

Intergroup Attitudes and Competition Over Limited Resources

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 1999

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in the Department of Psychology

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Abstract

According to realistic conflict theory (RCT), people develop negative attitudes towards others as a result of competition with those others over limited resources. I hypothesized that participants would change their opinions of others in a greater negative direction if those others were competitive in resource use than if those others are cooperative. Additionally, I hypothesized that the participants' own resource use would influence how they changed their opinions of the others. Participants were asked to complete a ten-item trait-rating questionnaire before and after competing in a simulated fishing environment against a simulated group that fished either a little (cooperative opponent) or a lot (competitive opponent). As predicted, when fishing against competitive opponents, participants changed their ratings in a more negative direction than when fishing against cooperative opponents. In addition, participants' own fishing behaviour influenced some of their rating shifts. I discuss an alternative explanation of the results as based on group identity processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and suggest that the effects of such processes should be directly compared with competition over resources in the same study. Limitations of the study are discussed along with potential solutions.

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The world is increasingly characterized by economic and social interaction between diverse groups of people. Such intergroup contact may be friendly or simply indifferent, but relations are often hostile. Inter-group strife has been manifested throughout human history in many ways, the most obvious being wars between nations. Such negative relations are usually accompanied by negative attitudes held by groups against each other. A lot of psychological research has been done with a focus on relations between individuals but recently psychologists have been also focusing on intergroup relations (Sherif, 1953; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

One important theory of inter-group relations was first put forward by Muzafer Sherif (1953; 1966), who proposed that intergroup hostility, both behavioural and attitudinal, is a result of competition over scarce resources. Campbell (1965) called this realistic conflict theory (RCT). RCT is unique because it proposes that concrete scarce resources, such as crude oil, are considered potential important factors in intergroup relations. Many other psychological theories focus on cognitive factors, such as the experience of belonging to a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Rothbart, 1993). The resources do not have to be tangible, as power and status can be considered scarce resources.

Development of Realistic Conflict Theory

Sherif (1953; 1966) developed a model of intergroup relations in which groups may have either compatible or incompatible goals concerning the attainment and maintenance of scarce resources. According to the model, if groups have compatible goals, they are acquiring as much of a resource as they need without decreasing the amount left for each other. If they have incompatible goals, each group's acquisition of resources will reduce the amount that the other group can acquire. Such competition has been suggested

as leading to historical intergroup hostility. Klare (2001) suggests, for example, that access to water has been a major reason for warfare throughout history. He gives the example of the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 as being one that was fought over control of water from the tributaries of the Jordan River. There is still conflict in the region between Israelis and Palestinians, and it can be presumed that much of that conflict is over one major resource, namely, land.

In support of his theory, Sherif (1953, 1966) conducted classic field studies that examined the development of intergroup hostilities among pre-adolescent (12 years of age) boys at summer camps in the United States. He directly manipulated group membership by assigning the boys to different groups. He manipulated intergroup competition among the boys by engaging them in team sports and other events in which the two groups were competing with one another for prizes. He found the predicted effects. During the group formation phase, the boys showed only mild interest in the group they did not belong to, and the interactions were neither overly negative nor positive. During the intergroup competition phase, the groups of boys became increasingly hostile to one another in action and in attitude.

Since Sherif's (1953, 1966) seminal work, many studies have specifically examined the relations between competition for resources and intergroup attitudes and perception. Correlational field research has shown that prejudice and discrimination are related to competition over scarce resources (Bobo, 1983; Brown et al., 1986; Ghosh & Kumar, 1991; Duckitt & Mphuthing, 1998; Corenblum & Stephan, 2001; see also the review by Jackson, 1993). For example, Bobo (1983) found that opposition to one desegregation method (transporting Black American students by bus to mainly White

American schools) was most strongly predicted by the belief that the pace of desegregation was threatening White individuals' valued resources and goals. White Americans in his sample were opposed to the desegregation method even when their responses to attitude measures indicated they supported the civil rights movement generally.

Also, researchers comparing the effects of conflict and social identity found that perceived intergroup conflict of interest (i.e., conflict over resources) predicted intent to aggress more strongly than group identity. This effect remained significant even when mediating variables, namely dehumanization of the out-group and sharpness of distinction between in-group and out-group, were taken into account. The researchers believed these mediators were the results of perceived conflict, in turn causing an increase in the intent to aggress (Struch & Shwartz, 1989).

Further experimental research has been recently conducted in support of RCT. For example, researchers in Canada recently examined the effect of making competition for jobs salient for attitudes toward immigrants and immigration (Esses, Jackson & Armstrong, 1998; Esses, Dovidio, Jackson & Armstrong, 2001). They found that increasing the salience of the success of immigrants in filling jobs resulted in greater opposition to immigration, less favourable views of immigrants, and greater opposition to empowerment of immigrants. Esses et al. suggest that opposition to empowerment is indicative of fear of further competition. Empowered immigrants would be able to compete successfully for scarce resources, especially jobs. Thus, there would be fewer jobs and other resources for non-immigrants. Other researchers have found that white landlords are more willing to rent to some ethnic groups (English Canadians) than others (Haitians, Asian Canadians, and

Italian Canadians) as a result of the perceived value of those other groups to the landlords themselves (Hilton, Potvin, & Sachdev, 1989).

Additional research that bears on the issue has been conducted using social dilemmas, situations in which participants must choose between maximizing their own interests and maximizing collective interests (Komorita & Parks, 1994). The original version of the prisoner's dilemma involved two hypothetical prisoners who have just committed a burglary together and must choose to either implicate the other prisoner (defection) in the burglary or not (cooperation). The payoff schedule can be viewed as a matrix of choices, as shown in Figure 1. The numbers represent the number of years each prisoner will get in jail for their part in the crime, given each prisoner's choice to implicate or not implicate their partner. The first number indicates years of incarceration for Prisoner 1; the second number indicates years of incarceration for Prisoner 2. As can be seen, if one prisoner implicates the other one (defects), and the other one does not implicate (cooperates), the first prisoner will receive no time in prison but the one who is implicated will receive a long sentence. If both implicate each other, they will both receive somewhat shorter sentences. If neither prisoner implicates the other, both will get a much lighter sentence. So defection by one prisoner is better for that prisoner, but if both prisoners defect, both will face severe consequences.

