

# Realistic Conflict Theory

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November 19, 2022

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Realistic Conflict Theory*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=39414>

Realistic conflict theory dates back to the beginning of the 20th century as one of the earliest of social psychological theories regarding prejudice and discrimination. Realistic conflict theory proposes that intergroup conflicts arise between groups as they compete over the same limited resources. This is a possible cause of prejudice and discrimination development within a society.

### **The Robbers Cave Experiment**

In 1954, Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif studied the origin of prejudice in social groups in a classic study called the Robbers Cave Experiment. They conducted their research in a 200 acres (0.8 km<sup>2</sup>) summer camp which was completely surrounded by Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma.

During the study, Sherif posed as a camp janitor. The study team screened a group of 24 twelve-year-old boys with similar backgrounds. They were picked up by two buses carrying 12 boys each. Neither group knew of the other's existence. The boys were assigned to two living areas far enough apart that each group remained ignorant of the other's presence for the first few days. The Sherifs had broken up pre-existing friendships to the extent they could, so that each boy's identification with his new group could happen faster. Asked to choose names for their groups, one chose "The Rattlers", the other "The Eagles." Within two or three days, the two groups spontaneously developed internal social hierarchies.

The experiment was broken into three phases.

In-group formation, as described above.

A Friction Phase, which included first contact between groups, sports competitions, etc.

An Integration Phase (reducing friction).

None of the boys were previously acquainted before the experiment, but hostility between the groups was observed within days of first contact. Phase Two activities proceeded as planned, but soon proved overly successful. Hostility between the groups escalated to the point where the study team concluded the friction-producing activities could not continue safely. Phase Two was terminated and Phase Three commenced.

To lessen friction and promote unity between the Rattlers and Eagles, Sherif devised and introduced tasks that required cooperation between the two groups. These tasks are referred to in the study as superordinate goals. A superordinate goal is a desire, challenge, predicament or peril that both parties in a conflict need to get resolved, and that neither party can resolve alone. Challenges set up by the Sherifs included a water shortage problem, a "broken down" camp truck that needed enough "man" power to be pulled back to camp, and finding a movie to show. These and other necessary collaborations caused hostile behavior to subside. The groups bonded to the point that, by the end of the experiment, the boys unanimously insisted they all ride back home on the same bus.

The Robbers Cave experiment is one of social psychology's most cited studies dealing with differentiation, showing how easily opposing in-groups and group hostilities can form. At the same time, it is one of the best examples of conflict resolution brought about by finding super-ordinate needs that transcend intergroup conflict.

### **An Extension of Realistic Conflict Theory**

Realistic Conflict Theory originally only described the implications of competition between two groups of equal status. John Duckitt suggests that the theory be expanded to include competition between groups of unequal status. Duckitt created a scheme of types of realistic conflict and the resulting patterns of prejudice.

Duckitt points out that two types of conflict are based on direct ingroup competition. The first is 'competition with an equal group' and is explained by realistic conflict theory. Group-based threat leads ingroup members to feel hostile towards the outgroup which can lead to conflict as the ingroup focuses on acquiring the resource. The second type of conflict is 'domination of the outgroup by the ingroup.' This occurs when the ingroup and outgroup do not have equal status or a conflict is won during the initial competition. If domination occurs, there are two responses the subordinate group may have. One is stable oppression, in which the subordinates accept the dominating group's attitudes on some focal issue and sometimes, deeper values. The subordinates submit to the dominant group to avoid further conflict. The second response that may occur is unstable oppression. This occurs when the subordinate group rejects the lower status thrust upon them, and sees the dominating group as oppressive.

The dominant group then may view the subordinates' challenge as either justified or unjustified. If it is seen as unjustified, the dominant group will respond to the subordinates' rebellion with hostility. If the subordinates' rebellion is viewed as justified, the subordinates are given the power to demand change. An example of this would be the eventual recognition of the civil rights movement in the 1960s in the United States.

Realistic conflict theory claims that prejudice and discrimination occur as a result of real competition between groups for resources (whether material or social) that both groups desire. The implication of this theory is that if groups are not in competition, there should be no prejudice or discrimination.