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Kurt Lewin: 70 Years on

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Introduction

In introducing this Special Issue devoted to evaluating the continuing influence of Kurt Lewin, we begin by briefly examining his life. This is followed by a more detailed examination of the conceptual roots of field theory, which is the foundation for his approach to change. We then discuss Lewin's commitment to creating a better world, which provided the underpinning motivation for all his work. The editorial concludes by discussing how the four articles in this Special Issue build on, develop, and demonstrate the continuing relevance of Lewin's work.

Kurt Lewin – a Brief History

Kurt Lewin was born in 1890 and died at the age of 56 in 1947. Detailed biographical information on Lewin is scarce as his untimely death prevented him from writing an autobiography. His daughter Miriam Lewin, like her father a psychologist, has provided some biographical details (Lewin, 1992), but Marrow (1969) wrote the only relatively systematic, detailed biography of Lewin, though even this is very sketchy in places. Kurt Lewin was born in Mogilno, a small town in Western Prussia now part of Poland, where an Institute of Psychology was established there in his name (Trempla, Pepitone, & Raven, 2006).

Lewin received an Orthodox Jewish education and then went on to complete a doctoral degree in philosophy and psychology at Berlin University, where he wrote a dissertation entitled 'The Psychic Activity: On Interrupting the Process of the Will and the Fundamental Laws of Association'. After serving in the military during the First World War, he was appointed as researcher at the Psychological Institute of Berlin University and served there as a professor of philosophy and psychology from 1926 to 1932. During this period, he conducted an impressive series of psychological experiments dealing with tension states, needs, motivation, and learning, which Lindzey (1952) characterized as the most salient empirical studies in psychological literature.

In 1933, following Hitler's rise to power, Lewin and his family moved to America. There he began to negotiate formally with representatives of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem about establishing a new chair of psychology and a research institute in psychology, though these were not successful. While the initial negotiations were taking place, he was employed on a research grant at Cornell University, where he conducted research at the university's child day-care centre. In 1935, he published a collection of his

German articles in English (Lewin, 1935), as well as an important theoretical volume entitled *Principles in Topological Psychology* (Lewin, 1936). Lewin's serious intention to join the Hebrew University is reflected in the dedication to the book: 'To a young scientific center, at the meeting of the East and the West [at the Hebrew University], where I hope new productive collectives will arise' (Lewin, 1936).

When Lewin arrived in the United States, he had already published extensively in German journals as well as in some American scientific journals. He had relationships with leading psychologists in Japan and the Soviet Union as well as in the United States. When his negotiations to establish a research institute at the Hebrew University failed, he took a position at the University of Iowa, where he remained from 1935 to 1945. During that period, he developed a research centre where some of the first classical experiments in social psychology were conducted. In addition, he undertook a wide range of social and organizational interventions that laid the ground work for organization development (OD) (Burnes, 2004, 2007). In 1945, he was offered a position at MIT, where he established the Research Center for Group Dynamics.

Kurt Lewin – the Last Year

At the beginning of 1947, Kurt Lewin was preparing to leave for a sabbatical at the Tavistock Institute in London, where he played an active role in launching a new journal, *Human Relations*. Lewin provided the journal with the following motto: 'Toward the Integration of the Social Sciences', which summed up his own view of the perspective on research. At that time, he was also engaged in developing the Research Center for Group Dynamics, the core of whose staff comprised his ex-students and long-time collaborators, many of whom later became leading figures in social and applied psychology. These included Leon Festinger, Ronald Lippitt, Dorwin Cartwright, John French, Alvin Zander, Morton Deutsch, and Stuart Cook (Patnoe, 1988). The Center conducted theoretical and applied research in social psychology and dealt with areas such as group decision-making and intergroup relations. One group of staff conducting laboratory experiments in areas such as group processes and dynamics, leadership styles, and conflict resolution. Another group was involved in real-life interventions dealing with issues such as prevention of bigotry as well as prevention of discrimination and antisemitic manifestations.

Lewin was also engaged in a major project for the American Jewish Congress in New York to establish the Commission of Community Interrelations (CCI), which, through the New Britain workshop, led to the establishment of T-groups, a technique that later became one of the main vehicles for interventions in OD (Burnes & Cooke, 2012; Lippitt, 1949). Concurrent with these activities, Lewin (1947a, 1947b) was working on a major two-part article, 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics', the first part of which was the launch article for *Human Relations*. Ironically, the 70th anniversary of the Journal's birth coincides with 70th anniversary of Lewin's death.

1947 marked the year when so many of Lewin's plans came to fruition: two major institutions that would develop and undertake his approach to resolving social conflict; a body of experienced and highly talented collaborators to staff these institutions; and a journal to disseminate Lewin's work and encourage others to move in a similar direction. Therefore, his death came at a time when the future held great promise and so much of his work was unfinished.

Lewin is now best known for his planned approach to organizational change, which comprises field theory, group dynamics, action research and his three-step model of change. However, at the time of his death, the most developed area of his work was field theory and his primary focus was not organizational change per se, but the broader aim of resolving social conflict, as will be discussed in the next section.

Lewin, Field Theory and the Betterment of Society

In her 'Preface' to a collection of Lewin's articles, his wife, Gertrude Weiss Lewin (1948) wrote:

Kurt Lewin was so constantly and predominantly preoccupied with the task of advancing the conceptual representation of the social psychological world, and at the same time he was so filled with urgent desire to make use of his theoretical insight for building of a better world, that it is difficult to decide which of these sources of motivation flowed with greater energy or vigor. (p. xv)

The foundation for Lewin's 'conceptual representation of the social psychological world' is his field theory. This, and his commitment to 'building a better world', will be examined in this section. We begin by looking at the conceptual roots of field theory.

Conceptual Roots

These will be examined in two parts, the first being.

Field theory – its intellectual and psychological origins

Field theory is the term Lewin used for his psychological theory, which examines patterns of interaction between individuals and the total field or the surrounding environments in which they move. The roots of field theory lie both in physics and psychology. According to this theory, and following the principles of the Gestalt school of psychology, behaviour needs to be evaluated in the right context, taking into account the forces that affect it.

Lewin's education in philosophy and psychology equipped him with conceptual tools which are very rarely part of the intellectual property of the average psychologist. According to the Gestalt school of psychology, every behaviour of individuals, groups, or organizations is the consequence of the total situation in which it takes place. For Lewin (1947c), the total situation was the life space or the field in which interdependent forces play a role. The life space is the totality of facts that determine the behaviour (B) of an individual, group, or organization at a certain point in time. The life space (L) represents the totality of possible events and includes the person (P) and the environment (E). Lewin expressed his theory in the formula: $B = f(p, e)$.

From this, Lewin proposed six meta-theoretical principles that underlie field theory. Five of the six principles will be elaborated here: (1) the psychological approach; (2) emphasis on the total situation; (3) the classificatory versus the constructive approach; (4) present time versus historical causation; and (5) the dynamic approach.

- (1) The psychological approach: Lewin argued that all psychological phenomena could be explained in psychological terms, even though he borrowed terms like *tension*, *vector*,

and *field* from physics. Consistent with the constructivist tradition, Lewin asserted that psychological phenomena are real. Therefore, the field that influences an individual should not be explained in the objective terms of physics. Rather, it should be explained in terms of the way it exists for that person at a given time.

- (2) **Emphasis on the total situation:** According to Lewin, researchers should always focus on the relationship between the specific group under investigation and its interaction with different internal and external forces. This leads researchers and agents of change to focus on the immediate situation in which the behaviour takes place.
- (3) **The classificatory versus the constructive approach:** The classificatory approach focuses on generalization from a specific object to an ideal one, which is an abstraction of the particular object. By contrast, the constructive approach stresses relational concepts.
- (4) **Present time versus historical concepts of causation:** According to Lewin, derivation of behaviour from past experience to the present state is not valid. Rather, the past experience of a person or group counts only in terms of its manifestations in the present field.
- (5) **The dynamic approach:** According to Lewin, the behaviour of an individual or group is analysed in the context of forces that enhance efforts to achieve goals when inhibiting forces obstruct those efforts. Reality is perceived as an ever-changing process of achieving equilibrium, which is continuously disrupted by the field of forces.

This now leads to the second part of our examination of the conceptual roots of field theory.

Lewin's Theory of Change

Lewin (1947a, 1947b) discussed social change in his two-part article, 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics'. He described social change as a change of the force field and proposed that the change agent thinks in terms of how the existing level of the field is turned into the desired state. Planned change means that the equilibrium of the force field at level, L_1 is replaced by a new equilibrium at the desired level, L_2 . Following the aforementioned meta-theoretical principle, the total social field of forces should be taken into account. In this regard, changing people's attitudes or behaviour is tantamount to trying to break a well-established custom or social habit. Thus, Lewin referred to social habits, which play a major role in preventing change, as *inner resistance to change*. In order to overcome inner resistance to change, it is necessary to apply an additional force that is sufficient to break the habit or 'unfreeze' the custom.

Lewin defined the change process as consisting of three stages. The first stage is 'unfreezing' of the present level of customs or habits. To achieve this, Lewin argued that it is necessary to break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness. Thus, in order to change attitudes and behaviour, the individual needs to be stirred up emotionally and experience a process that Allport (1948) referred to as catharsis. The second stage of change is 'moving', when the change actually occurs; and the third stage is 'freezing', now more commonly referred to as refreezing. This is when the new habit or norm is adopted and institutionalized. Lewin believed that the best and most effective means of bringing about change in individuals is through group encounters. Thus, the group

became one of the major vehicles in action research and OD. In essence, Lewin believed that we could build a better world by using field theory to change the behaviour of groups.

Commitment Towards the Betterment of Society

In examining this, we will show how Lewin sought to promote democratic values and resolve social conflict through action research.

Promoting Democratic Values

Action research and other OD interventions rely on the democratic principles of cooperation among researchers, practitioners, and clients. They utilize rational, transparent procedures for decision-making, and have high regard for humanistic values, which protect and maintain the dignity, freedom, and welfare of every person participating in the intervention.

Lewin did not examine democracy in a systematic way; however, many of his writings are imbued with his deep conviction and high respect for democracy, its merits, and its advantages – especially compared to *laissez-faire* regimes or to the autocratic regime that he fled in Germany. He was aware that ‘nations need generations to learn the democratic way of living’ (1943/1999, p. 321); and he referred to British history in this regard while criticizing the ‘mistakes which the German democrats made after 1918, when they tried to build up a democratic government with a people who were without democratic tradition and without adequately trained leadership’.

In the article ‘Democracy and the School’, which was the only article he devoted fully to democracy, Lewin (1943/1999) characterized the components of democracy as follows:

Democracy is opposed to both autocracy and *laissez-faire*. It includes long-range planning by the group on the basis of self responsibility; it recognizes the importance of leadership, but this leadership remains responsible to the group as a whole and does not interfere with the basic equality of rights for every member. The safeguard of this equality of status is the emphasis on reason and fairness rather than personal willfulness. The right to influence group policy must have as its counterpart the willingness to accept majority decisions. (Lewin, 1943/1999, p. 325)

As emphasized in this definition and in many other writings by Lewin, the democratic leader is the most important gatekeeper of the group, organization, or culture. Beginning with his famous pioneering experiment on leadership styles in experimentally created ‘social climates’, Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) perceived leadership as playing a central role in democratic life. He even believed that Germany could be culturally reconstructed after the war with a group of democratically trained new leaders.

Lewin perceived the democratic society as a pluralistic society, with emphasis on the need to grant freedom of expression and respect the diversity of the various groups in that society. He formulated the definition in 1943, before ‘cultural diversity’ became a prevalent term in American society, as he stated: ‘The parallel to democratic freedom for the individual is cultural pluralism for groups’ (Lewin, 1943/1948, p. 36). However, he was also realistic enough to express his views about restricting freedom of expression for extreme groups in society, an issue which continues to be debated to this very day. In this connection, he argued that democratic society has a right to defend itself

against destructive, intolerant cultures: 'Intolerance against intolerant cultures is therefore a prerequisite to any organization of permanent peace' (1943/1948, p. 36).

Action Research to Resolve Intergroup Conflicts in Society

Taking into account his personal experience as an immigrant and member of a minority group, it is understandable that Lewin chose intergroup relations as the central issue for his action research interventions. Lewin (1946/1948) wrote the article 'Action Research and Minority Problems' as part of an endeavour to improve intergroup relations in several American communities. Lewin, who was called upon to assist practitioners in assessing the outcomes of their interventions among those groups, realized that they would have to devise a different method of practice. In this regard, he observed:

The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management, or social engineering. It is a type of action research, comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading up to social action. Research that provides nothing but books will not suffice. This by no means implies that the research needed is in any respect less scientific or "lower" than what would be required for pure science in the field of social events. (Lewin, 1946/1948, pp. 202–203)

The term 'social engineering' should be understood here in the context of Lewin's personal, cultural, and historical milieu as well as in the general historical context of the 1940s. Lewin's personal and scientific approach was the antithesis of the impersonal, mechanical behaviourism that 'social engineering' might imply. The image is strengthened by biographical sources, which portray Lewin as a humane, personal, and exceptionally sensitive human being (Allport, 1948; Cartwright, 1951; Lewin, 1992; Marrow, 1969). Notably, the term 'social engineering' was coined after Lewin launched the Research Center for Group Dynamics (Lewin, 1945). At that time, he borrowed the term in a metaphoric sense from the physical realm where the engineering profession has the reputation of an applied science, with the know-how and techniques to effectively change the physical world. Lewin aspired to create an identical profession in the sphere of human sciences through research and theory in the social sciences. By no means was the term used to undermine the human aspect of individuals and social groups. Lewin proceeded to delineate the research required for practice, as distinguished from a more academic research objective:

Social research concerns itself with two rather different types of questions, namely the study of general laws of group life and the diagnosis of a specific situation. Problems of general laws deal with the relation between possible conditions and possible results. They are expressed in "if so" propositions. The knowledge of [general] laws can serve as a guidance for the achievement of certain objectives under certain conditions. To act correctly it does not suffice if the engineer or the surgeon knows the general laws of physics or physiology. He has to know too the specific character of the situation at hand. This character is determined by a scientific fact-finding called diagnosis. For any field of action, both types of scientific research are needed. (Lewin, 1945, p. 204)

In this statement, he clearly states that two origins of knowledge are needed for practice or for action research: 'general laws', which are the product of basic and academic research; and more specific knowledge, which derives from the 'specific character of the situation'. Here Lewin echoes a central meta-theoretical principle of field theory mentioned earlier, 'emphasis on the total situation'. According to this principle, individual psychological

processes are 'always to be derived from the relation of the concrete individual to the concrete situation' (Lewin, 1935, p. 41).

An additional issue that Lewin dealt with in the article on action research and minority problems is the need to integrate social science in endeavours to conduct action research. Lewin realized that the issue of intergroup relations, which was the focus of his action research ideas, requires an interdisciplinary approach or a holistic approach in Gestalt terms, hence the motto he created for *Human Relations: Toward the Integration of the Social Sciences*. In Lewin's own words:

Psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology each have begun to realize that without the help of the other neither will proceed very far ... It may mean ... the cooperation of various sciences for the practical objective of improving social management. (Lewin, 1946/1948, p. 204)

For Lewin, the process of action research is very similar to the problem-solving process: '[It] proceeds in a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (Lewin, 1946/1948, p. 206). Indeed, Lewin highly appreciated the importance of an evaluation component in action research. Without evaluation, the people involved in the process do not know the extent to which their objectives were achieved. The evaluation activity may sometimes bring about changes in methods of intervention, suggest different approaches to solving the problem, and even change the whole course of the research.

Lewin made two very acute observations, which are appropriate in this context and even sound like a prophecies with regard to his ecological view of world events and their interrelationships. The first observation was: 'No one working in the field of intergroup relations can be blind to the fact that we live today in one world. ... so far as interdependence of events is concerned, we are living in one world' (Lewin, 1946/1948, p. 215). In the same vein, Lewin's (1943–1944/1951) second observation was with regard to the power of the leader and the pivotal role of management/boards and governments:

Discrimination against minorities will not be changed as long as forces are not changed which determine the decisions of the gatekeepers. Their decisions depend partly on their ideology – that is, their system of values and beliefs which determine what they consider to be "good" or "bad" – and partly as they perceive the particular situation ... If we think of trying to reduce discrimination within a factory, a school system, or any other organized institution we should consider social life there which flows through certain channels. (p. 196)

In seeking to sum up Lewin's approach to change and his main objective in life, we can do no better than quote the words of his wife, Gertrud Weiss Lewin:

He [Kurt Lewin] described the way in which, to his mind, theory and reality have to be linked. He compares the task to the building of a bridge across the gorge separating theory from the full reality of the "individual case." The research worker can achieve this only if as a result of a "constant intense tension" he can keep both theory and reality fully within his field of vision. (Lewin, 1948, p. xvi)

Based on her testimony regarding the interdependence of theory and practice in Lewin's thought, we might assume that had Lewin survived, he probably would have changed his famous statement that 'There is nothing as practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1943–1944/1951, p. 169) to 'There is nothing as effective as the interdependence between theory, research, and practice' (Bargal, 2011, p. 43).

The Special Issue

The aim of this Special Issue is to examine the extent to which Lewin's work has stood the test of time and, in particular, to use Bargal's terminology, it continues to promote the 'interdependence between theory, research, and practice'. The following four articles have been selected because they contribute to this aim in three ways. First, they show that Lewin's work is alive, well and proving an effective way to bring about change. Second, there is a tendency to see Lewin's work as dominated by American academics and practitioners. These articles show that this is far from the case and that it is applicable to and being developed by academics and practitioners from a range of countries and cultures, including Italy, Pakistan, Germany, and Denmark. Last but not least, the articles show the continuing relevance of Lewin's work in the way that it is being linked to and used alongside newer change tools and techniques, such as collaborative inquiry, authentic leadership, and motivational interviewing.

In the first article, Endrejat et al. go to the heart of Lewin's work by describing how theory and practice unite to bring about successful change. The article shows how Lewin's field theory was combined with motivational interviewing in order to change employees' energy-saving behaviour in a German university. It concludes that Lewin's participative approach to behaviour change, which unites theory and practice, is still a valid and effective mechanism for promoting change. The second article, by Coghlan and Shani, shows how field theory and action research can be combined in practice. Drawing on collaborative inquiry, which aligns with and extends Lewin's participative approach to change, the article examines the merger of two Italian real estate companies. The article reveals how the merger unfolded as a process of inquiry and, in so doing, show the relevance and usefulness of Lewin's work.

The third article, by Lehmann, once again draws on field theory to provide the basis for examining the merger of eight Danish emergency management organizations into one new body. It focuses particularly on group behaviour, participation, and dialogue. The article concludes that Lewin's argument that the perceptions of the social group, dialogue, and involvement are imperatives for meaningful action and change. The last article, by Bakari et al., combines Lewin's three-step model with the theories of planned behavioural change and authentic leadership to examine change in five health-sector organizations in Pakistan. Not only does it show that Lewin's work still provides a practical approach to change, but also, as Lewin argued, that the style of change leadership and the leader-follower relationship are crucial to successful change.

After Lewin's death, his friends and collaborators developed and expanded his work so that by the 1970s it had become the OD movement, comprising thousands of academics and practitioners based mainly in America. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, through a combination of a changing world and the retirement of his main promoters, Lewin's work fell out of favour. It was claimed by many that his work was outdated and by some that it had never been useful in the first place (Burnes, 2004). Yet, in the last 20 years, interest in Lewin has experienced a renaissance, not just in its traditional heartland of America, but across the globe (Burnes & Cooke, 2012). This Special Issue is a testament to that renaissance and to a new generation of Lewin scholars who have rediscovered his work leavened it with newer change tools and theories and are using it to promote and bring about participative change. Seventy years

after his death, Lewin's work still offers a practical, theory-based, and effective approach to change.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

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