The Robbers Cave Experiment
Muzafar Sherif et al (1954)

The Robbers Cave experiment on intergroup conflict and co-operation was carried out by Muzafar Sherif and others as a part of research program at the University of Oklahoma. This large-scale Intergroup Relations Project was established as an interdisciplinary "psychological" and "sociological" approach to the testing of a number of hypotheses about intergroup relations.

The hypotheses tested were:

(1) When individuals having no established relationships are brought together to interact in group activities with common goals, they produce a group structure with hierarchical statuses and roles within it.

(2) If two in-groups thus formed are brought into functional relationship under conditions of competition and group frustration, attitudes and appropriate hostile actions in relation to the out-group and its members will arise and will be standardized and shared in varying degrees by group members.

The experiment plan called for the selection of 24 boys of about 12 years of age from similar, settled, lower middle-class Protestant backgrounds. These boys moreover were to be well-adjusted psychologically, of normal physical development and in the same year of schooling.

In the event 22 such young persons were selected and were divided by the researchers into two groups with efforts being made to balance the physical, mental and social talents of the 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 which was completely surrounded by Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma.

At the camp the groups were kept separate from each other and were encouraged to bond as individual groups through the pursuit of goals which had a common appeal value and the achievement of which required co-operative discussion, planning and execution. As expected, in line with the findings of earlier studies, over an initial five or six day "first stage" the two groups of boys tended to individually generate their own acceptance of common membership and their own status hierarchies. One group took spontaneously took unto itself the name of "The Rattlers" and the other similarly adopted the name of "The Eagles."

As each group became distantly aware of the presence of the other group they seemed to become re-inforced in their own sense of being a group and defensive about which of the camp facilities, that they themselves enjoyed, that the others might be "abusing." Both groups tended to insistently ask the camp staff (i.e. the researchers) to arrange some sort of competition against the other. Performance in all activities which might now become competitive (tent pitching, baseball, etc.) was entered into with more zest and also with more efficiency. Efforts to help "all of us" to swim occurred after this and it is possible that even this strictly in-group activity was influenced by the presence of an out-group and a desire to excel it in all ways.

The researches now arranged for their Stage Two where friction between the groups was to be facilitated over 4-6 days. In this phase it was intended to bring the two groups into competition in conditions which would imply some frustration in group relations one against the other. A series of competitive activities was arranged with a trophy (on the basis of accumulated team score) and also individual prizes - that would gladden the heart of most twelve year old boys - (a medal and a multi-bladed pocket knife) - which were to be presented to each of the "winning" group with no consolation prizes being allowed to the "losers."

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

The two competing groups were brought together for the first time in the mess hall there was considerable name-calling, razzing back and forth, and singing of derogatory songs by each group in turn. Before supper that evening, some Eagles expressed a desire not to eat with the Rattlers.

Following on from this the groups showed disrespect for each others flags (i.e. each group actually felt moved to burn the others flag) and they also raided each others cabins. After the Eagles, with the discreet connivance of the researchers, won the contest the Rattlers raided again and removed any medals or pocket-knives they could lay their hands on. In the disputations following on from this the Rattlers and the Eagles almost came to blows. The invectives and names which had previously been routinely hurled back and forth ("stinkers," "braggers," "sissies," and many considerably worse) now intensified. Derogation of the out-group was expressed in word and deed (e.g., holding noses when in their vicinity). Now both groups objected even to eating in the same mess hall at the same time.

The researchers now embarked upon Stage Three which they hoped would be an Integration Phase which was intended to dissipate the present contrived state of friction and which was intended to last some 6-7 days.

There were to be a number of improvised, and hopefully reconciliatory, get-to-know-you opportunities such as a bean-collecting contest, or the showing of a film, or the shooting of Firecrackers in association with the fourth of July. In the event this series of reconciliatory opportunities did not lead to any appreciable lessening of tensions between the Eables and the Rattlers. Several such get-to-know-you opportunities had actually ended in food fights.

The researchers concluded that such contrived contact opportunities were not going to promptly secure any meaningful lessening of tensions between the groups. They now arranged for the introduction of a number of scenarios presenting superordinate goals which could not be easily ignored by members of the two antagonistic groups, but the attainment of which is beyond the resources and efforts of one group alone. These scenarios were played out at a new location in the belief that this would tend to inhibit recall of grievances that had been experienced at Robbers Cave.

**The Drinking Water Problem:** 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.

All of the drinking water in the camp, which is distributed to various parts of the camp (kitchen, latrines, drinking fountains located near cabins and other convenient spots), came from a reservoir on the mountain north of the camp. The water supply had failed and the Camp staff blamed this on "vandals." Upon investigations of the extensive water lines by the Eagles and the Rattlers as separate groups the discovery of a practically full tank turned the attention of both groups to an outlet faucet which was found to have a sack stuffed into it. Almost all the boys gathered around the faucet to try to clear it. 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. The work on the faucet lasted over 45 minutes, during the first 30 minutes being the focus of interest for most members of both groups. During this first period, there were continually from 15 to 19 boys standing in a tight bunch watching the work. A few drops of water aroused enthusiasm, but completion of the task was not in view. Interest started lagging toward the end.

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 canteens with them and were thirstier. No protests or "Ladies first" type of remarks were made.
The Problem of Securing a Movie: The next superordinate goal to be introduced was a feature-length movie which has been a favorite for boys of this age level. Two films had been chosen after consulting experts on films and brought to camp along with other stimulus materials. In the afternoon, the boys were called together and the staff suggested the possibility of securing either "Treasure Island" or "Kidnapped": Both groups yelled approval of these films. After some discussion, one Rattler said, "Everyone that wants Treasure Island raise their hands." The majority of members in both groups gave enthusiastic approval to "Treasure Island" even though a few dissensions were expressed to this choice.

Then the staff announced that securing the film would cost $15 and the camp could not pay the whole sum.

After much discussion it was suggested that both groups would pay $3.50 and the camp would pay the balance. This was accepted even though a couple of homesick Eagles had gone home. The contribution per person was unequal but as groups Eagles and Rattlers paid equally.

At supper there were no objections to eating together. Some scuffling and play at sticking chewing gum around occurred between members of the two groups, but it involved fewer boys on both sides than were usually involved in such encounters.

Other superordinate goals included the joint use of a tug-of-war-rope on a partly cut-through dangerous tree and on an apparently stuck-in-a-rut truck that was carrying food for both groups.

In the event the joint pursuit of such superordinate goals, the interactions inevitable in that pursuit, and the joint sharing in their achievement all contributed to the lessening of tensions. At breakfast and lunch the last day of camp, the seating arrangements were considerably mixed up insofar as group membership was concerned.

The majority of the boys agreed by the last day that it would be a good thing to return to Oklahoma City all together on one bus. When they asked if this might be done and received an affirmative answer from the staff, some of them actually cheered. When the bus pulled out, the seating arrangement did not follow group lines.

Just before the bus pulled into the town where a refreshment stop was planned, a "Rattler" inquired if they still had the five dollar reward they had won in the bean toss contest. This inquiry was repeated by others when the boys were at the refreshment stand, and the "Rattler leader" suggested that their five dollars be spent on malts for all the boys in both groups. Several Rattlers nearby agreed; the others approved the idea when asked. This meant that malted milks for all the boys would be paid for with the five dollars contributed by the Rattlers, but that each boy would have to pay for sandwiches and other treats himself.