

Intergroup Conflict Comparison:
Historical Research on Superordinate Goals and a Contemporary Violence Study

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This summary selects a classic and current study within social psychology recognizing the contributions of social psychology, in addition to linear variation in research methodology.

Introduction

Intergroup conflict has been an area of focus for social psychologist dating back to the 1950's (Sherif, 1958). Contemporary social psychologist have expanded on the research conducted by their colleagues in attempts to further define, and describe intergroup conflict (Rovenpor et al., 2019). Sherif, (1958) presented the research question that explores whether or not superordinate goals reduce intergroup conflict, through the reduction of tension between groups. The following terms were defined in order to develop this research: group is defined as societal unit comprised of multiple people who exist in an interdependent state and maintain similar role relationships, and both possess implicit and explicit norms and values that shape the attitude, sentiment, and aspiration of each member, creating a set of common norms and values. Intergroup relations describe the relationships between at least two groups. Superordinate goals are defined as goals that are very appealing and compelling to the members of at least two separate groups that are experiencing conflict, while also being goals that can't be attained by either group individually without the energy and resources of the other group (Sherif, 1958).

The author in Sherif (1958) builds the foundation for the social psychology research question presented by introducing a handful of research studies conducted between 1949 and 1954, including Bogardus (1947), Sherif, White, & Harvey (1955), Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif (1954), and Hood & Sherif (1955). The author also relies on concepts presented by Bogardus (1947), and Williams (1947). The method chosen by Sherif (1958) was an experimental design that utilized a between subjects approach to test the independent variable of the addition of subordinate goals to intergroup conflict. An experimental approach was used to form the respective groups,

artificial tension was inserted to cause competition and frustration between the groups, and then an attempt was made to relieve that tension through the introduction of subordinate goals.

Sherif (1958) found support for the hypothesis that subordinate goals would in fact reduce tension and alleviate intergroup conflict. Additionally, the authors found strong evidence that when a group could achieve success only through another group failing, this scenario exacerbated hostilities between the groups, and led to a desire within the groups to maintain separation from the other group. This was combined with an increased solidarity within the group, and an increase in the group's cohesiveness. This finding was found in both iterations of group relations, both positive and negative leading to an effect on the relations inside the group. The conclusions were summed in the recognition that superordinate goals do reduce friction between groups, and specifically that providing information, increased social interactions, and intergroup leadership communication, all stand to reduce tension in intergroup conflict and promote achievement of superordinate goals (Sherif, 1958).

Human Behavior

An example of contemporary research related to intergroup conflict is provided by Rovenpor et al. (2019), who explored the question of whether or not violence experienced among two or more groups serves to perpetuate intergroup conflict, causing group members to be less likely to ignore or let go of negative intergroup beliefs. The authors here use work by Leidner et al. (2013), Staub (1999), Camus (1955), Frankl (1984), Heidegger (1996), Steger (2009), Maslow (1968), Proulx & Heine (2009), and Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon (1989), to establish a path that first explores

conflict between groups, moves on to adhere meaning to the conflict, and then describes the literary basis for how that meaning could be translated in the perpetuated maintenance of intergroup conflict. The authors utilize four studies to ethically explore the impact of the salience of conflict through reminding or not reminding subjects of violent conflict, utilizing subjects who were living during a time of real world conflict, or analyzing those who viewed world conflict as large vs. small. Using mixed methods to include correlational, longitudinal, experimental, and quasi-experimental, the authors found support for the hypothesis that violent conflict can serve to perpetuate the intergroup conflict by establishing the conflict as a source of meaning (Rovenpor et al., 2019). By integrating the concepts of intergroup conflict with meaning and how groups strive to find meaning, the authors created a workable path for future studies to explore conflict resolution and reduction, with the concepts that were supported here in mind.

When considering both the historical work of Sherif, (1958) and that of Rovenpor et al., (2019), trends toward a more complete understanding of intergroup conflict becomes evident. The work of Sherif (1958) serves as a foundation for Rovenpor to bring more specificity to the topic by introducing the impact of violence as a result, and perpetuating element of intergroup conflict. The understanding gained both in 1958, and in the contemporary research on the topic, serve to provide a better understanding of human social behavior, and group dynamics as evidenced Leidner et al. (2013)'s work toward achieving peace among groups. When analyzing the work by Leidner et al. (2013), as well as Rovenpor (2019), the results and conclusions reached by these social psychologist investigating the dynamics of group conflict have clearly influenced future applications of the findings. One example comes from the article published in the

NewsRX magazine describing advances in personality research, and citing the authors of Rovenpor, (2019) (NewsRX, 2019).

Influence on Society

Ditlmann, et al. (2017) eloquently describe a number of elements of intergroup conflict utilizing understandable verbiage, supported theories, and past research regarding intergroup conflict as it relates to violence demonstrating the contributions of social psychologist such as Sherif (1958), who through their own emphasis on intergroup relationships paved the way for this expanding and beneficial topic. In 2020, it seems as though technological advances, ease of transportation, and increased global wealth have facilitated more opportunities for distinct groups to come together who may not have otherwise. This increased connectivity, I feel, creates more opportunities for intergroup conflict and potentially violence. Because of the beneficial work done in studying phenomena common to this conflict, the field of social psychology has added valuable insight.

As is the case with many of today's scientific breakthroughs, the opportunity often exists for those with malicious intent can find ways to utilize findings, such as those described in Sherif (1958), and Rovenpor, (2019) to distort, manipulate or otherwise do harm with the findings presented. A hypothetical example would be the use of a superordinate goal to lure a group into deescalating intergroup tension for the sole purpose of gaining strategic advantage and ultimately overpowering the hated group. This scenario simultaneously demonstrates the validity of this research to real world scenarios, while highlighting the risks involved with publication of psychological research that can be easily exploited. On a micro level, the use of techniques to reduce tension in between

small groups, such as within a company or organization through the utilization of superordinate goals is a great example of the use of this line of research in everyday life. Superordinate goals can be utilized to bring about social change as demonstrated by recent movements toward a reduction in the use of fossil fuels. Proponents of this reduction often offer information and data that could be viewed as presenting a superordinate goal to groups or individuals who may be opposed to the reduction, by offering benefits that are mutually beneficial to environmentalist and those opposed to a reduction in their access to the resource. An example of this could be describing the benefits of using electric cars due to their ease of use, and lack of bulky, loud, and smelly engines, and reduced operating costs, as a means to encourage support for a decrease in gas powered cars requiring fossil fuels. Here the superordinate goal is the use of electric cars as opposed to gas cars, and the two groups are those who support a reduction in fossil fuels and those who do not.

In my professional experience as a Military Officer, I have witnessed the application of social psychological research such as that described above. Often times, conflict is avoided when possible, both through policy and interpersonal relationships. However, conflict and tension cannot be avoided, in my experience. Those who excel at utilizing steps to reduce this tension, de-escalate conflict, and bring about productive outcomes, excel. Those who cannot, or will not, often seem to struggle. As someone responsible for delegating difficult, dangerous, and unpleasant tasks to subordinates, I can confidently state that establishing a common goal that can unite each team member to carry out their respective tasks without hesitation, and to the best of their ability, is paramount. Often times multiple goals are needed to accomplish complex tasks, and a

good leader will know when and where to utilize them. Some of that knowledge comes from advanced leadership training, much of which seems to be built upon social psychological data. Group dynamics, and the formation of high functioning groups is both the topic of social psychological research, as well as a tenant of military training. I believe the work done by researchers within social psychology regarding group dynamics, intergroup conflict, and superordinate goals has influenced the way that people behave within society through direct literary contributions regarding group dynamics, and conflict resolution, as well as through the subsequent training, organizational cultures, and even cultural characteristics prevalent today. When considering major achievements by our species, whether they are in arts, sciences, technology, engineering, or warfare, it is difficult to remove the contributions of high performing, well organized, fully functional groups of people. An interesting study would be to compare the correlation between chronology of major technological advances that were highly dependent of successful group or team effort, and the chronology of advances in social psychology and the understanding of group dynamics. Is it a coincidence that highly functional groups of people have become even more effective at working together while we have simultaneously developed a field of social psychology dedicated to the improvement and understanding of those same groups? I think it is not, and would be very interested in exploring this question in future research.

Ethical Considerations

Sherif (1958) utilized methods that at the time would have likely met ethical standards common within the field of psychological research, which at the time were not as organized or direct as today. In fact, the word ethics is not found in the entire

manuscript from Sherif (1958). Sherif manipulated groups in order to produce tension and observed group function without the participants knowledge. Likely, manipulation of a group in order to produce what could be described as a negative outcome, such as tension, could cause some ethical concerns with contemporary ethical approval.

Additionally, observation without consent could also raise ethical concerns if this study were to be duplicated verbatim today. Subsequently, a stark contrast in methodology is witnessed in the research conducted by Rovenpor (2019), who while pursuing similar data utilizing a methodology with a much greater experimental separation than that of Sharif (1958), through the use of internet-based survey responses. To highlight the ethical climate change between these two manuscripts, Rovenpor (2019) draws specific inferences into possible unethical practices that will not be included in the methodology here, as well as a specific statement of ethical approval by internal review boards carried out on each of the studies included in the manuscript, as well as which protocols were utilized. With the differences in mind regarding these two studies, and their use of strategies that are deemed to be ethically appropriate, a likely improvement would be the replication of Sharif (1958) with the addition of an ethical review process that would consider the changes made from the original study to produce a methodology that both limited negative impact, and increased informed consent protocols. Likely, an experimental design such as that of Sharif (1958), able to pass current ethical review, would yield even more credible inferences and understanding to a topic vital to the successes of our families, our towns, our governments, and our world.

Conclusion

Viewing intergroup conflict, superordinate goals, the reduction of tension, and conflict between groups has evolved within the field of social psychology from the period during which Sharif (1958) explored the topic, through to contemporary research exploring similar constructs such as the work by Rovenpor, (2019). Through this evolution, the development of a clear lexicon that is easily applied to the study of intergroup relationships has assisted in the exploration of the theories and research questions explored. This more precise, robustly supported by empirical research, area of social psychology has offered opportunities to explore specific aspects of group conflict, where methodology, and supporting research may not have made this same level of detail possible in the early days of psychological research into intergroup conflict. Today, researchers poised to expand upon the research already conducted are able to utilize concepts, terminology, and supported theories to continue to explore contemporary groups, their conflicts, and compromises. Through this building block approach to social psychology, research into intergroup conflict can continue to grow, expand, and adapt to the most relevant sociological problems arising from differences between groups.

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