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Kurt Lewin and Foundations of Change Science



A Practical (and Principled) Theorist

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Abstract

In this brief entry, we examine the foundational impact of social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) on change management. We begin by reviewing the essential elements of Lewin’s life and work, while also exploring where he was going (and his broader vision for the social sciences) in the highly productive time right before his untimely death at the age of 56. We also explore lesser-known elements of Lewin’s work that form the building blocks of an integrated, highly salient approach to change, and conclude by offering a reappraisal of Lewin, one in which he should be seen centrally as a ground-breaking, integrated, and principled social scientist.

Keywords

Kurt lewin · Change science · Field theory · Group dynamics · Action research · Social psychology

Introduction

Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) was a German American psychologist who is considered a foundational figure in the rise of several major areas of psychology. Lewin’s work was of considerable influence in social psychology, organizational psychology, and particularly in applied psychology and organization development, where his model of the three stages of change is widely seen as a central pillar in the rise of action research. We begin this brief chapter by examining this foundational element of Lewin’s work, while also exploring where he was going with his work (and his broader vision for the social sciences) in the highly productive time right before his untimely death at the age of 56. It is in this latter work that we find a Lewin who has largely been overlooked and yet is highly relevant to the twenty-first-century world. We also highlight lesser-known elements of Lewin’s work that form the building blocks of an integrated, highly salient approach to change, and conclude by offering a reappraisal of Lewin, one in which he should be seen centrally as a groundbreaking, integrated, and principled social scientist.

Why Should We Look to Kurt Lewin for the Foundations of Change Science?

Most accounts of Kurt Lewin’s life agree that at the time of his death in 1947 he was at the height

of his influence and at the peak of his productivity. His work at the time included active involvement in two significant research centers, one in the USA and the other in Great Britain. He had helped to establish *Human Relations*, a journal dedicated to publishing interdisciplinary research on social relationships and social problems. His research was spread across topics as far-ranging as conflict in marriage, styles of leadership, employee motivation and performance, group problem-solving, communication and attitude change, anti-Semitism, antiracism, discrimination and prejudice, integration, segregation, peace, war, and poverty (Burnes 2017).

As a naturalized US citizen, Lewin had supported the World War II war effort through his work for the National Research Council's Committee on Food Habits, and shortly before he died, he predicted that one of the by-products of the recently concluded World War II would be a new stage of development in the social sciences that would be as revolutionary as the atom bomb (Lewin 1947). This prediction turned out to be largely correct. A period starting from the end of World War II and stretching through the early 1970s marked a dramatic and unprecedented expansion of social science research in the USA, during which Lewin's influence was diffused across his many personal and professional relationships and the institutions he was associated with. The themes from his work—knowledge about social relations, group dynamics, cultural differences, individual and group behavior, human nature, and motivation—continued to be pursued in many disciplines of the social sciences.

Kurt Lewin's approach to social science mirrored Albert Einstein's approach to physics in that he used his imagination to form theories in social science that challenged the mainstream beliefs, and disrupted the theories of psychology, sociology, and economics as to what can be considered real and relevant to predicting human behavior. This led Lewin to probably his most important theorem that says a person's behavior is a function of the person *and* their environment. Lewin believed that to understand people from a psychological perspective, it was necessary to consider all the possible factors that influence a person's

behavior *and* the way those factors interact and change over time. Expressed as the simple equation $B = f(p,e)$, this formula uses the equals sign to connect ideas from different social realms. Variables involving aspects of personality, group structure, ideology, cultural values, and economic factors are brought together in a holistic way to recognize the totality of a given situation.

Lewin was already considered one of the most important figures in psychology when he immigrated to the USA in 1933. It was at the University of Berlin where he had formulated what would become the basis of his work—field theory, Gestalt psychology, and Cassier's philosophy of science (Burnes 2025). However, upon his arrival in the USA he purposefully eschewed affiliations with the type of prestigious psychology departments he had left behind in Berlin. Instead, he forged a unique and innovative path for social science, beginning in 1935 at the University of Iowa's Child Welfare Research Station and later at the Research Center of Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which he established in 1945 to investigate group behavior and the benefits of participative management. He was also central to the establishment of the Commission on Community Interrelations (CCI), the aim of which was the eradication of discrimination against minority groups (Burnes and Cooke 2012). During this time, Lewin carried out ambitious research programs that incorporated eclectic approaches to experimental social psychology on topics such as conflict in marriage, styles of leadership, worker motivation and performance, conflict in industry, group problem-solving, communication and attitude change, anti-Semitism, and more. Through this study, Lewin established a new and revolutionary way of understanding and changing human behavior.

Following Lewin's death, one of the first groups to carry Lewin's work forward was the National Training Laboratories (NTL) Institute in Bethel, Connecticut. A technique developed by NTL called Training Group, or "T-Group," was a technique for applying Lewin's social psychology in a group setting that stressed personal growth and emotional expression along with the need to challenge bureaucracy and promote

democratic participation. The NTL Institute and the T-Group methodology went on to become a major influence in US corporate training programs (Kleiner 1996).

Another important institution that advanced Lewin's work following his death was the Tavistock Institute in London. Inspired by Lewin and led by Eric Trist, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations was modeled after Lewin's Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT and consisted of members of various social science disciplines, including psychoanalysis and economics. Researchers at the Tavistock Institute used Lewin's group dynamics theories, action research, and systems thinking as an integrated approach to address specific problems in organizations and improve work processes. Tavistock researchers were working within organizations to advance the concept of socio-technical systems, an approach to job and organizational design that emphasizes the interconnections between psychological, technical, economic, and other needs for flows of work, tasks, and roles.

The nascent field of Organization Development (OD) was founded upon Lewinian principles and expanded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s to establish itself as a major approach to change in management practice. Lewin provided both the core tools and approaches of OD, and OD's rationale and values (Burnes and Cooke 2012). Helping to fuel the growth of OD in subsequent years were scholars such as Chris Argyris and Edgar Schein, who called Lewin's work the taproot of OD (Schein 2010). Also contributing to OD's growth was the Tavistock Institute's action research programs. OD continued to advance as a field of academic study, an internal function within organizations, and as external consulting practices, with applications for everything from small-group to system-wide interventions.

Kurt Lewin's Vision for the Future

Lost from many accounts of Kurt Lewin is the vision he had for the future. This vision can be found in the seminal article *Frontiers in Group Dynamics* where Lewin proposed three aims for a

new stage of development in social sciences. They are (1) integrating social sciences; (2) moving from the description of social bodies to dynamic problems of changing group life; and (3) developing new instruments and techniques of social research (Lewin 1947, p. 5).

The aspirations Lewin had for the social sciences took him far beyond the narrow interests of his scientific community. His unique way of thinking about psychology and research methods challenged most conventional norms at the time. He focused on the interrelatedness between the person and the environment, the interdependence between the way that people think and how they are motivated, and the importance of understanding the individual in the context of their social group. These are now well-established concepts in psychology that all originated with Kurt Lewin.

In breaking with the tradition of most social scientists of his time, Lewin's relationship to science was more like an artist's relationship to their art. He sought to interact with a broader public audience who could benefit from his work. His vision for social science was science with a social purpose. He introduced a new vocabulary into the social sciences by integrating thinking from multiple disciplines. He created a different class of disciplinary thought that was based not on questions, but on problems—socially significant problems. His work often defied description or categorization and was distinguished by the integration of both theoretical and practical knowledge and set in a particular circumstance. Additionally, Lewin introduced the concept of social influence to social science. He experimented with novel ideas for influencing change and found success with less authoritarian and more democratic processes that were based upon relationships with peers and other members of a social group.

For Kurt Lewin, it was the practical purpose of social science that really mattered. He believed social scientists should not be afraid to use methods or concepts that span across disciplines—because “any one of them refers more or less to the same set of social problems.” As evidenced in this quote, Lewin was concerned

with the interconnections and interdependencies of our social world.

The variety of facts which social psychology has to treat might really seem frightening to even a bold scientific mind. They include “values” (such as religious and moral values), “ideologies” (such as conservatism or communism), “the style of living and thinking” and other so-called “cultural” facts. They include sociological problems, i.e. problems of group and group structure, their degree of hierarchy and types of organization, or such problems as the difference between a rural and an urban community, their rigidity or fluidity, degree of differentiation, etc. They also include so-called “psychological” problems, such as the intelligence of a person, his goals and fears, and his personality. They include such “physiological” facts as the person’s being healthy or sick, strong or weak, the color of his hair and his complexion. They include, finally, such “physical” facts as the size of the physical area in which the person or a group is located. (Lewin 1939)

Kurt Lewin’s Relevance in the Twenty-First Century

As a guide for readers to grasp the relevance of Lewin in the first half of the twenty-first century, rather than focusing on epistemology, methods, or style of theorizing, we offer stance as a metaphor that best accounts for Lewin’s work as a whole, and in context (Petriglieri 2020). The following outline of Lewin’s stance consists of four pillars—integration, systems, problem focus, and democracy—these four pillars encompass Lewin’s commitment to social change, his understanding of and approach to behavioral change, and its application to real-world problems.

Integration. Lewin was frustrated with the fragmentation he saw in the social sciences, specifically in anthropology, psychology, and sociology where each views the same world in different ways, and each forms their own sets of rules for what questions can be asked and what methodologies for research can be used. His frustration grew even more heightened with how these different communities of scientists seemed to be okay with this situation, satisfied to stay within the boundaries of their own communities and unconcerned with how each one’s specialty

interests could yield entirely different explanations of the same situation.

Lewin believed cultural anthropology should not be limited to “primitive” cultures but used in addressing modern problems as well. He believed that psychologists should conduct experiments in the field in addition to the more commonly used laboratory settings. He saw the fragmented state of the social sciences as being insufficient for resolving social problems and found research efforts that limited inquiry to dispassionate observers and failed to incorporate things like feelings and emotion were incomplete. At the time of his death, Lewin was advocating for an integration of the social sciences that also included economics, believing that all social scientists should incorporate factors like ideology, cultural values, and economic circumstance into their research and theories.

Systems. From his earliest work in Berlin and continuing throughout the many phases of his research, Lewin constantly kept the “larger social systems” in mind and analyzed these systems from a psychosocial perspective. He believed that crucial data was overlooked in descriptions of behavior without reference to its environment or when groups were defined only by isolated interests, goals, or viewpoints (Kariel 1956). Putting facts into classificatory pigeonholes was considered fruitless, no matter how accurately the pigeonholes were conceived. Consequently, he innovated the way groups were conceptualized by defining groups according to their interdependence of fate, the idea that an individual’s fate can be tied to the fate of the entire group.

Conceiving of groups as a *system of relationships* between individuals and groups is like reversing the telescope, where multiple, isolated views are exchanged for one expanded field view of a given situation. He rejected the notion that the presence or absence of one fact, or of a group of facts viewed in isolation, could determine whether or not a certain type of behavior occurs, and that a situation must be viewed as *one concrete dynamic whole* to understand the interrelation between its parts and properties.

In his attempts to describe the elusive nature of systems, Lewin would say, “if you truly want to

understand something, try and change it,” suggesting that a change of one of its parts implies a change of the other parts, and that it is necessary to be immersed in a system to truly understand its interdependencies and the combination of enabling and restraining forces that preserved the status quo.

Problem Focus. Lewin believed that problems, especially socially significant problems, should drive the interest of social scientists as opposed to the interests of their individual disciplines. He thought social science should serve society and therefore its usefulness should be evaluated in the “social” as opposed to the “scientific” realm. For Lewin, simply finding better theoretical explanations for problems was not sufficient for connecting social science to social problems, and that science should carry meaning and be significant to solutions to social problems. His methods for problem formulation are like the integrative approaches used by designers when approaching a design problem. Believing a problem cannot be fully understood in isolation from the solution, he used hypothetical conjectures based on abductive reasoning as a means of helping to explore and understand the problem formulation. In other words, he framed the problem in terms of the perceived relevant solutions (Schön 1995).

Democracy. A Lewinian view of democracy is not as a political system but as a set of values and practices that is interwoven with every aspect of culture including education, leadership, collaborative learning, and socially responsible research. Lewin’s lifelong commitment to democratic processes grew out of his early experiences in and around Hitler’s Nazism. He was explicit about his concern for using social science for developing a better world, being far ahead of his time in bringing attention to racial disparities in social systems. He advocated for education and social structures that support democratic values, such as openness, mutual respect, and critical thinking.

In a moving tribute to Lewin shortly following his death, Gordon Allport (1948) wrote how Lewin saw the intimate dependence of democracy upon successful social science, that democracy cannot succeed without knowledge of, and adherence to, the laws of human nature in group

settings, and that the freedom to pursue this research and theory is possible only in a democratic environment. Lewin, he said, had shown, more clearly than anyone else, in concrete, operational terms what it means to be a democratic leader, and to create a democratic group structure.

Lewin was concerned with placing social science at the service of democracy calling “intolerance against the intolerant” to be just as essential for establishing and maintaining a democracy as “tolerance for the tolerant” (Lewin 1946, p. 37). He advocated for integrating democratic values and human dignity into scientific theory and practice and sought to educate and empower the oppressed, the underprivileged, and the underserved in society. And as if taking notes from the American Founding Fathers, Lewin cautioned that the journey from a collection of individuals to an effectively functioning group could be daunting, requiring, among other things, good leadership and “management of the field of helping and hindering forces” (Raine 2014, p. 646).

Tempering his usual optimism, Lewin was realistic about the unwillingness on the part of some people in power positions to use the social sciences to influence legislation and public policy. He also bemoaned the shortage of social scientists who he felt to be competent in this work that he called intergroup relations. But he was still optimistic about the future of this work. In 1946, less than a year before his death, he wrote how he believed a large-scale effort of social research on intergroup relations would have a lasting effect on the history of the USA. “It needs the best of what the best among us can give, and the help of everybody” (Lewin 1946).

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