Kurt Lewin: The Tough-Minded and Tender-Hearted Scientist

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This paper presents a personal account of my experience with Kurt Lewin and attempts to characterize why he was such an effective scientific leader. Key points are Lewin’s personal leadership style, his approach to theorizing and research, the substantive and methodological innovativeness of the research done by Lewin and his students, his intense commitment to developing psychological knowledge that would be relevant to important human concerns, and his persistent attempt to develop ways of applying psychological knowledge to make the world a more humane habitat. The paper concludes by summarizing how my career in social psychology has been affected by Kurt Lewin.

This paper, which is in honor and remembrance of Kurt Lewin, gives a personal account of my impression of him. He was an extraordinary, creative scientist whose fertile mind and enthusiasms ignited the imagination of his fortunate students in a way that opened up many new areas in psychology to scientific investigation. However, Lewin was not only an original, tough-minded theorist and researcher with a profound interest in the philosophy and methodology of science; he was also a tender-hearted psychologist who was deeply involved with developing psychological knowledge that would be relevant to important human concerns. In short, Lewin was both tough-minded and tender-hearted; he provided a scientific role model that is still worth emulating.

I first heard of Lewin’s work when I was an undergraduate psychology major at the City College of New York during the period of 1935–1939. It was a time of much intellectual ferment and social turmoil. The ideas of Marx, Freud,
and Einstein were shaping the intellectual climate in which my undergraduate studies were immersed. The Great Depression, the rise of totalitarianism, the barbarities of Nazism, the Spanish civil war, and forebodings of a new world war were influencing scholars to believe our intellectual work had to be socially relevant; we could not stay in the "ivory tower." This was the context of Lewin's writings in the 1930s and of my first exposure to his works in two courses, taken simultaneously: Social Psychology and Personality and Motivation.

In the social psychology course, one of our textbooks was J. F. Brown's *Psychology and the Social Order*. This was an ambitious, challenging, and curious text that tried to apply Lewinian and Marxian ideas, with a sprinkling of the Riemannian geometry employed by Einstein in his theory of relativity, to the major social issues of the 1930s. To a naive 17-year-old undergraduate student like me, it was a very impressive and inspiring book showing how social science could shed light on the urgent problems of our time.

In the Personality and Motivation course, I read Lewin's *A Dynamic Theory of Personality* and *Principles of Topological Psychology*. I also read his "Conceptual Representation and Measurement of Psychological Forces" as an undergraduate, but I cannot recall when. I and others experienced great intellectual excitement on reading these books over 50 years ago. *A Dynamic Theory of Personality* consisted of a collection of independent articles, previously published in the early 1930s, while the other books made a brilliant but flawed attempt to articulate the foundations of a scientific psychology with the aid of topology. They were mind openers. These books are permeated by a different view of the nature of psychological science than the then traditional one. The new view was characterized by Lewin as the "Galilean mode of thought," which was contrasted with the more traditional "Aristotelian mode." In my writings on field theory (Deutsch, 1968), I have characterized in some detail Lewin's approach to psychological theorizing, his metatheory. Here, I can highlight only a few points.

**Lewin's Way of Theorizing**

First of all, Lewin emphasized the interconnectedness of the person and the environment, condemning explanations of behavior in terms of the characteristics of the individual—e.g., instincts, intelligence, personality traits, needs, habits—indeependently of the situation (and also vice versa). Individual psychological processes are, in Lewin's words, "always to be derived from the relation of the concrete individual to the concrete situation and, so far as internal forces are concerned, from the mutual relations of various functional systems that make up the individual" (1935, p. 41). In Lewinian terms, it was inconceivable that cognitive and motivational systems would not be interrelated in determining psychological events, or that one would see cognitive and motivational explanations of behavior as alternatives to one another.

A second, related emphasis in Lewin's approach to theorizing, derived from Cassirer (1923), was his stress on *relational* rather than *thing* concepts. Thing or entity concepts are part of a classificatory approach that assumes concepts are derived as abstractions from particular objects to an ideal object. Relational concepts are part of a constructivist approach in which the meaning of a specific phenomenon is construed from its essential elements. Phenotypic or historical-geographic data—in which the similarities are defined in terms of external rather than psychological characteristics—must be transformed into the language of psychological constructs (*genotypes*, to use Lewin's terms) before one can hope to develop general psychological laws that are applicable to individual cases.

This Lewinian emphasis prods one to go beyond "entity" concepts such as "male," "female," "child," "adolescent," *etc*., or "achievement" concepts, which define behavior in terms of what it accomplishes, to the psychological constructs by which one can meaningfully explain individual behavior or individual differences among adolescents—rather than simply describing a hypothetical typical adolescent. For example, Lewin employed the concept of unstable cognitive structure to give insight into the situation of many adolescents. He pointed out that "the uncertain character of the adolescent's behavior and his conflicts can partly be explained by the lack of cognitive clarity concerning the adult's world which he is going to enter" (Lewin, 1951, pp. 138–139). This is not to deny that descriptive statistics about adolescents or other entities can serve useful purposes, but such statistics are not the best basis for constructing psychological theory to understand the behavior of individual adolescents. Nor did Lewin deny that describing behavior in terms of its achievements can be useful. However, it is the psychological meaning of the behavior to the individual performing it which psychological theory cannot ignore.

A third theme in Lewin's metatheoretical approach was an emphasis on *systematic* rather than *historical* concepts of causation. Field theory in physics destroyed the notion of action at a distance and replaced it with structural equations in which "the field here and now depends on the field in the immediate neighborhood at a time just past" (Deutsch, 1968, p. 418). Lewin, in a similar vein, emphasized that psychological events—i.e., change in the life space—must be explained in terms of the properties of the field that exists at the time when the event occurs. He pointed out that past events can only have a position in the historical causal chains whose interweaving creates the present situation; they cannot directly influence present events. This is not to deny the significance of the past in creating current conditions. Although the notion that only the present is influential in the present is an obvious idea, one can still find many explanations in psychology that essentially are notions of "action at a distance" across time.

Perhaps the most important psychological emphasis in Lewin's metatheory
was his insistence on the interdependence between psychological structure and psychological dynamics. Psychological distance and psychological direction in the life space are determined by both structural and dynamic factors; they do not necessarily correspond to physical distance and physical direction. For example, on a Sunday night, returning from my summer cottage in East Hampton to New York City, the shortest physical distance involves taking several major highways whose directions are mainly due west. However, there are usually traffic jams on these routes. Since my goal is to get to the city as quickly and as safely as possible, the shortest psychological distance and the psychological direction, or distinguished path, to my goal involve physically longer and more circuitous byroads which are less likely to have heavy traffic. "Valence" and "force" as concepts assume both a cognitive map and motivation (or tension systems). The recent recognition by cognitive psychologists of the importance of motivational considerations was a basic feature of Lewin's theoretical approach. Lewin attempted to develop a mathematics, "hodological space," which integrated topological structural concepts and psychological dynamics. While Lewin was not successful in his attempt, he was nevertheless pointing to the need for psychology to have an integrated approach to structural and dynamic concepts.

The metatheory presented in Lewin's early books was new to me and to most American psychologists. It provided a different way of thinking about psychological phenomena than that which characterized the dominant American behaviorism and the midwestern dust-bowl empiricism. Lewin's metatheory is, of course, a variant on the approach of the Gestalt psychologists and reflected his participation in the group at the Psychological Institute of Berlin, which included Wertheimer, Kohler, Koffka, and Stumpf. Lewin extended the ideas of the Gestalt group in two directions. First, he attempted to apply and develop "the young mathematical discipline 'topology'... in making psychology a real science" (Lewin, 1936, p. vii). Second, and more important, he applied his metatheory to new areas in psychology, going considerably beyond the study of perception, which had been the main focus of earlier Gestaltists. As an undergraduate psychology major, I found Lewin's way of theorizing exciting because it seemed to offer the possibility of theory that would deal with psychological phenomena comprehensively rather than in terms of one simplistic causal mechanism such as associationism or hedonism or egoism. In my fantasy, it also seemed to be a vehicle for integrating Einstein, Freud, and Marx—Einstein's way of theorizing, Freud's emphasis on psychological dynamics, and Marx's emphasis on social influences upon psychological processes.

Lewin's Research

Perhaps even more impressive than the new way of thinking about psychological theorizing were the theoretical essays and the highly original research studies that were presented in *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*. Lewin's essays, "Environmental Forces on Child Behavior and Development" and "The Psychological Situations of Reward and Punishment," were instant "classics," providing deep understanding of the topics they addressed. These papers are still worth reading for the richness of their characterization of how the psychological structure of the environment and the dynamic forces acting on the person create different types of conflict situations.

A large number of path-breaking experiments were also summarized in this book. Some of the topics opened to experimental investigation by Lewin and his students in Berlin included the recall of completed and uncompleted activities by Zeigarnik; the resumption of interrupted activities by Ovianikina; the forgetting of an intention by Birenbaum; the discharge of needs through substitute activities by Lissner; substitute activities of different degrees of reality by Mahler; success and failure and the level of aspiration by Hoppe; psychological determinants of the level of aspiration by Frank; performance and level of aspiration by Juksnat; psychological satiation by Karsten; anger as a dynamic problem by Dembo; the dynamic properties of the level of reality and unreality by Brown; the behavior of the child in strange fields by Wiehe; and investigations into the differences in psychological structure in normal and feeble-minded children by Kopke. These diverse theory-driven studies reflected the fertility of his ideas as well as his ability to attract students and inspire them to do original, productive research. These pioneering studies reflected not only Lewin's theoretical acumen but also his unusual ability to stimulate his students to open up to experimental study important psychological phenomena never previously subjected to scientific inquiry. I felt very much drawn to the image I had of the work of Lewin and his students; they were capturing important phenomena of everyday life for science.

Entering Lewin's Orbit

My next contact with Lewin's work was my reading of various articles by Lewin, Lippitt, and/or White about the now-classic research on the effects of democratic, authoritarian, and laissez-faire leadership. I think I read them shortly after being released from the U.S. Air Force at the end of World War II. I was thinking then of resuming my graduate studies and was pondering whether to go to the University of Chicago to do clinical work with Carl Rogers or to study with Lewin at his newly formed Research Center for Group Dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Prior to the war, I had been oriented toward becoming a psychoanalyst, and had taken an M.A. degree and an internship in clinical psychology. The war and my experience in it shifted my interests toward social psychology—as did my reading of the Lewin, Lippitt, and White studies—but I was also still interested in clinical psychology. Thus, my question of where to study. I had an interview with Carl Rogers in Chicago
Radke (now Radke-Yarrow). Jack French and Alvin Zander were to join later. The small group of twelve students included Kurt Back, Alex Bavelas, David Emery, Gordon Hearn, Murray Horwitz, David Jenkins, Albert Peplome, Stanley Schachter, Richard Snyder, John Thibaut, Ben Willerman, and myself. These initial faculty and students were extraordinarily productive, and they played a pivotal role in developing modern social psychology in its applied as well as its basic aspects.

Lewin’s interest in establishing the RCDG reflected a marked shift in his interest—from the individual to the group—even though some of his earlier papers (Lewin, 1920; Lewin & Rupp, 1928) dealing with psychological aspects of work foreshadowed his later interest. As Miriam Lewin, his daughter, has written,

His personal experiences and those of his family under Fascism inevitably affected him profoundly. He became absorbed in social psychology, the problems of minority groups, and intergroup relations. The war increased his conviction that the development of the social sciences must keep pace with the advances in the physical sciences if time was not to run out for mankind. This sense of urgency, and focus on group phenomena, remained with him the rest of his life. (1974, p. 319)

During the war, Lewin conceived of the notion of a research center that would focus on the development of theory and research related to groups, and would also be concerned with understanding the processes of social action and social change through “action research.” He sought an academic home for his proposed new center. Edward Chace Tolman was very interested in having Lewin and his proposed center come to the University of California at Berkeley, while Douglas McGregor wanted them at MIT. Lewin would have preferred the warmer climate of Berkeley, but MIT came through with an offer first; two days after he accepted it, Berkeley also made an offer.

In a paper published in 1945, Lewin described the twin objectives of the MIT center: to advance the scientific knowledge of group processes through theory building and group experiments, and to foster the practical application of this knowledge to social management. He was aware that there would be skepticism concerning the mixture of basic research and practical application that he was advocating. As he put it,

One may ask whether this interrelation between theoretical social science and the practical needs of society will not lower the scientific level. . . . Psychologists have recognized the necessity of a theoretical approach only relatively recently, and fear has been expressed that the preoccupation with the applied problems of the war will retard this development. The student of group life should be aware of this danger and the still greater danger of becoming a servant of very one-sided social interests. We should, however, not try to set the clock back and retard a scientific step that is ready. We will have to look forward, and I am persuaded that if the scientist proceeds correctly, a close link with practice can be a blessing for the development of theory. (Lewin, 1945, as quoted in Marrow, 1969, p. 172)

Lewin died suddenly on February 11, 1947, of a heart attack. The RCGD had been functioning for considerably less than two years when he died. Yet in
this brief period of time he had established an institution that would strongly influence the development of modern social psychology, and he himself continued his prolific writings in social psychology. Let me offer some speculations as to why the Research Center for Group Dynamics was such a remarkably productive center.

**Reasons for the Center’s Effectiveness**

1. First of all, Lewin was an unusually effective scientific “tribal leader” (to borrow a phrase from Donald Campbell). As I have indicated in describing my personal contacts with him, he was enthusiastic, inspiring, and persuasive. He led those working with him to feel they were involved in an important, promising enterprise that could have very valuable consequences for both social science and society. He treated his faculty and students as colleagues—giving them autonomy and responsibility, and the sense of being actively involved, individually and collectively, in creating the new field of group dynamics. He also encouraged open and vigorous conflict about ideas and methods among his faculty and students in the never-ceasing attempt to get to a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

   This was most evident in the loosely organized research seminars, named the Quasellestripe (or winding string), that he very loosely led for the faculty and students. Typically, in the Quasellestripe a faculty member or student would present some research or some theoretical issue that he or she was involved in, and a lively controversy would erupt. Sometimes the controversy was related to the presentation, but frequently the discussion wandered off into other issues. Not infrequently, the most heated exchanges took place between Leon Festinger and Ronald Lippitt, who had rather different views of the nature of science and of research. During these vigorous disputes, Lewin would be smiling benignly as he watched his intellectual offspring squabble. Almost invariably at the end of these wandering, disputatious research seminars he would emerge from his role as an observer, and in an active way he would offer a deeper, integrating perspective that would provide a basis for synthesizing the conflicting viewpoints.

2. It was not only Lewin’s leadership style but also his ideas that contributed to the productivity of the RCGD. Very much influenced by Cassirer, the German philosopher of science, he believed “the taboo against believing in the existence of a social entity is probably most effectively broken by handling this entity experimentally” (Lewin, 1951, p. 193). The concept of “group,” as well as other concepts relating to social psychological phenomenon, had little scientific status among psychologists in the 1930s and 1940s when Lewin was first turning his attention to social psychology. He believed the “reality” of these concepts would only be established by “doing something with them.” So at the center there was strong pressure to do something with the concepts related to groups and not merely to talk about these ideas. And, of course, the faculty and students did many experiments to demonstrate that one could, in a sense, capture for science such phenomena as “styles of group leadership,” “social influence,” “cooperation and competition,” “group cohesiveness,” “pressures for uniformity,” “trust and suspicion,” “social comparison,” etc. The pressure to do something with the concepts was not only directed toward experimentation, but also toward application—namely, to show that these concepts could be employed to change existing social reality—e.g., to improve group functioning, to reduce prejudice, to train more effective leaders.

   Lewin’s metatheory, his conceptual language, as well as his specific theoretical ideas were also important influences on the members of the center while they were at MIT. Over 30 years later, in the spring of 1978, there was a reunion of almost all the surviving members of the RCGD at Columbia University. The participants included Kurt Bach, Dorwin Cartwright, Leon Festinger, Jack French, Gordon Hearn, Harold Kelley, Ronald Lippitt (via tape), Albert Peplome, Stanley Schachter, and myself. At that reunion (the first and last one), the participants were asked to indicate how Lewin had influenced their work. From the discussion, it was evident that all of us had been very much influenced by Lewin’s way of thinking about science and by his general orientation to psychology. Earlier I described the key elements of Lewin’s metatheory—in other words, his field-theoretical approach to psychology. This is what had most impact on the participants. Very few were still involved with Lewin’s conceptual language or terminology, with topological and vectorial psychology. Some had been stimulated to do work that related to Lewin’s specific theoretical ideas, particularly those relevant to tension systems, level of aspiration theory, social interdependence, group leadership, group decision making, changing individual attitudes, and quasi-stationary equilibria. And several were stimulated by Lewin to be concerned with articulating the connections between social psychological theory and change in social practice.

   Nevertheless, the common thread that linked our group of past RCGD members together was a Lewinian way of thinking. It emphasized the importance of theory; the value of experimentation for clarifying and testing ideas; the interrelatedness between the person and the environment; the interdependence of cognitive structures and motivation; the importance of understanding the individual in his/her social (group, cultural) context; the usefulness of theory for social practice; and the value of trying to change reality for the development of theory. These emphases are not unique to the Lewinian way of thinking; they characterize good social science and good social practice. But Lewin was the one who introduced them to social psychology.

3. The RCGD fostered a sense of pioneering elitism among its members. We felt we were working on the frontiers of social psychological knowledge, creating new research methods, and capturing new phenomena for science. This
created a narcissistic arrogance in many of us that permitted us to venture on untrodden paths and to feel rather superior to the work being done by our friends and neighbors in Harvard’s Social Relations Department, as well as elsewhere.

In addition, of course, the center had a “critical mass” of active researchers among its faculty and students so that the publications of this group dominated the early work in experimental and applied social psychology. Alfred Marrow (1969), in his biography of Kurt Lewin (The Practical Theorist), listed over 100 publications and dissertations connected with the RCGD during the period of 1945-1950. In a sense, apart from whatever other merits we had, we were so influential because we were lucky enough to be active early in the development of modern social psychology when there were relatively few others who were doing research and publishing in this field.

4. Lewin recruited a very able and congenial group of mature students who, for the most part, had previous graduate work in psychology and had served in the armed forces in World War II. They were prepared to take responsibility and to work with the faculty as colleagues. The relatively young faculty were unusually accessible and open to collaborative working relations with the students. As students we were very quickly involved in the design and execution of experiments and of research on the training workshops; some of us were also rapidly thrust into the role of conducting training workshops on group processes and group leadership. The students comprised a small, cohesive group that provided much mutual support even as we had intense intellectual discussions about the new ideas and techniques that were being developed.

5. Lewin also recruited an unusually gifted younger faculty. I assume that he purposefully created a faculty that had some tension as well as some unifying elements within it, a faculty within which there would be productive tension in theory, research, and application. As suggested earlier, Festinger and Lippitt had fundamental disagreements, and while he lived, Lewin served as an integrating force, intellectually as well as administratively. After his death, Cartwright maintained the administrative integration, but there was little intellectual common ground between the disparate perspectives of Festinger and Lippitt. For many students, Festinger became a symbol of the tough-minded, theory-oriented, pure experimental scientist, while Lippitt became a symbol of the fuzzy-minded, dogooder, practitioner of applied social psychology. These were unfortunate caricatures of both Festinger and Lippitt. Such caricatures were, I believe, one of the contributing cases to the estrangement between basic and applied social psychology in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s. I doubt that these caricatures would have developed if Lewin had lived longer. As my earlier quotation from him indicated, he saw an intimate two-directional link between the development of theory and of practice.

### The Commission on Community Interrelations

Parallel to his initiation of the RCGD, Lewin started the Commission on Community Interrelations (CCI) of the American Jewish Congress, which was concerned with social action and research on social action in the area of prejudice and discrimination against minorities. Stuart Cook was appointed as co-director of CCI, and many other distinguished-to-be psychologists worked there, including Isidor Chein, Kenneth Clark, Marie Jahoda, and Goodwin Watson, as well as various members of the RCGD. CCI did many innovative things: it developed “action research”; “sensitivity training” and “T-groups” emerged from a workshop conducted in New Britain, Connecticut, during the summer of 1946 under the auspices of CCI (I was on the research staff at this workshop); it produced procedures for handling bigots; its research helped break down legal segregation in the United States; and so on.

The concepts and methods developed by Lewin and his students have not only been applied in the area of prejudice and discrimination, they have also been widely used in the field of organizational development and change in industry as well as in schools. Space limitations allow mention of only a few of the topical areas of research, theory, or technique that have been widely employed: the effects of different styles of group leadership; the effects of group decisions on individual behavior; force-field analysis and quasi-stationary equilibria; sensitivity training; and the distinction between “own” and “induced” forces as it relates to worker participation.

This issue of JSI in honor of Kurt Lewin is one of the many indications of his enduring influence. He was a creative scientist who enriched our understanding of individual and social life by his concepts and research. He was a charismatic scientific leader who enthused and inspired his many students to do original important work of their own. And he was a socially concerned, responsible human being who constantly sought to apply his ideas to make the world a more human habitat for all of us.

### Epilogue

My career in social psychology has been greatly affected by Kurt Lewin. First of all, I probably would not have been a social psychologist were it not for the inspiring interview with him in the summer of 1945. Second, the intellectual atmosphere created by Lewin at the RCGD strongly shaped my dissertation. I started off with an interest in issues of war and peace, and with an image of the possible ways that the nations composing the then newly formed U.N. Security Council would interact. The atmosphere at the center, still persisting after Lewin’s premature death, led me to turn this social concern about the risk of
nuclear war into a theoretically oriented, experimental investigation of the effects of cooperative and competitive processes. The specific problem that I was first interested in took on a more generalized form. It had been transformed into an attempt to understand the fundamental features of cooperative and competitive relations and the consequences of these different types of interdependencies in a way that would be generally applicable to the relations between individuals, groups, or nations. The problem had become a broad theoretical one, with the broad scientific goal of attempting to interrelate and give insight into a variety of phenomena through several fundamental concepts and basic propositions. The intellectual atmosphere at the center pushed its students to theory building, Lewin’s favorite slogan was “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.”

After my dissertation on the effects of cooperation and competition, I turned my interest to the question, “What are the conditions under which a cooperative or competitive relationship will evolve?” I found it convenient to address this later question by studying conflicts; these are typically situations that contain a mixture of cooperative and competitive motives. Since our research focused on conflict, I reworded my question so that it was expressed as “What are the conditions that give rise to a constructive or destructive process of conflict resolution?” I believe our research and theorizing provide a deep, proliferating answer to this question. It has all been published in my book, The Resolution of Conflict: Constructive and Destructive Processes (Deutsch, 1973). As I worked in this area, I of course knew of Lewin’s insightful writings about the different situations of intrapsychic conflict, but my work had a rather different interpersonal focus. A number of years after my book on conflict had been published, I was surprised to remember that a book of papers by Lewin had been published in 1948 with the title, Resolving Social Conflicts. I am sure that, unconsciously at least, this was more than a coincidence in book titles.

My first job, after completing my dissertation in 1948, was with Stuart Cook at the Commission on Community Interrelations, which had been formed by Kurt Lewin. There, I worked on the social psychology of prejudice and discrimination, conducting a study of the comparative effects of integrated and segregated interracial housing (Deutsch & Collins, 1951). Like Lewin, being Jewish, I had a deep concern about prejudice and discrimination against whatever it was directed, and also like Lewin, I was concerned with understanding the conditions that give rise to prejudice and discrimination, and what could be done to eliminate them.

My concern for social justice, which predated my contact with Lewin but was reinforced by it, has been another theme in much of my theoretical and empirical work. This has been summarized in my book on distributive justice (Deutsch, 1985). Although I did not specifically think of Lewin or his ideas when I wrote this book, there is little doubt that the Lewinian approach is very much reflected in it.

A Personal Impression of Kurt Lewin

I feel fortunate to have been one of Lewin’s students, and I hope that, had he lived to the present, he would have been happy that I was.

References


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