

CHAPTER

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LAUNCHING PROGRAMS OF COMMUNITY ACTION

Although the formation of C.C.I. was not formally announced until February 1945, a small staff consisting of Lillian W. Kay and Ronald Lippitt had been busy since September 1944 analyzing fundamental issues and making policy recommendations. Busy as he was at M.I.T., Lewin came to New York weekly to assist in planning a program that would not measure the effectiveness of methods already in use, but would work out and test new ways that might be better. He maintained that C.C.I.'s responsibility would not end with finding out what methods work; it also had to be concerned to see that its results were put into action. He suggested that C.C.I. should concentrate on problems that confronted the people who were engaged in fighting prejudice. It should carry on its studies in real-life situations where the results would be used. Finally, he stated that, whenever possible, C.C.I. should conduct its studies in cooperation with other agencies carrying on programs of action

against prejudice. Lewin was pleased with the staff proposal to narrow their studies to three priority research areas. These were:

1. The conditions which improve the effectiveness of community leaders who are attempting to better intergroup relations. For example, what are the most effective and practical methods of training such leaders? What are the principles governing the choice of trainees? What can be done to promote the maintenance of the operating efficiency to which such leaders are brought as a result of training?
2. The effect of the conditions under which contact between persons from different groups takes place. For example, what conditions result in an improvement of attitude and in harmonious relations and what conditions bring about the converse? What conditions of contact result only in the formation of particular friendships as against the formation of friendly feelings toward other cultural groups taken as a whole? What conditions result in the formation of lasting favorable attitudes as against those susceptible to easy reversal in a prejudiced environment?
3. The influences which are most effective in producing in minority-group members an increased sense of belongingness, an improved personal adjustment, and better relations with individuals of other groups.

Lewin was less pleased with the staff's working conditions. At first it was assigned space in the New York City headquarters of the A.J.C. overlooking Central Park at Columbus Circle. But this grew crowded and forbidding as C.C.I.'s staff grew in size and complexity (for instance, when a distinguished advisory council of behavioral scientists was added to the permanent staff). New and better office space became an urgent need. It was supplied in the form of a loft at 50th Street and Broadway, which offered more space but hardly more attractiveness than the crowded office they were leaving. Then the staff had a piece of good luck.

Lewin persuaded his friend and fellow refugee Marcel Breuer, who had found a place with Walter Gropius in the Harvard School of Architecture, to take a look at C.C.I.'s loft and design its offices and furniture at a nominal fee. Breuer projected within the decrepit loft a layout with magnificent color combinations, specially built files, and a large library, honeycombed with shelving on all four sides and having a huge conference table in the center. Visitors from

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many distant places soon came to view the offices which Breuer had designed for C.C.I.

For its motto, Lewin proposed a quotation from the Hebrew sage, Hillel:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am for myself alone, what am I?
And if not now, when?

Lewin felt the lines had a special aptness. "In regard to research, the first and second lines say that we are ready to investigate ourselves, our ideals, and our conduct as seriously and as conscientiously as we are ready to investigate non-Jewish groups. Jews are a small minority, but the conduct of the Jewish child and adult, of the Jewish leader and follower, the Jewish businessman and rabbi, is at least as essential for Jewish fate and for the relations between Jews and non-Jews as is the conduct of any non-Jewish group. The last line of our motto says: The Commission means action, and action now. If we speak of research, we mean 'action research,' that is, action on a realistic level, action that is always followed by self-critical objective reconnaissance and evaluation of results. Since we like to learn rapidly, we will never be afraid to face our shortcomings. We aim at 'no action without research; no research without action.' "

Lewin's penchant for the symbolic representation of social forces had long been demonstrated on blackboards in the classroom. He now provided C.C.I. with a unique symbol, composed of a superimposed circle, crossed lines and an arrow. The circle, Lewin said, signified a community bound together in common interests; the crossed lines were the barriers—walls of prejudice, intolerance, and misunderstanding of cultural differences; the arrow represented facts in action research. This partnership was to be made available by the C.C.I. to all communities throughout the United States.

Stuart Cook came from the Air Corps to serve as co-director of C.C.I. One was needed in view of Lewin's multiplying responsibilities at M.I.T. and C.C.I.'s growing action-research program, which included opening offices in Boston and Chicago. Among the other psychologists who served full or part time were Alex Bavelas, Barbara Bellow, Milton Blum, Dorwin Cartwright, Isidor Chein,

Kenneth B. Clark, Morton Deutsch, Leon Festinger, John Harding, Marie Jahoda, Lillian Kay, Ronald Lippitt, Marian Radke, Gerhart Sanger, and Goodwin Watson. Like the other staff members of C.C.I., Cook quickly became caught up in the project's excitement and in Lewin's enthusiasm. Lewin saw the staff as a task force of behavioral scientists who could study ongoing events systematically and objectively, making recommendations for action as well as compiling research data. Hendry and Cook had the responsibility for carrying out the various studies.

Lewin never sought to assert his authority as C.C.I.'s chief architect and senior consultant. But Cook remembers that Lewin kept coming up with ideas for new projects which would have meant abandoning others already under way, and new approaches which would have required interrupting avenues of inquiry already opened. Much younger than Lewin, far less eminent and experienced, Cook occasionally found himself in the position of defending the operation against Lewin's enthusiasm. But he learned much from him at the same time.

One piece of wisdom that Cook says he has never forgotten grew out of a conversation with Lewin about a research proposal in which Cook listed the various aspects of the problem to be studied. Lewin offered the comment that when there were so many dimensions to a problem there was danger that the research would cover the minor aspects and never get to the major ones. "Sound research strategy," he said, "dictated looking for the variable aspect that would make a difference, coming back later to the others."

Lewin was learning too. For one thing, Stuart Cook remembers that Lewin was beginning to appreciate the difference between laboratory research (in which most of the time is spent thinking about and discussing the project's theoretical aspects while the actual experiment is done fairly quickly) and community research (in which the biggest and most time-consuming part of the job is building relations with community people and collecting data from them). "He learned too that there were inherent limitations in the results that could be expected, no matter how heavy the investment in time, money, and personnel."

Confronting the Social Issues

C.C.I.'s advisory council¹ which had originally met in Washington, continued to meet with the staff in New York to discuss a series of issues fundamental to the solution of problems of racial and religious prejudice. The issues they confronted were the ancient human problems of how people who are different from each other can live together without explosive conflict. Among the issues discussed were these:

1. *Assimilation versus cultural pluralism.* The idea of "acculturation without absorption"—particularly as it applied to the Negro—was a baffling one. A Negro leader who had been invited to attend one of the sessions startled his hearers when he said: "We Negroes want to break down barriers whenever possible; the Jews want to preserve many barriers. They seek to integrate but not to assimilate and they pride themselves on their separateness in many ways. We want to end separateness."

This difference in aims caused C.C.I. members to ask whether the Commission should consider minimizing racial and religious distinctions in certain areas while maintaining them in others.

- a) Were there some areas in which each person should be regarded on his merits, irrespective of race or religion, and others in which Jewish distinctiveness should be maintained?
- b) Would this justify encouraging the establishment of a separate Jewish medical association while at the same time fighting for Negroes to be admitted into the local medical society?
- c) Would the definition of areas of separateness hurt or help the effort to reduce discrimination in other areas?

¹The advisory council's membership included Gordon W. Allport, Harvard University; Nathan E. Cohen, New York University; Franklin Fearing, University of California at Los Angeles; Charles Johnson, Fisk University; Rensis Likert, Department of Agriculture, Washington D.C.; Howard Y. McClusky, University of Michigan; Douglas M. McGregor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Margaret Mead, American Museum of Natural History; Lois B. Murphy, Sarah Lawrence College; Fritz Redl, Wayne State University; Robert R. Sears, University of Iowa; Edward O. Tolman, University of California at Berkeley; W. Lloyd Warner, University of Chicago; Alfred J. Marrow served as Chairman of the council.

Two decades later the cry of "Black Power" and the development of the Black Nationalist Movement has shown how critical the issue was—and would increasingly become.

2. *"Separate but equal" versus integration.* It would be nine years before the Supreme Court issued its famous decision outlawing racial segregation in public schools. The decision was based in part on evidence submitted by Isidor Chein of the C.C.I. staff. In 1945, C.C.I.'s staff and advisers had been deeply divided over this issue, asking themselves: Should minority groups be urged to accept segregation as the price of immediate improvement in schools, hospitals, and housing; or should they risk indefinite delay by insisting on integrated projects? It was a question that would still divide the American community two decades later.

3. *Acceptance versus rejection of class stratification.* One of C.C.I.'s consultants, Fritz Redl, reported that experiences with interracial groups in boys' clubs indicated that middle-class white boys tended to accept middle-class Negro boys more readily than either "tough" whites or "tough" Negroes. Would it be sound policy, therefore, to acknowledge and work within existing stratifications in order to minimize racial differences? Would a black welder have more in common with a white welder than with a black psychiatrist?

4. *Other "minorities" versus "anti-Semitism."* The argument that Jewish problems were but one part of the much larger problem of disadvantaged minorities (which meant that democracy, rather than the welfare of the Jews, should become the central goal) was contrasted with the view that the problem of anti-Semitism was distinct from that of other minorities, so that interfaith committees on which Jews served should not end up, as they usually did, devoting all or at least most of their attention to black-white relations.

5. *Attacking "discrimination" versus attacking "prejudice."* Cities that introduced Negro employees on streetcars and buses as a *fait accompli* rarely experienced the kind of hostility that fre-

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quently developed in communities where months of discussions were held with the aim of "preparing" people for planned changes in employment, housing, or education. Often white families who thought they would want to move out of housing projects when Negro families came in but were delayed in doing so, found in the interval that they liked their new neighbors. Such observations led some of C.C.I.'s advisers to suggest that if the pattern of racial segregation and religious discrimination could be changed swiftly and firmly, the new environment would take care of prejudiced attitudes; that is, an attack on behavior patterns would eventually change attitudes (rather than vice versa). Should C.C.I.'s goal, then, be legal action to remove institutionalized barriers between races and religions—quota systems in universities, blackballing in employment, housing discrimination—or should it concentrate on seeking to influence personal feelings and attack prejudices?

6. "*Direct*" versus "*incidental*." Some organizations focused directly on interracial or interfaith cooperation. Others, such as hospitals, universities, and labor unions, regarded these problems as incidental to their primary purposes. When should such groups draw attention to their interracial activities and policies? When should they ignore, or treat as entirely natural, the cooperation of different groups? When, if at all, was there need for an organization that focused directly on community inter-relations?

The C.C.I. advisory board recognized that there was much the staff had to learn and much to explore. But they understood that the staff couldn't wait for all the evidence. A beginning had to be made with the knowledge that was available. Such action would lead to more reliable knowledge. Action would become research, and research action. C.C.I. would not always be able to wait for research into "facts." They would have to rely on the application of certain postulates—postulates of group dynamics—to reduce community tension.

Working under Lewin's general supervision, Cook, Chein, and John Harding outlined four varieties of action research to carry out C.C.I.'s objectives, once the direction of these major policies was

decided. They named these varieties of action research: (1) diagnostic, (2) participant, (3) empirical, and (4) experimental.

1. *Diagnostic* action research was designed to produce a needed plan of action. Here C.C.I. would step into an already existing situation (for example, a race riot or anti-Semitic vandalism), diagnose the problem, and recommend remedial measures. Unless the proposed cures were feasible, effective, and acceptable to the people involved, however, this design of action was often wasted.

2. *Participant* action research assumed that the residents of the affected community who were to help effect a cure must be involved in the research process from the beginning. They would thereby realize more keenly the need for the particular steps finally decided upon; at the same time their "ego investment" would support the remedial program. This type of action research—an example would be a community self-survey (see pages 214 ff.)—seemed to be most effective for a limited range of problems. It was useful in disclosing particular and local facts (not general principles) which could provide examples for other communities.

3. *Empirical* action research was primarily a matter of record keeping and accumulating experiences in day-to-day work, ideally with a succession of similar groups, such as boys' clubs. An inherent weakness of this procedure was that conclusions were drawn from experience with a single group, or with several groups differing in numerous ways, without test controls. Despite this handicap empirical action research could lead to the gradual development of generally valid principles as clinical medicine had already demonstrated.

4. *Experimental* action research called for a controlled study of the relative effectiveness of various techniques in nearly identical social situations. Of all the varieties of action research, the C.C.I. staff members agreed, the experimental had the greatest potential for the advancement of scientific knowledge. Under favorable circumstances it could definitively test specific hypotheses. It was, however, the most difficult form of action research to carry out successfully.

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C.C.I. was officially launched at a dinner for a thousand guests held at the Plaza Hotel in New York. Lewin was the principal speaker and his talk was particularly significant for its reflection of his shift from theoretical psychology to action research. He began by outlining C.C.I.'s practical approach, Lewin pointed out that he was wary of what he described as "that type of so-called realistic policy which lives from day to day, patching up a hole here and applying a new coat there." He insisted that any constructive plan must include both long-range goals and day-to-day actions. Such a strategy should consider not merely the local situation and the peculiar constellation of events and personalities involved, but also the broader issues and the social forces behind them.

But contextual information, he pointed out, was not readily available. Statistics measuring such items as the distribution of Jews in various occupations (for example, the low percentage of Jews in banking) were on hand but statistics do not change anti-Semitic attitudes. Anti-Semites are never at a loss for a justification of their prejudices. A prejudice was reasonable to them, no matter how irrational it might seem to others. That "the forces of anti-Semitism are not rational does not give us the right to ignore them; nor does their irrational character place them outside the approach of science." Irrational behavior, Lewin felt confident, could be studied objectively and scientifically, but the studies must be in depth to be useful in any action program. Data must be assembled from every aspect of community life—economic, political, educational, cultural, traditional. They must include information concerning minority and majority, Jew and non-Jew, Negro and white.

Lewin maintained that C.C.I. must deal with minority problems as one of the crucial aspects of a developing democracy, as an issue that must be solved in a democratic spirit, if democracy was to survive as a way of life. True, each minority—Negroes, Catholics, Mexicans, Jews—had its own characteristic problem; but each should learn from the others. To Lewin a minority problem was meaningless without its counterpart "majority problem." "Every minority problem is, in fact, a majority problem," he stated. "The Negro problem is a problem of the whites, the Jewish problem, of the

Christian." Nevertheless, a condition for improving relationships between majorities and minorities called for altering the attitudes and certain aspects of the conduct of minority members. The alterations would be extremely difficult, inasmuch as members of minorities who are victims of discrimination tend to apply to themselves the unexpressed judgment of the majorities that minorities are inferior.

Many environmental forces served to develop in the children, adolescents, and adults of minorities a deep-seated antagonism toward their own group. Excessive submissiveness, feelings of guilt, extreme emotionalism, and other manifestations of ineffective behavior are the consequence. No group which is thus at odds with itself can live normally, much less happily, with other groups. Therefore, Lewin argued, it was hopeless to seek to cope with this problem in terms of individuals. The discrimination that individuals suffer is directed against them not as persons but as members of a group. Only by raising the members' esteem for the group character could relief come to them. More than twenty years later Martin Luther King would preach "black is beautiful" and Black Power advocates would demand that Negro history and Swahili be taught in the New York City schools.

Lewin realized from the start at C.C.I. that the research problems would not always be those he wished to select. He knew he would be responsible for overcoming social resistance to applying his findings. He would also have to hold in mind the community interest, for society neither supports nor makes use of research findings that do not meet community-felt needs. He perceived that he would have to state the problem not only in objective scientific terms but also in terms of the ways in which the community evaluates its problems. So his relationship to a community as a researcher would have to start with the community problems. At every step of his investigation he would have to bear in mind the attitudes of his lay collaborators and sponsors, as well as those of the general public. The research staff would have to consider the community as seriously as it took its own research.