What Would Lewin Think About
the Current Status of Social Psychology?

Morton Deutsch

Let me start by saying that those of us who have been deeply influenced by Lewin are linked together by a Lewinian way of thinking which emphasized: the importance of theory; the value of experimentation for clarifying and testing ideas; the interrelatedness between the person and the environment; 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.

From the perspective of this way of thinking, I suggest that the short answer to the question posed for this symposium is that Lewin would probably have had mixed feelings about the current status of social psychology.

Let me first focus on the positive. I think he would have applauded the greater involvement of social psychology, through its theorizing and research, in influencing thinking and practice related to important social issues. Social psychology is increasingly having an impact on issues related to a sustainable environment, war and peace, conflict resolution, cooperative learning, health promotion, social justice, discrimination, racism and sexism, organizational effectiveness, and so on. Lewin's dictum that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" is being demonstrated repeatedly.

I also think that Lewin would have approved of the increasing diversity and sophistication of the research being conducted in social psychology: experimental studies in the field as well as the laboratory; detailed case studies of individuals, groups, and organizations; action research in
cooperation with practitioners; cross-cultural research; etc. Although Lewin was much concerned that the unique interrelatedness between the specific individual and his or her specific environment is lost in many research approaches and in much statistical analyses, I think he might have been positive toward some of the newer approaches to causal analysis because of their requirement of a theoretical model.

Additionally, I think he would have been pleased by the fact that more current research appears to be theory-driven than was the case when researchers appear to be doing theory-barren research using particular research formats - e.g., the Prisoner's Dilemma Game, the Asch situation, the Skinner reinforcement paradigm, etc.

Finally, I suppose Lewin would have been amused by the belated recognition of those working in the area of social cognition that cognitive structures and processes are highly interdependent with motivation. Lewin and other gestalt psychologists as well as Gardner Murphy and others had in their theorizing and research demonstrated this interdependence many years earlier.

With regard to negatives, three issues come to mind. First of all, I believe that Lewin would have been disappointed that no common systematic language for social psychology has emerged. He spent considerable time and energy in an attempt to develop such a language in his topological and hodological psychology. His attempts were not successful and no one has since ventured onto the path which he tried to develop.

Second, like many of the theorists of his day, Lewin was interested in grand theories which encompass the variety of phenomena with which a field is concerned. His hope of a unifying theory which would integrate the field of social psychology has clearly not been realized. Social psychology consists of many little and mid-range theories that exist side-by-side with little communication
between them. Recently, some colleagues and I have been meeting in an informed seminar which is concerned with developing a book about the theory and practice of conflict resolution. In our discussions of what to include in the book, we came up with about 20 substantive areas - each of which had more than one theory or theoretical approach contained in it. These different substantive areas have little intellectual contact. I think that Lewin would have hoped that there would be more grand theorists in social psychology who would be oriented toward developing theories embracing all or most of social psychology.

Third, and most important from my perspective, is that current social psychology is deficient in characterizing the socially relevant properties of individual personalities and the psychologically relevant attributes of social structures.

In a paper presented in 1975, and published I believe in 1976, I wrote the following and I believe the critique is still valid.

A. The socially relevant properties of individual personalities. Our current theories in social psychology more or less assume that individuals are homogenous, blank slates who uniformly accept the psychological states which our experimental manipulations are meant to induce in them. Of course, we know better than this but we theorize and do our research as though this were a reasonable assumption. Suppose we were to become more realistic and were to reject this assumption. How should we begin to characterize individuals? I am not sure that I can give more than the sketchiest of answers but I do know that we should avoid the trap that many personality theorists have fallen into. We should not characterize personality dispositions as though they operate in a vacuum. Personalities always function in situations and usually in relations with other people. Thus, to use a term from Coutu, a sociologist, personality tendencies should be conceptualized as
"tinsits" - tendencies to behave in particular ways in given situations. To characterize meaningful personality dispositions, we must know how the individual conceptualizes his social world. To describe the individual's social world, we need to know: the major dimensions underlying his conceptualization, the types of social situations and social objects, and the types of social behavior which occur in his social world, and where these social objects and social behaviors are located in the dimensionalized space of his world. I believe that we already know enough to characterize the major dimensions of the interpersonal world for people of Western culture. Research by Myron Wish and myself (Wish, Deutsch, and Kaplan) and by Harry Triandis and his associates (Triandis, 1972) provide a basis for doing this.

Let me be a bit more specific. Our research suggests that there are at least four primary dimensions in most people's interpersonal world, even though these dimensions may have different weights for different people. The dimensions can be labelled as: (1) cooperation - competition; (2) equal - unequal; (3) socio-emotional - task-oriented; (4) intense - superficial. Relations between oneself and one's lover, for example, are usually seen as being highly cooperative, equal, socio-emotional, and intense. And this is true over a wide range of situations but not for all. Relations between oneself and one's adolescent son, in contrast, are usually seen as less cooperative, less equal, but also socio-emotional and fairly intense: but this is more variable from social situation to social situation. What I am suggesting is that we conceptualize personality dispositions as tendencies to behave in a particular way toward specified social objects in particular social situations. Knowing how a person locates, in his interpersonal world, his own social relations, different social situations, and various possible behaviors, will enable us to characterize how that person will tend to behave toward a specified other in a particular situation.
I wish to make two other points about personality dispositions. The first is that they usually reflect an internalization of both sides of a relationship, i.e., there is not only a tendency to behave in a given way toward another in a particular situation but there is also the complementary expectation that the other will act toward you in a given way in that situation. Thus, if your disposition is to act toward another in a trusting manner in a certain situation, you will expect that the other will behave toward you in a trustworthy manner. On the other hand, if your disposition is to act in a suspicious manner, your expectation is that the other will be untrustworthy or exploitative. This is what research we have done with the Prisoner's Dilemma game suggests (Deutsch, 1960). The foregoing is consistent with the theorizing of the "object relations" school of psychoanalysts (Fairbairn, 1952) and of Parsons (Parsons and Bales, 1955) about the socialization process.

The second point that I wish to make is that the psychic realities underlying each person's interpersonal world are not as flimsy as many social psychologists appear to assume in their theorizing. These psychic realities are not as malleable as one might hope. Where an individual positions himself in his interpersonal world, how easy or difficult he finds it to move into the different regions of his world are not, I suspect, very modifiable in most adults. Thus, some men find it difficult to have intense, cooperative, intimate, and equal relations with other men; some people find it difficult to have such relations with anyone...some people are only able to have intense relations in task-oriented situations...some people are only able to have intense relations in unequal situations...and so on. I assume, with the psychoanalytic theorists and also with our common sense observations, that we develop a core of personal identity from our individual life-experiences which has a large degree of stability over time.

B. The psychologically relevant properties of social situations. Just as we have been deficient
in characterizing the socially relevant characteristics of individual personalities, so also we have failed to characterize the psychologically relevant properties of social situations. We know people behave differently in antique shops and in zoos but we haven't conceptualized the characteristics of antique shops or zoos in such a way as to enable us to understand why people act differently in various behavior settings or situations. Although Roger Barker and his colleagues and also some of the "environmental" psychologists have made initial attempts to characterize environments psychologically, I think it is fair to say that these are limited efforts by a very few people who for the most part are not considered to be in the mainstream of social psychology. My own earlier work on the socio-psychological characteristics and effects of different types of interracial housing developments was an attempt to characterize social environments psychologically. Milgram's work on the psychological characteristics of cities was also oriented in this direction. But we must go much further if we are going to have a social psychology that has theoretical richness and social usefulness.

We must define ourselves as social psychologists in a way which enables us to ask ourselves: what kinds of social structures, social organizations, social processes will give rise to what kinds of socio-psychological consequences? What new kinds of social structures and social processes might be invented to produce specified socio-psychological consequences? We are not doing the kind of thinking which would enable us to make social inventions that, for example, might permit large groups as well as small groups to have the characteristics of a participatory democracy. We are not helping architects and city planners to create urban structures which would promote the sense of neighborhood and personal security in large urban centers. Our theorizing in social psychology is not sufficiently directed toward understanding the situations and places in which people live so that we might develop the ideas necessary to conceiving new and more personally fulfilling environments.