

CHAPTER

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THE DYNAMICS UNDERLYING GROUP LIFE

At M.I.T., Lewin planned to link some of the work of the Research Center for Group Dynamics with that of the Commission on Community Interrelations of the American Jewish Congress. In his early work at the University of Berlin, Lewin had focused upon the individual in his social environment. After the early 1940's, Lewin contributed very little that was new to his already published theory of the "person." His energies were directed rather to the study of group processes. He was convinced that now it was possible to build up a body of knowledge and construct a general theory that would apply to any group—family, work, religion, community. To design experiments that should gather data about such diverse matters, he envisioned the study of such specific problems as how leaders are chosen, how group atmosphere is formed, how group decisions are reached, how the members communicate with one another, how group standards are established.

From Lewin's point of view, group behavior is a function of both the single person and the social situation. Neither the personality of the man alone nor the nature of the social situation by itself is ade-

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quate to interpret group behavior. Both variables must be understood. There were already a number of occupational disciplines in the United States that provided a favorable atmosphere for deeper study along these lines. This was particularly true of social group work, group psychotherapy, education, and industrial management—in all of which sufficient experience had been gained prior to World War II to persuade specialists in these fields of the need for more systematic and comprehensive observation of group functioning. While the needs were recognized, little significant research had been undertaken. Directors of social groups were among the first specialists to recognize that groups can be managed so as to bring about desired changes in the attitudes of their members. Recreational directors realized before most others that their techniques of dealing with club members definitely affected both the collective behavior and the personal conduct and attitudes of the rank and file. It was evident to a good leader that some methods were more successful than others, but often he had to depend upon intuition alone, or else he drew lessons from experience without thoroughly examining his methods.

Again, group psychotherapy strongly influenced the development of group dynamics. Although commonly associated with psychiatry, group psychotherapy did not actually come out of psychiatry and certainly is not limited to it today, as the formation and role of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, makes evident. Much in group psychotherapy does not derive from medicine or traditional psychoanalysis. Practitioners seek new insights from research in other human sciences of man, particularly in social psychology.

Students of progressive education also saw the need for studies of group behavior. This was stimulated by the educational philosophy of John Dewey. To carry out Dewey's theory of "learning by doing," teachers organized such group projects as student self-government and hobby-club activities. This called for the development of leadership skills and the collective setting of group goals. Teachers, like other group workers, had to learn how to guide children's clubs and teams and how to direct such extracurricular work toward productive ends. The teacher could be seen as a

group leader who affected his students' learning not merely by his proficiency in his subject, but also by his skill at increasing their motivation, encouraging their active participation, and improving their esprit de corps. Lewin's pioneering research in group behavior thus drew upon the experience of educators in deciding upon and developing topics for research and in establishing a strong interest among social psychologists and teachers.

Finally, there was industrial management, or, more broadly, the management of people in large organizations, whether profit-making, governmental, educational or medical. All have the same responsibility to direct and coordinate the behavior of people. They share a common interest in finding new ways to get people to attain their potential and work at their best.

From the interaction of all these closely related and overlapping disciplines, group dynamics emerged as a definite field of study. What, then, is group dynamics? As the word "dynamics" indicates, it is a discipline which concerns itself with the positive and negative forces at work in human groups. The group modifies the behavior of its individual members. A person's role and rank in it, for example, may determine how others behave toward him: whether they treat him with deference or cause him unhappiness by excluding him. Groups exert on members influences which may be harmful or beneficial. A better understanding of the principles of collective behavior, therefore, might show how groups could be made to serve more socially desirable ends. Accordingly, Lewin advocated the scientific study of the group as a configuration of a variety of forces.

He undertook to employ the methods of science, as he conceived them, to study the dynamics of every kind of group. His first use of the term "group dynamics" in print was in a 1939 article in which he wrote that the purpose of his experiment "would be to give insight into the underlying *group dynamics*."¹ Lewin and his associates saw that in a group each member recognizes the other members as persons on whom he depends to a definite degree. The group is therefore a psychologically organic whole, rather than a simple collection of individuals. With this 1939 paper, Lewin began a

¹ "Experiments in Social Space," *Harvard Educational Review*, 1939, 9, 21-32.

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series of articles expounding and discussing the dynamics underlying group life.

The gist of his theory might be stated as follows: A man who joins a group is significantly changed thereby. His relations with his fellow members alter both him and them. A highly attractive group can bring great pressure to bear upon its members; a weak group will not have as much moulding power.

To effect any sort of change in the goals or outlook of a group, a change in its equilibrium is necessary. To try to do this by appealing to members individually is seldom effective, as was learned by those of Lewin's associates who in 1940 began their experiments in industry. They discovered, for instance, that if a group sets the range or level of productivity in a factory, any attempt on the part of any single employee to deviate from that standard heightens the normal social pressure of his co-workers to push him back into line. The further he deviates from the norm, the stronger the pressure on him to conform to it.

When Lewin studied this problem at the Harwood plant in 1940, he concluded that it is futile to try to change any worker from one pattern to another unless the entire group to which he "belongs" is included in the change. Rather than disturb his relation to his group, the individual will as a rule take considerable risk, even at substantial financial sacrifice, to conform to his group. Thus the behavior of a whole group may be more easily changed than that of a single member. This willingness to stick together ("cohesiveness") is an essential characteristic of any group. Indeed, without it, it is doubtful that a group could be said to exist at all. Lewin defined "cohesiveness" as the resultant of the forces which keep members together—the positive forces of reciprocal attraction and the negative forces of reciprocal repulsion.

What renders a group cohesive? Among other things, that its activities must strengthen the individual's chance to achieve his own goals. Over a period of time certain standards develop in any group. These may include attitudes as well as actions. Each member expects the others to conform to the standards, but the extent of conformity varies directly with the degree of cohesiveness. What

renders a group cohesive is, as Lewin pointed out, not how similar or dissimilar its members are—for example, in their attitudes—but how dynamically interdependent they are. Out of reciprocal dependence for the achievement of goals there arises a readiness to share chores and challenges, and even to reconcile personality clashes.

A group does not have to be composed of members who are greatly similar; it may be a “Gestalt”—a whole containing dissimilar parts. “For example,” said Lewin, “a man, wife, and baby within one family may show greater dissimilarity to one another than the man to other men of his age and social class, or the woman to other women, or this baby to other infants.”² Moreover, it is typical of well-organized groups with a high degree of unity to include a variety of members who are different or who have different functions within the whole. Not similarity, but a certain interdependence of members constitutes a group.”

Lewin also pointed out that similarity can exist *without* interdependence just as it can exist *with* it. He remarked that dynamic wholes have properties which are different from the properties of either their parts or the sum of their parts. This did not mean to him that the “whole” is invariably more than the sum of its parts. The whole, he maintained, is not necessarily superior, nor does it add up to “more.” His general formulation was simple, “The whole is different from the sum of its parts: it has definite properties of its own.”

Lewin observed that a person is apt more often to be a member of a group to which he feels similar or to which he wishes to be similar than to groups upon whom his dependence is greatest.

Belonging is signified by adherence to the group code. Those who belong “obey.” Thus group pressures regulate the conduct of the would-be deviant member. He stays among those with whom he feels he “belongs” even if their conduct seems unfair and their pressure unfriendly. To change his conduct or point of view independently of the group would get him into trouble with his fellow group members.

² Kurt Lewin, “Field Theory and Experiment in Social Psychology,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 1939, 44, 868–897.

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Lewin's own identification with his adopted homeland was a true example of his theory of group belongingness. From his first days in the United States, Lewin was an American. He determined to learn English at once, although he never succeeded in completely losing his German accent. He never felt, as the French put it, *dépaysé*. Indeed, he astonished many of his friends with the thoroughness with which he made American customs and habits his own. I recall visiting the New York World's Fair with him in 1939; it was getting dark and we were growing hungry, but the Fair's restaurants were already crowded with dinner patrons. "Let's have a couple of hot dogs," Lewin said. "That's what we Americans eat on Sunday evenings in the summer!" Five minutes later that's what we were doing.

In his theory of group behavior, Lewin repeated his lifelong theme that acts cannot be understood on the basis only of the personality of the individual or only on that of the nature of the social environment. "Group behavior," he stated yet again, "is a function of both the individual person and the social situation." In the years that followed, he planned to build a new, realistic experimental social psychology that would help find solutions to major social problems. Both his work at M.I.T. and his assignment for the A.J.C. provided a daily life laboratory in which to test his theories of group dynamics. Lewin was excited and challenged by the prospect.

In an article published in 1945,³ he described the objectives and ideology of the M.I.T. Research Center: "The Research Center for Group Dynamics has grown out of two needs, one scientific and one practical. In the field of social management, we are just awakening to the fact that a better knowledge is needed than day-by-day experience, tradition, and the memory of an individual or a social group can provide. We require understanding on a scientific level . . . There are increasing symptoms that leading practitioners in government, in agriculture, in industry, in education, in community life are becoming aware that the statement 'nothing is as practical as a good theory' holds also in the field of social management."

³ Kurt Lewin, "The Research Center for Group Dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology," *Sociometry*, 1945, 2, 126-136.

He then described his plan to have "the Research Center use whatever qualitative or quantitative psychological, sociological, or anthropological methods are needed for investigation. The main methodological interest, however, will be the development of group experiments and particularly change experiments. Such experiments can be carried out in the laboratory or in the field."

Lewin recognized that he was advocating an unusual blending of "pure" research and practical application and that there would be skepticism concerning its feasibility. 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 of 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 then continued: "One point should be seen clearly and strongly. There is no individual who does not, consciously or unconsciously, try to influence his family, his group of friends, his occupational group, and so on. Management is, after all, a legitimate and one of the most important functions in every aspect of social life. Few aspects are as much befogged in the minds of many as the problems of leadership and of power in a democracy . . . We have to realize that power itself is an essential aspect of any and every group . . . Not the least service which social research can do for society is to attain better insight into the legitimate and non-legitimate aspects of power."

"The Center would educate research workers in theoretical and applied fields of group life and assist in training practitioners. The main task of the Center would be the development of scientific methods of studying and changing group life and the development of concepts and theories of group dynamics."