

CHAPTER

9

SETTING NEW FORCES IN ACTION

Though the Iowa appointment was primarily for research, rather than for teaching, Lewin, being Lewin, was surrounded by students throughout his nine years at the university from 1935 to 1944. They gathered around him as they had in Berlin—from many parts of the country, from a variety of educational backgrounds, for many different reasons. He, in turn, considered the appointment at Iowa a piece of timely good luck. A full-time academic post, with a possibility of continuity, meant greater security for his growing family, the chance to work with students over a long enough period to develop and test ideas, and freedom to look to the future. None of these had been possible during the preceding several years.

The Lewin family moved to Iowa in 1935 after the summer they had spent in Milford with the Heiders. They found Iowa City different in many ways from both Cornell and Berlin. But it was not completely different, for he continued to explore the same ideas and to carry on experiments as he had in Berlin during the late 1920's. Very soon new vistas opened. "Iowa was exciting," recalls Tamara Dembo. "I felt that here we had Kurt Lewin himself, and a constant

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feeling of something fresh and very worthwhile. For some of us it was a very deep experience, even more than Berlin.”

Lewin first attracted a few students who were already on the Iowa campus; then others came from elsewhere, as more and more were increasingly eager to study with him. His distinctive approach soon stirred controversy and helped maintain the Iowa Research Station's reputation as one of the leading centers of American psychology. The interests of the Lewin circle were broad. Although his academic title was Professor of Child Psychology and most of the studies in the years that followed were of children, Lewin's concern continued to be general psychological theory and experiment.

Roger Barker, who had first encountered Lewin at Stanford, was the first to arrive at Iowa. Lewis Terman had recommended him and when a fellowship was offered he accepted it as a great opportunity. Although he had found Lewin's English difficult to understand, he appreciated the potential challenge of working with someone who was unlike the professors he had known before. Barker did not feel that he had the background to work with Lewin. “But I believed he had something that I needed and wanted. Working with Lewin was like waking up from sleep for the first time and realizing that there is this whole world of ideas about science. I hadn't known anything about this.”

Many students who joined Lewin, at least after 1938, came with a practical interest in the social uses of psychological research. They found that in an era when life problems rarely received consideration from psychologists, and then only when they had reached the stage of abnormality and malfunction, Lewin's thinking was strongly life-connected. His theories were tools to attack everyday human problems. They led Lewin, in chicken-and-egg fashion, to place increasing emphasis on experimental studies of the how and what-for of individual and social change—studies which later were consummated as “action research” and “group dynamics.” These students provide us with an invaluable account of his working and teaching methods, as well as another personal picture of Kurt Lewin the man.

Those who worked with Lewin at Iowa cannot always remember precisely how their basic research interests and those which followed them came into focus; but, as his group of students grew, the informal relationship of the *conditorei consortium* that had been a part of life at the Berlin Psychological Institute was re-created. There was, of course, nothing quite like the Berlin Schwedisch Cafe in Iowa City, but an acceptable substitute was found in the Round Window Restaurant. There, in a top-floor room where the proprietor allowed students to bring their own lunches if they purchased coffee or tea, Lewin's Midwestern *Quasselstrippe* (the Iowa students translated it as the "Hot-Air Club") met informally each Tuesday noon.

At lunch, animated conversation, bad puns, and much laughter prevailed, with Lewin joining in the fun as much as anyone. Frequently his humor was unintended and sometimes traceable to students who had fun teaching him malaprop American colloquialisms. His unintentional gaffes often convulsed his volunteer English teachers. Ron Lippitt remembers the occasion when Lewin was to comment on a paper at the Midwestern Psychological Meeting. Alex Bavelas and Harold Sheels told him that "slobbered a bibful" meant "said a lot." When Lewin wanted to say something nice about Dr. Wheeler's having a lot to say, he ad-libbed, "As you Americans would say, Dr. Wheeler has certainly slobbered a bibful."

Lewin was "warm and fun-loving," recalls Alvin Zander, a member of the Hot-Air Club. "He liked and told good jokes—poorly." But that did not matter to the meetings of the Iowa *Quasselstrippe*, where one or another of the dozen students present would either report on his current research or propose a project he wanted to take up. One contribution would build upon another and group-formed ideas emerged for a testable hypothesis or an enthusiastic consensus on how a new area of investigation should be explored.

Erik Wright recollects that "none of the group ever felt that he was on stage when he spoke. He was among his peers, sharpening his ideas on their criticisms of his experimental procedures or recruiting assistants for some phase of a project. How Lewin kept the talk moving constructively without seeming to direct it at all has stuck

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in the minds of many of us. It was one of the things I have tried to carry over among my own students and I have learned how very difficult it is to establish that kind of atmosphere.”

The group never became large. The membership merely altered as new students arrived, presented their work, wrote their theses, and departed. There were neither bars to nor requirements for membership; no one was “screened” either formally or informally. It was not thought to be especially “fashionable” or “unfashionable” to eat one’s lunch with the Club on Tuesdays. If one was a graduate student in one of Lewin’s seminars and had a problem to discuss, he—or she—would probably bring it to the next meeting of the Club.

Robert Leeper, who was teaching at a college some twenty-odd miles from Iowa City, wrote that he made weekly trips “to participate in a seminar in which Lewin was presenting his interpretation of a monograph on psychological forces.” Leeper ranks his encounter with Lewin as “among the pleasantest memories of my life. It was a privilege both emotionally and intellectually to share in the discussions with Lewin and his eager students and associates. The seminars often met at Lewin’s home, in a room with brown-stained wooden walls and a floor littered with sheets of brown wrapping paper on which Lewin and the students drew their diagrams in colored chalk. The ‘full-fledged topologists’ came to these sessions equipped with four-color pencils, to squat on their hands and knees and draw on wrapping paper.”

Donald MacKinnon has remarked that the group around Kurt Lewin was “as loyal as the early group around Freud.” But, where Freud required a kind of fealty and conformity to his views, Lewin never made any such demands on his students or colleagues. “As a result, for sound psychological reasons, the inevitable apostasies against Freud were very messy, whereas people could move out of Lewin’s immediate circle even during his lifetime and still maintain ties with him and others in his circle. If you drifted away, you wouldn’t feel guilty about it, and you weren’t accused of disloyalty. I think Kurt was quite right in saying that he didn’t want to develop a school of psychology; he was merely trying to develop a language for the representation of psychological phenomena.”

Nevertheless, at Iowa Lewin did tend to build warmer relationships with his students than had most other eminent men in American psychology. Alex Bavelas says, "It was a very close group. We were at his home frequently. The offices were all adjoining, and we ate lunch together even when not at the *Quasselstrippe*. Someone was always reporting on something."

Lewin never saw himself as the proponent of a set doctrine. "He did not care for power or for prestige as an expert," says John R. P. French, Jr., "so he was just as open to influence from his students as they were to him. Thus his relationships with his students could be intimate without becoming crippling; they retained their independence of mind while realizing their fullest potential."

Dorwin Cartwright recalls that his first exposure to Lewin's thinking came in 1938 when he was a college senior at Swarthmore and read *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*. "It was so stimulating that following my first year of graduate study I enrolled in a summer session at Iowa in order to learn more about him. I found a whole group of people whose waking hours were devoted fully to working on ideas generated by Lewin. Almost immediately they made me a part of the group and I was engaged in their endless discussions. In less than a month's time Lewin got me interested in the problem of 'decision time' and started me on work which subsequently constituted my doctoral dissertation."

Cartwright, who went to Iowa in 1940 as one of the General Education Fellows, says, further, "In retrospect, it is clear that Lewin was the ultimate source of all this stimulation, but his influence was exerted in large measure through the interacting social system that had grown up around him. His ideas dominated this microculture, but he was never domineering. In seminars and informal bull sessions, the talk was invariably animated, often heated, and everyone participated. Lewin always kept control of a corner of the blackboard, but everyone was encouraged to use the rest of it to display competing ideas. In such a setting, it was hard not to become committed to a life of research."

Lewin loved seminars and loved the group. As he was going to a seminar, he'd happily tell his secretary, "Nobody is to disturb me except my wife and the President of the University."

Margaret Mead attended some of the later sessions held during the early years of World War II. "I was financing my travel by lecturing," she recalls, "but I managed to get to Iowa City very often to spend long intensive weekends discussing hypotheses and experiments, raising new questions about involvement of different kinds of participants—all conducted with the Lewin household as the center, the Lewin children interested listeners, the students intensely related to the work they were doing together. In it all, Kurt was like the fire around which other people gathered for warmth and for light by which to read their own thoughts more clearly."

Beatrice Wright chose to study with Lewin for her doctorate at the urging of her professors, Abraham Maslow and Solomon Asch. "I was attracted to Lewin," she said, "by his idea of explaining behavior by taking into account both the person and the environment in the conceptual formulation of intervening variables. My present interest in psychological problems of rehabilitation was furthered by my association with Lewinians Barker and Dembo and involves the person-environment system with special emphasis on social-emotional relationships."

It was through Harold Seashore, his first psychology teacher at Springfield College in Massachusetts, that Alex Bavelas met Lewin. Lewin had visited Springfield College and had given a talk in one of the dormitories on topological psychology and related matters. "I understood very little of it," Bavelas confessed, "but I was interested and enthusiastic." Very much influenced by Lewin's lecture, which treated of the problems of satiation, Bavelas conceived a related problem and designed an experiment, which he carried out with Seashore. Bavelas and Seashore published the study. "I was proud of being in print, in *General and Experimental Psychology*, and Seashore encouraged me to try to get admission to Iowa." Seashore and Bavelas sent Lewin the article and Bavelas arranged to go and talk with him about it. "He very gently explained to me that my study really wasn't of satiation," Bavelas recalls. "I still did not understand him very well, but as a result of that visit I was offered a research-assistantship at Iowa. I think Lewin may have been swayed by his growing interest in group processes and my background in

group work. When I got there, I met Leon Festinger and all the other students in Lewin's circle."

Leon Festinger also sought out Lewin at Iowa: "When I received my degree at C.C.N.Y., I was already interested in studies of the level of aspiration and went out to Iowa in 1939 specifically because Kurt Lewin was there. My introduction to this problem had been through Max Hertzman, who was lecturing on it at C.C.N.Y. His wife, Rosalind Gould, was working on the same topic for her doctorate at Columbia. Hertzman and I did a study together on group variables involved in the level of aspiration. That was my first published study, done in 1938-1939; it appeared about 1941. I was attracted to Lewin, and the areas in which he worked, by his ability to bring a rigorous experimental approach to problems such as the Zeigarnik effect and the level of aspiration. It is a rare ability in psychology. These problems became more interesting than others to me because of the precise experimental approach, together with the effort to pull out the general theoretical importance of the finding."

Erik Wright came to Iowa in 1937 "because Al Hicks had completed his Ph.D. during Lewin's first year here. I had taken my Master's degree under Hicks and was enthusiastic about going there for my doctorate. I was able to get an appointment as a fellow in the Child Welfare Research Station, where Lewin worked. After one semester with Lewin, I determined to take every course I could with him—and I did."

Alvin Zander visited Lewin at Iowa during Christmas vacation in 1941 while still a student at the University of Michigan, and in February Lewin offered him a job. Zander worked with him on food habits, leadership training, and observations of Boy Scout troops. Zander left Iowa in 1942 to move to the national headquarters of the Boy Scouts, where Ronald Lippitt had already brought in Lewin as an adviser on field research. Zander recounts how Lewin involved almost everyone with whom he came into contact. "A student came to ask him a question one day while I was in his office. Lewin replied to the student that he could best learn what he wanted to know by joining us in our current research endeavor.

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"We will help you by exploiting you," Lewin told him, and the student cheerfully chipped in.

Lewin was also concerned about the personal growth of his fellow workers. He often talked to Zander and others about the students who were studying with him at the Child Welfare Research Station, telling of his hopes for their improvement and what he was doing to help them excel. His was the attitude of a parent asking himself what he must do for a gifted child. He often paid calls on his co-workers, students, and their families. "He treated his students in a fatherly way," Zander said, "and his research assistants could expect visits from him in their homes with no advance notice of his coming. On such an occasion he chatted about personal matters and in many ways acted as though he were part of the family." Lewin frequently invited his students and colleagues to accompany him and his family on picnics and drives. Sometimes the rides were hair-raising experiences. Lewin, his mind absorbed, would pay more attention to his talk than to his driving, and he would often take his hands off the wheel to make excited gestures.

"One of the many things that the Lewins did for us," said Louise Barker of the early days at Iowa, "was to help us to see lots of things about our own country—and life in general—in a new perspective, since they came from such a different background and were so easy to communicate with. You see things more clearly when you have something else to sight against. Kurt and Gert gave us that."

John R. P. French, Jr., who came from Harvard to study with Lewin, says, "Lewin had a basic respect for the ideas of others, no matter who they were. He never hesitated to examine a suggestion and usually found in it interesting things that ought to be talked about. He greeted new ideas with glee and would get so excited about them that he sparkled."

Lewin never ceased to be as interested in the ideas of his juniors as in those of his equals. To many of his students he brought a rare sense of recognition and Roger Barker remarked on this gratefully. "It was the first time that anyone had taken my ideas seriously."

Sometimes, however, Lewin seemed insensitive. If, on occasion, a member of the class would try to get a point explained, he might

say, with a sigh, "Oh, do we have to go into *that* now?"—with an expression of annoyance that he himself would have been the first to criticize had he seen it on someone else.

Lewin could also be sharp with those who could not, or would not, understand what he was trying to accomplish. Roger Barker says, "A classmate of mine was doing a thesis with a well-known member of the faculty on balance in painting. This professor had developed photographic techniques for mapping out visual fixation points, in order to observe what a person looks at in a picture. This was to be related to artistic principles of balance; for example, unbalanced pictures might cause the viewer to fixate on one side. There would be a relationship between balance and these fixation points. The student explained this to Lewin, and Lewin replied, 'Ach, nonsense! Just nonsense!' To a student struggling with a thesis based on a new idea such as this, it's not very encouraging to hear your ideas called nonsense. Well, it turned out to be nonsense."

Another of Lewin's minor shortcomings, as a teacher and supervisor of research for academic dissertations (requiring demonstration of the relevance of the reported studies to previous or related work), was his apparent inability to guide the student to investigations or theories that lay outside his own immediate fields of interest. Therefore, students had to develop considerable ingenuity in seeking out other faculty members or more advanced graduate students who could provide this kind of background and guidance.

But in their own research Lewin constantly stressed the importance of going beyond a mere piling up of facts which can only lead to a chaotic and unproductive situation. The simple collecting of facts is indispensable at certain stages of a science, he maintained, and is a wholesome reaction against a philosophical and speculative building of theories. But it cannot give a satisfactory answer to questions about causes and conditions of events. Only with the help of theories can one determine causal interrelationships. A science without theory is blind because it lacks that element which alone is able to organize facts and give direction to research. Even from a practical point of view the mere gathering of facts has very limited value. It cannot give an answer to the question that is most impor-

tant for practical purposes—namely, what must one do to obtain a desired effect in given concrete cases? “To answer this question it is necessary to have a theory, but a theory which is empirical and not speculative. This means that theory and facts must be closely related to each other.” Guided by these beliefs Lewin addressed himself to a number of research projects, which have since become among his major contributions. These are discussed briefly in Chapter 21.