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Norms, Groups, Conflict, and Social Change

Rediscovering Muzafer Sherif's Psychology

**Ayfer Dost-Gözkan and
Doga Sonmez Keith, editors**

With a foreword by Jaan Valsiner



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Conclusion: A Scholar Between and Beyond

Fatbali M. Mogbaddam

Although I greatly admired Muzafer Sherif from my earliest days as a student of psychology, it was only in 1979 that he became an intimate part of my life. That year, I completed my PhD thesis, was examined and passed by Henri Tajfel who served as my examiner in England, and returned overland to Iran excited to be in the midst of the historic anti-Shah revolution. The universities re-opened in the "Spring of Revolution" that same year and I was eager to teach and learn: But what kind of psychological science was I going to teach in the midst of revolutionary chaos, the hostage taking crisis, and the start of the Iran-Iraq war?

During my search for guidelines as to what direction to take, I found not only the writings of Sherif, but also his personal life experiences to be inspirational, practical lifelines that helped to guide me. He had been educated as a social psychologist in the West, and then returned to research and teach in a non-Western society undergoing foundational conflicts and transformations. When, for political reasons, he was forced to leave Turkey and seek refuge in the West, like Henri Tajfel, Serge Moscovici, and a number of other "outsiders" who found new homes in the West as refugees, Sherif took up the challenge of transforming traditional psychological research.

The excellent chapters in this timely volume document the different aspects of Sherif's highly productive and often innovative research life. In this concluding chapter, I move to a higher level of abstraction and provide a perspective on Sherif in relation to broader trends in psychological science in the 21st century. "Between and beyond" aptly describes Sherif's position, because he both escaped the bounds of particular cultures, effectively moving between them, and pointed

"beyond," toward a future universal science of psychology. Although very aware of cultural differences, Sherif pointed to a universal psychological science.

In Part 1, I explore the theme of "from societal to individual processes," which reverses the traditional perspective of starting from the micro individual level and moving to the societal level. I argue that, like Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), Sherif was pointing to the orientation that psychological research should adopt, of taking collective processes as primary. In Part 2, I examine the materialist theme in Sherif's scholarship. On the one hand, this materialist theme is influenced by Marxism and seems "anti-American," particularly in the Cold War context in which Sherif was working in the heyday of his career. It is not surprising that Sherif came to be investigated by US security officials (see Batur, 2015). On the other hand, I demonstrate that the field of inter-group relations in particular has been profoundly influenced by the materialism Sherif espoused. The main theme in Part 3 of the chapter is the central role of norms in social behavior. Sherif's brilliant research on norm formation, and the powerful influence of norms on group and individual behavior (Sherif, 1936), together with his innovative exploration of slogans (Sherif, 1937), point the way to a "normative psychology." Finally, I discuss an underlying theme in Sherif's life and work: power relations.

From Societal to Individual Processes: The Power of Context

As amply documented in the earlier chapters in this text, Sherif was highly conscious of the cultural limitations of traditional psychology, and pointed out that what is taken to be "normal" in Western societies is not necessarily "normal" in non-Western societies. This was a natural orientation for him, given his deep understanding of, and appreciation for, at least some non-Western cultures. In this sense, he was "cultural" well before the "cultural turn" that took place in psychology in the last few decades of the 20th century. But beyond this sensitivity to cross-cultural variations in behavior, Sherif was also concerned that psychology move beyond the individualistic and reductionist biases of Western societies. The priority he gives to group and inter-group processes reflects this concern (Sherif, 1951, 1966; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961; Sherif & Sherif, 1953, 1969).

Sherif's seminal contribution to the psychology of inter-group relations has been celebrated by scholars, including in this volume, but I want to highlight a subtle feature of Sherif's approach that is easily

overlooked: the priority given to collective processes and context. From Sherif's perspective, it is the characteristics of the context and collective processes that shapes individual behavior and identity. It is only recently that other leading researchers in social psychology have come to a similar position, "... a person's collective identity is the most important and psychologically primary component to the self-concept" (Taylor, 2002, p. 40).

Students of Vygotsky will of course recognize a parallel development in how the great Russian and Turkish psychologists conceptualized the relationship between context and the individual. Vygotsky also gives primacy to the collective level. In a crucially important passage, Vygotsky states, "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level, first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapychological)" (1978, p. 57). A close reading of Sherif's analysis of the changes in individual behavior as a result of changes in collective processes leads to the conclusion that Sherif and Vygotsky had very similar views in this regard. In Sherif's seminal summer camp studies involving young boys, the changes from group formation, inter-group competition and hostilities, and then to inter-group cooperation (through superordinate goals) was achieved first at the collective level, then at the individual level. As Vygotsky would put it, the changes were first between the boys, and then inside individual boys.

The primacy given by Sherif to collective processes is related to an underlying theme in all of his research: the power of context, and particularly his emphasis on material conditions, a topic I discuss next.

Materialism

In this section my goal is to clarify more precisely the nature of Sherif's "materialist" perspective. Some elements of this materialism are discussed elsewhere under the title of "realist conflict theory" (Moghaddam, 2008a), but my concern here is much broader, as required by Sherif's nuanced perspective.

Consider a continuum, as in Figure 1, with "psychological factors shaping behavior" at one extreme and "material factors shaping behavior" at the other extreme.

Influential theories at the "psychological factors" end of the continuum include psychodynamic theory, relative deprivation theory, equity theory, and a variety of other subjective justice theories and trait-based

Figure 1
Continuum of Psychological and Material Factors Shaping Behavior

Psychological factors ----- Material factors

personality theories (Moghaddam, 2008a). The common theme in all these theories is that the subjective interpretation of the world, and various psychological factors within individuals, shapes behavior, including in the realm of conflict. These theories have attempted to explain political systems, including dictatorships, through reference to personality characteristics, particularly those of leaders such as Hitler (Moghaddam, 2013). At the other end of the continuum are theories that give priority to material factors, and propose that material conditions shape psychological experiences. The most important of these is the “realistic” conflict theory, championed by Sherif.

According to Sherif’s “realist” approach, the psychological experiences of individual group members are shaped by the material conditions. When their groups share material goals with another group, then the members of both groups will be positively disposed toward one another. On the other hand, when two groups have material interests and goals that compete with one another, then the members of the two groups will be negatively disposed toward one another. For example, during the Cold War, when the USSR posed a serious threat and competed against the United States on the world stage, Americans and Russians saw one another as enemies and attitudes on both sides were negative toward the out-group. After the collapse of the USSR and the decline of Russia as a serious threat to American power in the early 1990s, American attitudes toward Russia became less negative. However, with the rise of Putin as an aggressive leader and the re-emergence of Russia on the global stage in the 21st century, American attitudes and policies toward Russia have once again hardened.

Sherif’s starkly materialist perspective might appear out of place in the American context, and he might be dismissed as “un-American.” Despite this, the tradition pioneered by Sherif has continued, as reflected in a number of theories that are influential in the 21st century. For example, consider resource mobilization theory and system justification theory (see Moghaddam, 2008a, for more detailed discussions of these theories). Resource mobilization theory argues that collective movements are shaped by those individuals and groups who have the

greatest control over resources. From this perspective, collective movements and inter-group conflicts do not necessarily begin with feelings of deprivation, dissatisfaction, injustice, and the like. Rather, these psychological experiences can be manufactured and manipulated by those who control resources. With resources, one can create feelings of deprivation within a population. Similarly, system justification theory argues that in everyday life, the explanations and perspectives people adopt serve to justify the existing political system, with its group-based inequalities. These explanations and perspectives are part of the ideology shaped by the elite. Of course, those familiar with the Marxist tradition will recognize this system justification account as based on the concept of false consciousness, and very much in line with Sherif’s “realistic” perspective.

What are the mechanisms through which material conditions shape psychological experiences at the level of the individual? In addressing this question, we need to examine the nature and function of norms, the next topic for discussion.

Norms and the Road to Normative Psychology

In terms of both methodological rigor and conceptual sophistication, Sherif’s experimental studies of social norms (Sherif, 1936) are landmarks that stand the test of time (Moghaddam, 2005). Critics who view Sherif’s famous “summer camp” studies as methodologically lax, find that the experimental studies he conducted using the so-called “autokinetic effect” meet the highest standards of experimental rigor, and are decades ahead of their time. These experiments have been discussed in detail in earlier chapters in this text, and rather than repeat their descriptions I want to highlight a number of their implications that are easily neglected but of considerable importance.

Sherif’s studies on norm formation demonstrated that individuals who develop norms as independent individuals, come to develop and adopt group norms when they become part of a group. Thus, for example, an individual who reported seeing a spot of light in a dark background move half an inch when making estimates independently, might as a group member agree with other group members that the spot of light actually moved one inch. Importantly, when this individual leaves the group and once again as an independent individual makes estimates of the distance that the light moved, he or she is still influenced by the group norm. This “group influence” is notable, but even more so because of the following aspects of the situation.

First, the group estimate is always wrong. That is, the light does not move, so whatever amount of movement the group reports (other than zero), the group is always wrong. Second, despite being wrong, the group developed norm has an impact on the estimates of individual group members, even after they leave the group. This is a brilliant experimental demonstration of the power of arbitrary and incorrect norms. Almost half a century later, Henri Tajfel and his associates demonstrated what I interpret to be another outcome of arbitrary norms, through the minimal group paradigm (Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971): inter-group bias on the basis of a "trivial" criterion. When people are placed into groups on a relatively "meaningless" basis, without knowing the identities of in-group and out-group members, they will still tend to show bias in favor of the in-group. The initial interpretation of this finding was along the lines of "group norms" (Billig, 1976), and the subsequent social identity theory interpretation based on a need for a positive and distinct identity, is also reflecting assumed norms. It is assumed to be normative for people to desire a positive and distinct identity. Consequently, when I was conducting my doctoral research on the minimal group paradigm in the 1970s, I saw myself working within a tradition pioneered by Sherif, and continued and expanded by Tajfel.

Of course, the materialist perspective is often criticized for failing to explain bias in favor of the out-group (see, Platow, Hunter, Haslam, & Reicher, 2015). However, it is simplistic to assume that Sherif overlooked these cases. For example, as pointed out in earlier chapters in this volume, Sherif was critical of a blind bias in favor of everything Western that is often found in societies such as Turkey. Such an "idolization" of the West is still pervasive among Western educated elites in the post-colonial era in many parts of the world, and one result has been a radical backlash in the shape of Islamic fundamentalism (Moghaddam, 2008b, 2010). A close analysis of the storylines developed by radicals and terrorists reveals that they are in part reacting against what they see to be the abandonment of traditional heritage cultures, in favor of an imported Western (and particularly American) culture. Sherif was sensitive to this clash between traditional and "modern" cultures, and his position was generally in favor of modernization, with the proviso that Western culture should be approached critically.

The materialist perspective is also criticized for apparently failing to explain inter-group bias on a basis that seems to make little sense on material criteria (again, see Platow et al., 2015). The minimal group paradigm (Tajfel et al., 1971) is cited as producing an example of the

kind of inter-group bias the materialist perspective could not explain. However, on a higher level of abstraction Sherif would point to power relations, and the ability of elites to manipulate "arbitrary" and "trivial" criteria, so as to influence inter-group biases.

Both Sherif and Tajfel were "outsiders" in the West (respectively in the United States and England), and they were both highly sensitive to the power and arbitrariness of norms. For both of these researchers, norms are arbitrary, but they are not random. That is, a norm could take just about any shape, and in this sense norms are arbitrary. However, norms do not function in a random manner—they serve a specific function, a function that is revealed through the analysis of group and inter-group relations. An important function of norms is to maintain and enhance group identities, and support group-based inequalities. Most broadly, norms reflect the power hierarchies in society, the final topic of this discussion.

Power Relations

What, then, is Sherif's most important and lasting contribution to psychological science? The earlier chapters in this book have done an outstanding job of identifying the details of Sherif's seminal empirical and conceptual contributions. When we move to a higher level of abstraction, I see Sherif's long-term contribution, one that subtly underlies both his research and his personal life experiences, to be the highlighting of power relations between different interest groups, at both national and international levels. Of course, the centrality of power is clear in his materialist perspective on human behavior: those who have the greatest power to shape material conditions also have the greatest influence in shaping human behavior. Sherif's personal experiences of being forced to leave his home country, as well as his "outsider" status in his adopted land, underscore the role of power. It may well be that some of his personal characteristics that were criticized as "arrogance" or "being ill tempered" were reactions to perceptions of inequalities and injustices against himself.

Power over material conditions results in the ability to shape the normative system, including norms, values, roles, and positions. Through the shaping of the normative system, those who enjoy greatest power have the greatest influence on behavior. The demonstration of the influence exerted by arbitrary norms, by superordinate goals, and by other key aspects of culture, including slogans, underlines the important question of: who exerts control over such cultural characteristics?

Sherif's approach, like Tajfel's, inevitably leads psychological science to also be concerned with exploring the normative system: what characteristics does the normative system have, and who controls it? Given that even arbitrary norms can have such a powerful impact on behavior, as demonstrated by the autokinetic experiments and by the minimal group paradigm, there must also develop a "normative" psychology, focused on how normative systems are manufactured and shaped by those with greatest resources, and how normative systems regulate everyday behavior. New developments in cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2012) indicate movement in this direction, and demonstrate Sherif's more subtle long-term influence.

Concluding Comments

The final judge of scientific and artistic products is time. Over the next few centuries, it will become clear what, if any, products of 20th century psychological research continue to be influential. According to my crystal ball, Sherif's research influence will be long lasting. This is particularly because he has important contributions to make in international psychology, and in the future psychological science will change along with globalization forces to become more international and less "American-centric." Questions concerning power dynamics and the shaping of the normative system, questions at the heart of Sherif's research contributions, will become more central in international psychology, moving us toward a psychology "between and beyond."

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Conclusion

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