



**Perry, Gina. (2018). The Lost Boys: Inside Muzafer Sherif's Robbers Cave Experiment.
Melbourne: Scribe Publishing.**

Reviewed by: Drayton Humphreys, MacEwan University

Gina Perry, an Australian psychologist who has written multiple books on controversial past experiments, continues her collection with “The Lost Boys,” reviewing the Robbers Cave experiment by Muzafer Sherif from 1954. This experiment is infamous primarily for its questionable ethics and has received some negative attention over the many years. Perry was intrigued by Sherif’s character, particularly toward his craft, in that he was fiercely dedicated to his success and reaching the results he desired. She notes that Sherif was prideful of his work and the conclusions he came to through his experiment. Despite his dedication, this hard work came at a cost for the children involved in the experiment. They were manipulated to dangerous extents in this setting. Perry takes a stance of questioning the ethics of the experiment as well as the validity of the results.

Having 20/20 hindsight nearly seventy years after this experiment occurred, Perry spends some time trying to understand the ethics and effects of the experiment and its ugly consequences. It appears, especially in that day and age, maybe there was not much awareness for an individual’s well-being. In contradiction, there was great motivation to advance research in the world and to be the one obtaining those advancing results. In Perry’s focus on the consequences of the lack of ethics in the experiment, she strived to give the boys from the experiment a voice. When she

contacted these now adults, they had no idea that they had been experimented on. So, Perry dug into the long-term effects of what this experiment had done to these children. One gentleman she conversed with named Doug said, “It’s better to respect it, understand what happened, and then get on with your life because you didn’t die and you’re okay. Keep moving. And I think that translates to this camp thing for me a little bit. So while I was originally fascinated and glad, it doesn’t feel the same, it feels more like I was used. Not abused but used. And that really makes me mad” (p. 146). Perry is, of course seeking out and presuming negative information throughout these interactions, which is likely congruent in most instances but a bit presumptuous as to other possible outcomes that could have arisen.

In Perry’s book, she examines the events of personal influence and some degree of tampering with the experiment. Of course, like any researcher, one would have a prepared expected outcome, the hypothesis. However, Perry highlights how Sherif had conflicts from his childhood that were so influential in the plot of his experiment that it played a heavy impact. She talks about Sherif’s conflict-filled upbringing in Turkey and how he wanted to represent that evil was due to interaction and circumstances rather than a standard of human nature. However, Perry points out that his determination to prove this hypothesis was beyond fair experimental grounds. As a result, this had made the outcomes both unreliable and disingenuous. She makes light of his failed experiment a year prior; something she says he tried to hide. “But I could find only occasional passing references to the 1953 study and almost nothing about why it was canceled. It was as if Sherif wanted to forget it. However, in the archives, unpublished material about this 1953 camp experiment took up almost as much space as the files and folders about his Robbers Cave Exper-

ment, held just a year later” (p. 15). Perry shows that Sherif was not going to take “failure” in his experiment as a result. He insisted on achieving a vision and willingly overstepping experimental protocol. “Tellingly, Sherif wrote that staff were under strict instructions to follow the experimental protocols, hinting that there were lapses” (p. 298). This note provided ample evidence that the experiment’s results were being heavily pushed in a skewed direction.

The latter portions of this book consist of Perry examining the motivations of Sherif from his history in Turkey. Sherif wanted to prove that conflict resulted from straining in competing environments for limited resources. Upon Perry already addressing the visions that Sherif had to achieve specific results and skew the experiment accordingly, in this section, she wanted to understand precisely why his motivations were pointing in that direction. She leans in the direction that there was not one incident to point the finger at despite the constant chaos of Sherif’s childhood. “Perhaps there was no single event, no one moment where Muzafer Sherif’s childhood was snatched away from him. From the age of six he lived in an empire, and then a country, that was constantly at war” (p. 239).

Given the context and the history of the Robbers Cave Experiment and the subsequent controversy, Perry does well to swim against the current here. Rather than joining the well-oiled bandwagon of despising the experiment due to the ill ethics, which would be a convenient choice. Instead, while still recognizing the flaws, Perry attempts to discover some redeeming qualities to give Sherif the benefit of the doubt. She imagined that there was possibly a stroke of justification for Sharif’s actions that people had neglected to observe until now. “Could there perhaps be a psychological scar in his own past that could explain his apparent lack of compassion for the boys?” (p. 224).

Perry's book is well constructed and engaging to the reader. She brings a better understanding and a more detailed view of the Robbers Cave Experiment than what the average social psychologist is familiar with. Despite this, there are some drawbacks. Although this experiment is infamous due to its corrupt nature, it is worth mentioning that the National Research Act was not passed until 1974, twenty years after this experiment. So, although nearly seventy years later, we understandably see this as entirely unreasonable for a multitude of factors, this experiment, at its time, would not have been considered unreasonable. Additionally, it is hard not to feel like the first two-thirds of the book is much more engaging and page-turning than the remainder. The first two-thirds explicitly address the experiment and its events and context, while the remainder is about Perry traveling about in Turkey and America searching for information about Sherif's childhood and history. The sentiment and dedication to the journey is admirable, but it seemed drier and more unnecessarily drawn out than anything. This seemed to involve Perry too much in the actual events where she should have been more removed from the text. This section could have been tightened up reasonably, leaving a more significant proportion of the text to focus on the experiment itself and its events.

Perry's work is applicable in a multitude of disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, criminology, child and youth care, anthropology, and philosophy. This book can apply in these domains because the book and the experiment itself address many different facets of human nature. These academic domains address some form of who we are as people, both as individuals or amongst society, and view different perspectives within those categories, respectively. This material also covers a wide range of disciplines, partially since the experiment holds a wealth of

knowledge, but almost more so in how the experiment itself was executed. Between these two facets and the educated observations and research from Gina Perry, there is ample material to extract from this text that is relevant to all these disciplines and likely more. Perry provides a well-rounded and relatively engaging text for many groups of readers that would be interested in the Robbers Cave Experiment.