

# Real-life Lord of the Flies

Muzafer Sherif's classic experiment on children is held up as proof that waging war comes naturally to us. But there's more to this story than meets the eye, reveals Gina Perry



**I**N THE summer of 1954, a bus pulled into Robbers Cave State Park in the mountains of rural Oklahoma. The dozen 11-year-old boys on board, all of them strangers to each other, craned to catch a glimpse through the dusty windows of what for most of them was their first summer camp. For a week they explored the park, swam in a creek, and hiked in and around mountain caves. They didn't know that a couple of days later, a second group arrived, also believing they had the park to themselves.

Social psychologist Muzafer Sherif and his team, disguised as camp counsellors, watched each group bond and form its own identity. The two groups named themselves the Rattlers and the Eagles, each with flag, anthem, dress code, leaders and followers, as well as shared rules and standards. "They staked out their territory," Sherif's research assistant, O.J. Harvey, told me. "Everything was 'our' –

'our hideout', 'our creek.'" The Rattlers felt particular ownership of the baseball field, which they had cleared and marked out.

Gradually, each group became aware of the other: when the Rattlers discovered some empty cups in their hideout and heard the sounds of others playing on the baseball field, they began to resent the interlopers. Finally, Sherif brought the two groups together in five days of competition, in everything from baseball to tent-pitching. The winners would be awarded a group trophy and a handsome jackknife for each boy, the losers nothing. From their first interaction on the baseball field, the Rattlers and the Eagles regarded each other with hostility and suspicion, according to Sherif. Throughout the tournament, the adults fanned rivalry between them, covertly stacking the odds against one team, then the other, increasing the tension ➤

**Take two groups of boys, place them in a park, then wind 'em up and let 'em go**

and keeping the scores neck and neck.

Hostilities reached fever pitch halfway through the competition. The Rattlers, faces smeared with soot, crept up to the Eagles' cabin in the dark. Bill Snipes, now a retired detective but back then one of the Rattlers, recalls the raid: "I climbed through their window and almost fell on one boy. I woke him up and he was not happy. He started swinging at me. We tore their place up. They did the same to us. It was almost like the counsellors were building this animosity." Days of warring words and fisticuffs followed, with staff only intervening to break things up before anyone got seriously hurt. The violence ended only when the staff engineered a disaster by cutting off the camp's water supply. In calling for volunteers to help, Harvey hinted that unknown saboteurs may have been at work; that the park had a history of vandalism. All the boys duly volunteered, perhaps fired up by the idea of a common enemy.

At the top of the hill behind the mess hall, the two groups found the water line buried beneath boulders and some sacking jammed into the pipes. As the temperature climbed towards 40°C, they realised that they would slake their growing thirst sooner if they worked as a single team to clear the obstructions. This saw the group boundaries blur and, in a series of problem situations devised by Sherif over the final week of the three-week study, dissolve.

By the time the boys returned home – this time in a single bus – their antagonisms had been forgotten. They were a cohesive group who sang *Oklahoma!* with gusto.

Sherif's Robbers Cave study is remembered less for its happy ending than for its startling demonstration of just how quickly animosity can develop between people who have no reason to hate each other – an indictment of human nature. Carried out in the year that William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was

## "The Rattlers, faces smeared with soot, crept up to the Eagles' cabin in the dark"

published, the study is often twinned with the novel. Both involve the transformation of children in the wilderness, a descent into savagery and violence. Sherif described how an observer chancing on the interactions at Robbers Cave would have never have guessed these "disturbed, vicious... wicked youngsters" were in fact the "cream of the crop" in their middle-class home communities.



CARDOLYN AND MUZZAFER SHERIF PAPERS, THE DRS. NICHOLAS AND DOROTHY CUMMINGS CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY, THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON

### The youngsters had no idea they were part of a psychological experiment

But the scientist's and novelist's views of human nature couldn't have been more different. For Golding, "man produces evil as a bee produces honey" and his novel was, he said, "an attempt to trace the defects in society back to human nature". For Sherif it was the other way round: people were inherently good and it was the environment – economic, political, social – that set groups competing against each other, fostering rivalry, prejudice and violence. If Golding was a pessimist, Sherif was an optimist: he thought you could foster peaceful coexistence between warring tribes by changing the environment.

The roots of Sherif's experiment lay far from rural Oklahoma. Sherif had arrived in the US from his native Turkey in 1929 at the age of 23, as part of a wave of young intellectuals sent abroad by the new government of Mustafa Kemal (later called Atatürk) to study and bring back the tools for shaping a new nation. After a stint at Harvard University, Sherif ended up at Columbia University in New York City.

When Sherif arrived, the city was in the grip of the Great Depression. He was appalled by the suffering of thousands of unemployed and homeless people who flooded the streets. At rallies he heard of the antagonism and racism between working people competing for jobs and housing, and passionate calls for the poor and unemployed to unite for radical social change. Moved by the disenfranchised and what he saw as the cruelty of the capitalist system, Sherif gravitated towards a group of intellectuals who thought that communism offered a framework for understanding the chaos of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism, racial prejudice and anti-Semitism. In his first book in 1936, he blamed a "competitive individualistic bourgeois society" for creating frictions between different social classes, believing that "the classes themselves must be eliminated".

But on his return to Turkey in 1937, Sherif found such views unwelcome. In 1944, he was swept up in the first of a series of anti-communist purges and was briefly jailed, before his influential family secured his release. Disenchanted, he appealed to friends

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