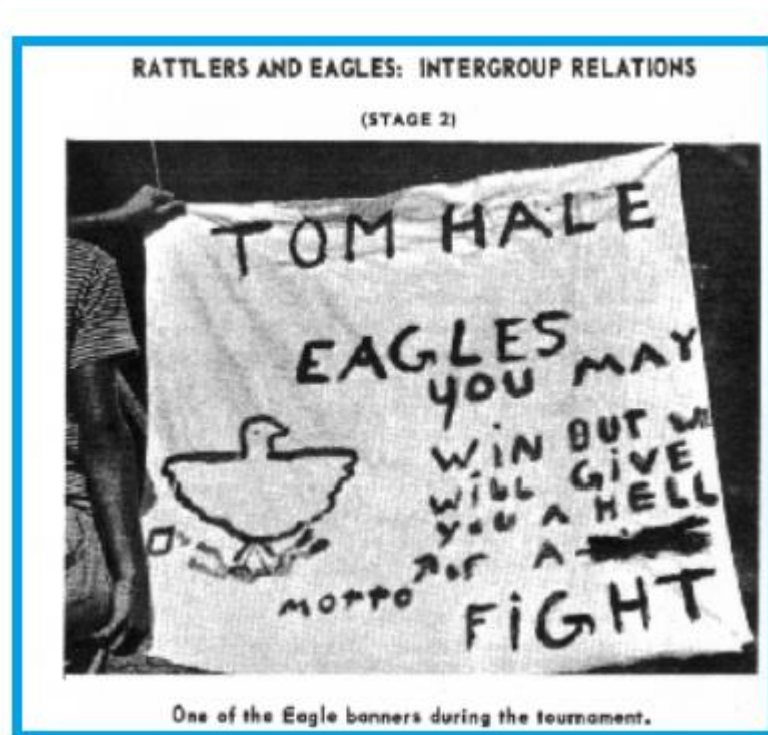
Events judged by staff members separately for the two groups:

1. First cabin inspection (Day 3)
2. Second cabin inspection (Day 4)
3. Third cabin inspection (Day 5)
4. Skits and songs (Day 3)
5. Treasure hunt (Day 5)

At first, this prejudice was only verbally expressed, such as taunting or name-calling. As the competition wore on, this expression took a more direct route. The Eagles burned the Rattler's flag. Then the next day, the Rattler's ransacked The Eagle's cabin, overturned beds, and stole private property. The groups became so aggressive with each other that the researchers had to physically separate them.

During the subsequent two-day cooling off period, the boys listed features of the two groups. The boys tended to characterise their own **in-group** in very favourable terms, and the other **out-group** in very unfavourable terms.





At the end of Stage 2, the Rattlers and Eagles were both clearly structured, closely knit ingroups. This is revealed in observational data, observers' ratings, and in sociometric choices obtained at this time from each member individually by the participant observer of his respective group (who appeared as counsellor to the participants).

Friendship Choices of In-group and Out-group Members

By Rattlers and Eagles

End Stage 2

	Rattlers		Eagles	
Choices of	f	%	f	%
In-group members	73	93.6	62	92.5
Out-group members	5	6.4	5	7.5

The Eagles and Rattlers were asked to make ratings of their own and each other's group. It was explained to the subjects that they were being asked to do this to help the administration find out what they thought of their new acquaintances and how they were enjoying camp.

STAGE THREE: Intergroup Integration

The first part of Stage 3 was devoted to a series of contact situations varying in duration from about 15 minutes to an hour or so, and differing in the character, such as (a) participating together in a psychological experiment with opportunity to interact before and after the experiment, (b) attending a movie together, (c) having meals together in the same mess hall with utmost freedom to choose seats and interact with anyone in any way

desired. Essentially the same general procedure was followed in each of the contact situations. The two groups were taken to the place of contact (for example, the recreation hall or mess hall), both groups arriving at the same time or one shortly after the other, and then they were left to their own devices. Once the groups were in the contact situation, the staff walked away from the immediate contact range and pretended to be engaged in some activity, such as sitting under a tree in conversation. In no contact situations did the Eagle and Rattler staff members associate with one another during the period while the contact situations were being initiated and carried out.

One such example was planned in relation to shooting firecrackers. It was the Fourth of July and the participants were told that they could shoot their firecrackers with anyone they wanted to. Both groups started shooting them at about the same time. At no time was there intermingling of the two groups.

Following these contact meetings, Sherif introduced tasks which involved working collaboratively. These superordinate goals aimed to reduce intergroup friction. The first superordinate goal to be introduced pertained to drinking water at a time when both groups faced the prospect of thirst and became progressively thirstier with the successive steps of activities directed toward solution of the problem. To solve the problem the groups had to work together to find a solution to fixing the broken water pipe in the tank. They were informed by their respective participant observers that there might be a water shortage in the whole camp as there seemed to be some trouble with the water system, but that it was being investigated. The announcement went on to say that the help of about 25 people was needed. Some of the Rattlers discovered a ladder about 30 feet from the tank and were rejoicing over this discovery. Immediately some of the Rattlers brought the ladder to the side of the tank and climbed to the top, followed by the Eagles. The boys took turns taking off the lid to inspect the inside of the tank, seeing that it was $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Suggestions from members of both groups concerning effective ways to do it were thrown in from all sides simultaneously with actual efforts at the work itself. When the water finally came through, there was common rejoicing. The Rattlers did not object to having the Eagles get ahead of them when they all got a drink, since the Eagles did not have drinking cans with them and were thirstier, as they had run out of water before the Rattlers.

In order to check the influence of situational factors at this rather fluid state of intergroup relations, the staff re-arranged the camp dining room while the two groups were at their cabins cleaning up from the trip. Instead of long benches, the room was rearranged into smaller groups of tables. Once inside the two groups went through the line to get their food separately, but there was friendly conversation between members of the two groups. The reactions to the new table arrangement were as anticipated. In spite of the fact that the groups had lined up separately in habitual fashion to get food, the seating at the newly arranged tables cut across the in-group demarcations. The two tables in the middle were occupied by Eagles and Rattlers sitting together.

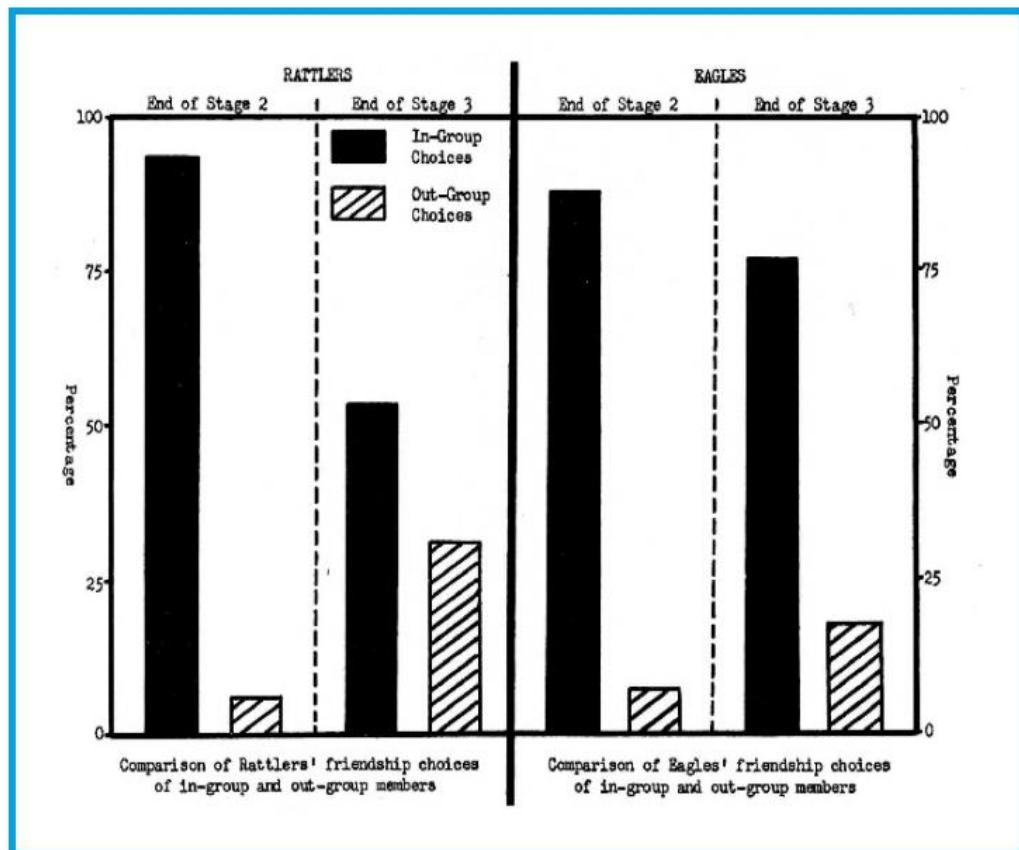
Later at the evening campfire there was a striking demonstration of the cumulative effectiveness of situations requiring interdependent activities toward common superordinate goals. Procedures for cooperative give-and-take between groups had been developed. It was arranged and presented by the two groups themselves to entertain each other. The notion of "taking turns", which had started as a way of regulating activities in which a conflict of interests was involved, had been extended to joint singing of the two groups' favourite songs on previous occasions. This showed the groups had reduced intergroup conflict and many were talking as friends.

Friendship Choices of In-group and Out-group Members by Rattlers and Eagles

End of Stage 3

	Rattlers		Eagles	
	f	%	f	%
In-group choices	63	63.6	41	76.8
Out-group choices	36	36.4	15	23.2

When the choices of out-group members at the end of Stage 3 are compared with those at the end of Stage 2, a substantial and significant increase is found for both groups.



This study shows how the mere existence of two groups is sufficient to cause the identification of an 'us' and 'them' mentality. When competition is added, intergroup conflict can be observed. This hostility can be reduced by the introduction of superordinate goals. This formulated the basis of **Sherif's Realistic Conflict Theory**.

Reference:

Sherif et al. (1954/1961) Intergroup conflict and cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment. Online at <https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Sherif/chap1.htm>

