Sherif’s theoretical concepts and intergroup relations studies: notes for a positive interdependence

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Sherif’s theoretical concepts on intergroup relations are not merely a historical landmark for surpassing individualistic perspectives on that domain. They could also be, nowadays, useful theoretical tools for those who are interested in studying societal functioning. The main point of this article is to argue that social psychology can benefit from the discussion and use of Sherif’s concepts, in order to provide a more comprehensive analysis for the study of intergroup relations than those deriving from a strict use of the categorization model. This is illustrated here with two examples of supra-national identities (European identity and the lusophone community) studies which could benefit from the use of Sherif’s ideas, especially the notion of superordinate goals. However, despite the pertinence and utility of Sherif’s concepts, several weaknesses of realistic conflict theory of intergroup behaviour should also be noted, namely, the tendency to assume that conflict is always negative. This undermining idea is discussed here based not only on the perspective of disadvantaged groups but also on positive evidence from the benefits of socio-cognitive conflict provided by two fields of European social psychological studies: social developmental psychology and research on minority influence.

KEY-WORDS: realistic conflict theory; intergroup relations; social identity; national identity

Before M. Sherif

Several theoretical concepts started developing in social psychology a few years before the 2nd. World War, aiming to understand complex social phenomena related to intergroup relations, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. This immense domain has attracted several researchers, whose work, since those days, has marked the history of social psychology. The fact that racism and the


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