



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

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Gina Perry's book, "The Lost Boys: Inside Muzafer Sherif's Robbers Cave Experiment," is a biography on one of social psychology's greatest minds: Muzafer Sherif. To gain insight into Sherif's controversial study, known as the Robber's Cave Experiment, Perry, examines its origins, the man responsible for the study, and the effects the study had on the boys who blindly participated. By investigating every nook and cranny and analysing a variety of factors connected to the experiment, Perry aspires to piece together what is missing from archives and published works. She hopes to uncover what led to the creation of the experiment, determine the experiment's impact, and expose the experiment's flaws. As we delve through the mysteries of the experiment, unfolding new clues as we go, it begins to manifest by way of Perry that Sherif's experiment was flawed. Perry draws the conclusion of a fallacious study through constant examples of experimenter intervention, confirmation bias, and mistreatment of participants.

Throughout her quest, Perry uses several analytical tools in order to compose a story that captures the true nature of the experiment. In her pursuit to piece together missing components of the experiment, Perry digs through archives, examining the notes, recordings, and photographs taken by the researchers who conducted the study. However, she does not solely rely on data found in scientific records. Instead, she goes a step further to construct her own inquiries travel-

ing to various destinations and conducting numerous interviews to gather lacking information.

In pointing out the deep unreliability of Sherif's study, Perry points to how using the word "experiment" to describe what took place at Robbers Cave State Park is inaccurate. The classic Robbers Cave experiment was intended to be an observational study, one where no interventions were to be implemented by investigators. However, the experiment was not conducted as planned, and as a result, Perry criticizes the conclusions drawn by Sherif as deceptive and misleading. Perry establishes this critique by arguing that one can't consider the proceedings that occurred at Robbers Cave State Park to be an experiment due to excessive experimenter intervention. Rather, the study should be understood as being the execution of something that was pre-planned: "It seemed to me that what happened at Robbers Cave wasn't a test of a theory so much as a choreographed enactment" (p. 216).

A second argument made by Perry to capture the delusive results of the experiment involves her continual presentation of the confirmation bias exhibited by Sherif and members of his research team. Confirmation bias occurs when researchers search for and favour only the information that supports their hypothesis. During this process, the data that would dispute the researchers' claims are ignored and discarded. Despite setting measures to "guard against biases," prejudice towards one's own beliefs is heavily displayed by researchers in the Robbers Cave Experiment (p. 58). "It was as if Sherif chose only what he wanted to see in the observational notes" (p. 120). The study was used as "a confirmation rather than investigation." As a result, the published works of the study are replete with only information that supports the researcher's hypothesis (p. 312). Excluding such a tremendous handful of evidence led to the creation of an unreliable study because if all the data had been included, an alternative

explanation might have been required.

Along with manipulation, Perry draws our attention to the researcher's extensive use of deception. The published results are misleading, drawn from results that stem from the researchers influencing participant behaviour, but Perry also alludes to how unethical measures were used to recruit participants. Parents were "told the truth but not the whole truth" (p. 156). Parents had no idea their children would be blind participants in a study that presented them with a moral dilemma. The consequences created for the boys exposed to such grueling hypocrisy are rigorously suggested by Perry, who almost doesn't participate in the investigation of the study due to her disgust with the boy's mistreatment. For her, the study appeared as "further evidence of a branch of science that I had begun to think of as careless in its treatment of people" (p. 14).

Rife with vivid illustrations, interpretations, references, and insightful analogies, Perry's book serves to "recreate the backstage world of the Robbers Cave experiment, to explain where it came from, how it started, and why it ended" (p. 339). In attempting to uncover the experiment's hidden aspects and uninvestigated consequences, Perry accomplishes two goals. First, she revealed the true nature of the experiment, as one constructed on patterns of confirmation bias and discarded data deemed inconvenient. To accomplish this goal, Perry uses numerous research methods to fill in the gaps of the experiment. Second, Perry calls into question the accuracy of the experiments published results, providing an alternative explanation that is possibly more valid: "One of Sherif's major predictions, and the one that has made Robbers Cave famous, is the apparently spontaneous mistrust and hostility that erupted between the groups during the tournament, and the apparent inevitability of the fighting that broke out

when the Eagles won the prize. (The Eagles are one of the two groups of boys that were ushered into competition against each other.) But rather than competition causing conflict at Robbers Cave, it was the intervention of the men setting the groups against one another" (p. 215).

Perry achieves this second intention by alluding to the idea that the competitions did little to spark violence between the groups. The boys even displayed sportsmanship after games. Instead, Perry argues that the aggression between the groups stemmed from the continuous intervention of the researchers who helped to influence the boy's behaviour. "Surely the men's involvement in and approval of retaliation and vandalism had influenced the boy's behaviour" (p. 214).

Perry's book has the potential to be outstanding, but its triumph is significantly limited by Perry's tendency to veer off-topic. If Perry were to focus exclusively on the facts of the Robbers Cave experiment, the book would have been a much more engaging read. However, the book has two powerful limitations that guide the reader's attention away from the book's primary objective: understanding the experiment and its shortcomings.

The first issue is that Perry's investigation is too far-reaching. In her book, composed of three parts, she spends much of part three on a foolish quest to uncover the mysteries of Sherif's unknown past. Yet after spending a large portion of the book searching for answers, Perry fails to reveal anything of significance to the experiment. In the book, Perry even makes a statement hinting at the lack of knowledge she had gained: "[perhaps] I would never really know how events might have shaped Sherif" (p. 266). Despite this, she continues on her inconclusive exploration.

The second problem is Perry's inclination to engage in unnecessary storytelling. Although it is crucial to understand where Perry got her information to show that her book is reliable, Perry goes too in-depth with certain aspects of her investigation. Moreover, she provides plenty of unnecessary details regarding her travels. Consider the following quote: "The taxi driver dropped me off on the edge of Bozdag, at one hotel, which was closed. Brown leaves lay on the bottom of the swimming pool in inches of muddy-looking water. Except for a tractor that chugged down the center of the street, trailing a cloud of diesel fumes, the place was empty" (p. 231). This quote is one of several redundant telling's that contribute nothing to the discussion of the Robbers Cave experiment.

Ultimately, both limitations reduce engagement with the experiment itself as the reader's attention begins to wonder after following chapters of extensive storytelling, which provides no conclusions or insights into the experiment.

Perry's intended academic audience, those involved or interested in the field of social psychology and those curious about psychological experiments would find this book intriguing. I believe it also provides a great teaching opportunity for post-secondary institutions and professors who teach psychology. Specifically, it would be a great resource to be utilized by those teaching a psychology class on research methods as it captivates where the experiment went wrong in terms of the research design. Other disciplines such as sociology and education might also benefit from the book.

Despite its limitations, "The Lost Boys: Inside Muzafer Sherif's Robbers Cave Experiment" was a delightful read. I found it to be informative, insightful, evocative, and well-written. I would recommend the book to anyone interested in social psychology.