

THE
PRACTICAL
THEORIST
The Life and Work of
KURT LEWIN

BY

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Preface

“Freud the clinician and Lewin the experimentalist—these are the two men whose names will stand out before all others in the history of our psychological era. For it is their contrasting but complementary insights which first made psychology a science applicable to real human beings and to real human society.” Thus did Edward C. Tolman sum up the greatness of Kurt Lewin, in a memorial address delivered during the 1947 convention of the American Psychological Association shortly after Lewin’s death at the age of fifty-six.

It may surprise some readers to know that Lewin was so highly regarded. His name has never been well known to the general public. But psychologists have known of the breathtaking sweep of his scientific endeavors. Many of his concepts have been so widely adopted that they figure as intrinsic to the science itself and their origin is not remembered. Often enough ideas and techniques Lewin originated are discussed without any reference to him. Among them are the concepts signified by such familiar terms as “group dynamics,” “action research,” “field theory,” “sensitivity training.” Even such of Lewin’s observations as “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” are repeated without any idea of their source.

Different psychologists, of course, have different views on the meaning and worth of Lewin’s original concepts. But most recognize the innovative thinking and pioneering experiments that led to

his being described as the scientist whose originality, in Gordon Allport's phrase, "seemed to remove him from all comparison scales." In the years since Lewin's death, psychologists have kept finding in his work fresh support of what Allport termed "the revolution that Lewin created in the scientific study of men in society—a revolution due more to his work in social psychology than to the work of any other behavioral scientist."

It is not too soon, therefore, to evaluate what Lewin's place in contemporary psychology is; to inquire precisely what his role was; to measure what its significance has been. The available data on the course of Lewin's professional development are few and scattered; the complete summation and appraisal has yet to be made.

The reader of standard textbooks is apt to get a one-sided though impressive picture of Lewin's manifold role in the history of psychology. Some authors wrote of Lewin as the proponent of group dynamics; others describe him variously as the radical innovator in experimental psychology, the developer of field theory and topology in psychology, or perhaps as simply the pioneer in action research.

It may rightly be said that Lewin's psychology was concerned primarily with the actualities of men's daily lives with one another. He was singular in that he was one of the few psychologists who could transpose a life problem into controllable experimental form. The scientific method that Lewin provided has been used in studies in industry, education, and government. Lewinian ways have infiltrated the social sciences in fields that range from industry to anthropology, from child rearing to city planning, from clinical psychology to education. Both as a scholar and as a humanitarian, Lewin was concerned with the consequential import of scientific thinking and aware (as his phrase "group dynamics" indicates) of the teamwork upon which each individual depends for his own performance.

He has turned social psychology in all its aspects in new directions and given the psychological study of human relations more precise yet more humanely oriented methods. The variety of his concerns and the richness of his contributions joined to serve a

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single purpose: "to seek deeper explanations of why people behave as they do and to discover how they may learn to behave better."

Lewin's influence was in no small degree facilitated by his personal qualities, his intellectual power joined to his warmhearted concern for and rapport with other people. He extended a warm welcome to all who sought him out. He awakened in students an enthusiasm and a zest rare in teacher-pupil relations. Unlike the typical German professor, he was a natural, spontaneous democrat. Almost everyone called him by his first name, and he had time for everybody and everybody's problems. These he would consider with the same enthusiasm he brought to his own problems—even when he thought them to be insoluble.

He kept exchanging ideas with all sorts of men on all sorts of occasions—fellow professionals, students in his own and other fields, colleagues both sympathetic and unpersuaded by his theoretical position, research subjects, casual acquaintances. There was something charismatic in this, and it probably had a role in the Lewinian way of choosing and stating problems, of designing research in terms of action, and of applying its findings in programs of social change. He lived psychology—not only for his love of science but also for his devotion to mankind. Thus it is not surprising that Gardner Murphy should express the hope, in referring to Lewin, that "it would be possible for mankind in general . . . to sometime rear a shelter for men's minds and hearts where he will occupy a place fairer than any in which his imagination ever dwelt."

It was the late Douglas McGregor of M.I.T. who first suggested to me that it would be a good idea to seek out those who had worked and studied with Lewin, in the hope that their personal recollections would reveal the reasons for his great impact on them and would provide a clearer idea of what that impact was. McGregor felt that out of the experiences of these behavioral scientists a book could be made that would show Lewin in the full range of his extraordinary powers and genius, both as a man and as a teacher. I agreed to try.

The task has been rewarding, but more difficult than I had antici-

pated. Karl E. Zener, of Duke, who had worked with Lewin in Berlin, had died shortly before my talk with Douglas McGregor. Not long afterward, McGregor himself died unexpectedly. Other colleagues and former students were scattered around the world. Happily for me, however, almost all were eager to collaborate when I explained my purposes to them. Some responded by writing their reflections. Others preferred to hold expanded conversations. Most of them found it easy to reminisce. The time they had spent with Lewin was deeply etched in their memories, and they continued to feel his powerful influence on their own lives. This was true even though none of the many men and women whose reflections are included in this book were unquestioning disciples, precisely repeating the Lewinian discipline. They were students, colleagues, associates, and friends who, each in his own way, found in Lewin the most reliable guidelines for their own diverse endeavors.

Summarizing Lewin's important theoretical articles and the experimental reports was not easy. Some of the experiments reported in the *Psychologische Forschung* from 1924 to 1934 had never been fully translated into English. Most were doctoral dissertations, and a number were a hundred pages or more in length. Now all have been translated. A number of unpublished papers and letters were also made available to me, including some of the action-research projects of the Commission on Community Interrelations. These now appear for the first time.

I first met Kurt Lewin in November 1934, when he was at Cornell University. I had written to him late in October to say that I was working on a variation of the Zeigarnik experiment for my doctoral dissertation and that I would like to discuss with him some aspects of the investigation. I had originally hoped to explore this topic under him in Berlin, but the rise of Hitler had changed both our plans. Lewin wrote back at once, inviting me to Ithaca and promising me as much time as was needed to discuss the project. He offered to meet me at the railroad station if I came by train. If, on the other hand, I intended to drive, he suggested that I plan to stay overnight as a guest at his home. I was overawed and felt it would be inappropriate for a graduate student to accept this proffer of hospi-

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tality. I therefore arranged to drive to Ithaca, planning to return to New York immediately after our talk.

A date was set, and on a Saturday in November I drove to Cornell with my wife. We were greeted with great friendliness by the entire Lewin family. I was eager to get to work and take up as little of Lewin's time as possible, but he insisted that we visit the building in which the nursery school was located and see the one-way screens and other new equipment that had been installed for research purposes. We were introduced to his colleague Tamara Dembo and urged to sample a new variety of apple being developed at the Agricultural College (it has since become celebrated as the Golden Delicious). Eventually we began to discuss my projected study, and the talk continued for the rest of the afternoon.

After dinner, the conversation turned to political events in Germany and the flight of the Jews from there to Palestine and other lands. Lewin spoke of his own deep interest in Palestine, both as a permanent home for himself and as a place that offered a unique opportunity for research. He spoke of some preliminary plans for a Psychological Institute at the Hebrew University, and of his intention to raise the funds needed to establish such a research center. His enthusiasm was catching. When he asked me to lend a hand in this project I agreed at once.

We had retired to Lewin's study for our talk and were still at it after midnight when Mrs. Lewin came to remind him that it was not proper to keep guests up so late. By then all plans to return to New York that evening had been abandoned. Next morning we resumed our discussion of the proposed Psychological Institute at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and in our enthusiasm drew up a preliminary statement of how such an Institute should be organized. It was characteristic of Lewin that he could initiate a discussion of such length, on so serious a matter, with someone he had just met. An interested responsiveness in another person was all he needed to include that person in anything that was nearest to his heart and mind.

During the next twelve years our relationship grew increasingly close, and during the last five years of his life almost every aspect of

it became involved with my own. Lewin, I discovered in those twelve years, accepted the unknown, not as a mystery, but as a frontier which scientists must strive to push back if they are to achieve a better understanding of the social world about which science still knows so little. His aim was to discover the determining conditions of human events; his approach was ideal for his kind of scientist—the kind who believes that his life as a scientist must be integrated with his life as a citizen.

At the time of his death in 1947, Lewin's conceptual formulations and the shaping of his concepts into a system patterned by this approach were far more highly developed than their experimental testing. Now this has been changed. Testing has been diversified and multiplied, and experimentation has amply confirmed his basic insights.

The range and scope of Lewin's undertakings were the product of a fertile and inquiring mind, joined with a confident reliance on the willing collaboration of colleagues and students. Through them, his influence has been kept alive and contemporary in many institutions of social research, in departments of psychology and sociology, in social agencies, and in the management of organizations. The Research Center for Group Dynamics, which Lewin founded at M.I.T., has moved to the University of Michigan, where it continues with many of the same people and remains one of the fountainheads of social research in the United States. The action-research studies, which he initiated, continue to illuminate and shape ongoing community experiments in integrated housing, equalization of opportunity for employment, the cause and cure of prejudice in children, the socialization of street gangs, and the better training of community leaders. Sensitivity training, which he helped to create, is considered by many people to be the most significant educational innovation of the century.

In the new science of organization development, too, Lewin's influence continues to be seminal. In the application of behavioral-science concepts to management methods, such authorities as McGregor, Likert, Argyris, and Bennis, among others, have built many of their formulations on Lewin's concepts and experiments.

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It is in the light of Lewin's sustained influence on these diverse fields of social inquiry and of his impact on the work of friends and colleagues that I, as one of his very wide circle of co-workers, have assembled these remembrances of Lewin's life in psychology.

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