Field Theory in Social Science

Kurt Lewis

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社会科学中的场论

〔美〕库尔特・卢因 Kurt Lewin

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Foreword

When the intellectual history of the twentieth century is written, Kurt Lewin will surely be counted as one of those few men whose work changed fundamentally the course of social science in its most critical period of development. During his professional life of only about thirty years, the social sciences grew from the stage of speculative system building, through a period of excessive empiricism in which facts were gathered simply for their intrinsic interest, to a more mature development in which empirical data are sought for the significance they can have for systematic theories. Although the social sciences are only barely into this third stage of development, Lewin's work has accelerated greatly the rate of development. Though he was primarily a psychologist and made his major contributions in that field, the influence of his work has extended well beyond the bounds of traditional psychology.

One reason for this breadth of influence is that much of his work concerned itself with determining the methodological and conceptual prerequisites for a mature science of human behavior. His earliest work in Berlin dealt with the comparative theory of science, an enterprise which permitted him as a young man to get clear what the formal properties of a developed human science must be. He then proceeded throughout the rest of his life to work systematically toward establishing such a science. As a consequence of this early concern with the necessary conditions for scientific progress, his subsequent work on a broad range of special topics in psychology and sociology had a consistent orientation and a pointed impact upon social science generally.

The influence Lewin exerted upon social science is remarkable in that a fully systematic statement of his work was never drawn together in readily accessible form during his life. Most English-speaking social scientists knew him through his *Dynamic Theory of Personality* and his *Principles of Topological Psychology*. While these volumes

brilliantly propounded the broad outlines of his work, they merely alluded to the more systematic type of development presented in such lesser known publications as Der Begriff der Genese in Physik, Biologie, und Entwicklungsgeschichte, the Conceptual Representation and the Measurement of Psychological Forces, the several introductions and appendixes to series of publications of his co-workers, and papers scattered throughout various journals. Moreover, these two more widely known books contain none of the results of his highly productive years of work after he came to America. Many of the controversies that grew up in regard to his systematic position stemmed from the fact that his work was only partially known.

The writings brought together in this book should help greatly to clarify the systematic nature of Lewin's contributions to psychology and the social sciences. Although they were written during a relatively short span of his life (approximately the last ten years), they add up to a remarkably comprehensive statement of his major contributions. Even those familiar with the individual chapters will find that rereading them together and in sequence provides new insights and a deeper understanding of the full significance of this monumental work.

It is possible to state the theme of this volume as a thorough and careful answer to the question: What is field theory in social science? This question is concisely answered in Chapter 3: "Field theory is probably best characterized as a method: namely, a method of analyzing causal relations and of building scientific constructs." (P. 45.) The answer to this question, however, is treated throughout the book in many different ways with particular illustrations from many different fields. It is stated in terms of what the field theorist does as well as what he believes. It makes clear that field theory is more an approach to the scientific task than a theory about a realm of data.

In a broader sense, then, Lewin analyzes in this volume the major attributes that will characterize the working methods of any productive social scientist, regardless of his theoretical orientation. Or, to put the matter differently, he discusses many basic problems of scien tific method which all social scientists must face and he proposes solutions not so much on a basis of absolute "right or wrong" as in terms of what will make the scientist most productive. He believes strongly that science is a continuous enterprise in which advance is made by successive approximations to "the truth" and by a never-

ending series of small excursions into the unknown. It is more than a coincidence that so productive a scientist should be greatly concerned with the problems of scientific productivity. It is significant, too, that, although his own personal experiences dramatized all too emphatically the political and social influences upon scientific productivity, he felt especially constrained to plead for a recognition of the pervasive influences on productivity that stem from the scientist's own beliefs in the realm of the philosophy of science. He saw clearly that even the most empirical scientist cannot avoid making assumptions of a metaphysical and epistemological sort and that these assumptions shape inevitably the nature of the descriptive concepts he uses, the phenomena he observes, and the way he collects his data.

Although the papers in this volume touch on many topics, throughout all the discussions certain principles guide the development, sometimes quite explicitly but sometimes less obviously. It may be useful to examine briefly Lewin's treatment of three of these more basic issues. The first deals with the nature of constructs in social science and the process of conceptualizing. The second concerns the definition of the fundamental concept, "field." The third opens up problems of strategy concerning the proper balance, at any stage of scientific development, between the construction of rigorous, formal systems and the use of less exact, more popular concepts.

THE PLACE OF CONSTRUCTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

To Lewin the essential nature of the work of the scientist consists of making a proper translation from phenomena to concepts. This process of conceptualizing, he believes, contains within it some of the most crucial problems faced by the scientist. In order to develop a satisfactory system of concepts, the scientist has to be particularly careful about the way in which he develops his concepts. Before a system can be fully useful the concepts in it have to be defined in a way that (1) permits the treatment of both the "qualitative" and "quantitative" aspects of phenomena in a single system, (2) adequately represents the conditional-genetic (or causal) attributes of phenomena, (3) facilitates the measurement (or operational definition) of these attributes, and (4) allows both generalization to universal laws and concrete treatment of the individual case.

How can such powerful concepts be generated? Lewin found a guide in the "method of construction" first developed in mathematics:

To consider qualitatively different geometrical entities (such as circle, square, parabola) as the product of a certain combination of certain "elements of construction" (such as points and movements) has since the time of the Greeks been the secret of this method. It is sometimes called the method of "genetic definition." It is able, at the same time, to link and to separate; it does not minimize qualitative differences and still lays open their relation to general quantitative variables. Cassirer has shown how the same method proved to be fruitful in empirical sciences where the "elements of construction" are mathematically described empirical entities (such as forces, ions, atoms). [Chapter 2, page 32.]

In psychology and the social sciences it is necessary similarly to develop appropriate "elements of construction" and ways of combining these elements into a system of concepts. In Chapter 2 Lewin presents a penetrating discussion of the problems involved in this process. Of especial help to those working toward the development of a system of concepts is the taken ent in this chapter of the conceptual dimensions of constructs, for it is the dimensional characteristic of a construct that determines how it may be combined with other constructs and how it may be measured. The significance and practical value of this discussion have yet to be fully utilized by most theorists in the human sciences.

This analysis of the nature of conceptualizing, though highly abstract, is important for an understanding of Lewin's work, because it was in the concrete application of these principles that he made some of his most significant contributions. The essence of much of his most brilliant work consists of a conceptual analysis of the "nature" of phenomena which previously had had only popular labels. Time and again Lewin took some popular notion, such as conflict, frustration, or learning, and subjected it to a conceptual analysis which consisted of ascertaining its elements of construction. Once these were determined, phenomena which had long been thought inaccessible to scientific treatment became fruitful topics of experimental research. And, as Lewin points out in Chapter 9, even the "reality" attributed to them by scientists changed as a result of a successful conceptual analysis of their nature. Examples of this process recur throughout this volume, but especially noteworthy are

the treatment of "intention" (Chapter 1), "frustration" (Chapter 2), "learning" (Chapter 4), "regression" (Chapter 5), "adolescence" (Chapter 6), "resistance to change" (Chapter 9), and the classic analysis of "conflict" (reproduced in Chapter 10).

DEFINITION OF "FIELD"

The most fundamental construct for Lewin is, of course, that of "field." All behavior (including action, thinking, wishing, striving, valuing, achieving, etc.) is conceived of as a change of some state of a field in a given unit of time, $\left(\frac{dx}{dt}\right)$. In treating individual

psychology, the field with which the scientist must deal is the "life space" of the individual. This life space consists of the person and the psychological environment as it exists for him. In dealing with group psychology or sociology, a similar formulation is proposed. One may speak of the field in which a group or institution exists with precisely the same meaning as one speaks of the individual life space in individual psychology. The life space of a group, therefore, consists of the group and its environment as it exists for the group. It is the task of the scientist to develop constructs and techniques of observation and measurement adequate to characterize the properties of any given life space at any given time and to state the laws governing changes of these properties.

In carrying out this task, it is necessary to determine specifically what things are to be included in the representation of any given life space at any particular time. This problem is equivalent to that of determining criteria for attributing scientific "existence" or "reality" to phenomena. It is also closely related to the problem of defining the boundaries of a specific science, for it raises such questions as "What is a psychological fact, an economic fact, a political fact, etc.?" In defining a given field, or life space, it is also important to characterize it so that the interdependence of its parts may be treated satisfactorily. Finally, there is the problem of specifying its location and depth in time.

Existence. The life space is defined so that at any given time it includes all facts that have existence and excludes those that do not have existence for the individual or group under study. "Existence for the individual or group" is given a pragmatic definition. Lewin

chose to attribute existence to anything having demonstrable effects. In individual psychology, the environment and the person as consciously perceived by the person are ordinarily included in the life space. But, in addition, unconscious states are also included to the extent that by direct observation or inference the scientist can determine that they have effects. It is interesting to note that many of the great "discoveries" of psychology have consisted essentially of a demonstration of the existence in the life space of influences previously not included. A notable example would be Freud's "discovery" of unconscious influences.

In Chapters 3, 8, and 9 Lewin examines in some detail what should be included within the life space of an individual. He indicates that it is reasonably easy to decide to include many things, such as needs, goals, cognitive structure, and the like, and to exclude many others, such as physical and social events occurring at a remote distance and having no direct effect on the individual. There is, however, a boundary zone of events and processes which are ordinarily thought of as physical, economic, political, legal, etc., which, nonetheless, do have direct effects upon individual behavior. Such events and processes must be included within the life space of the individual. Many of Lewin's contributions to the understanding of human behavior consisted of showing that a wider and wider realm of determinants must be treated as part of a single, interdependent field and that phenomena traditionally parceled out to separate "disciplines" must be treated in a single coherent system of constructs. In the last few months of his life, he was coming to recast considerably his conception of motivation to emphasize "needs" less and to stress more such determinants as group membership, personal ability, economic and political resources, social channels, and other influences usually omitted from psychological theories of motivation.

Interdependence. It is a basic assertion of field theory, and here its close relation to Gestalt psychology is apparent, that the various parts of a given life space are to some degree interdependent. It is probable that nothing satisfying the criterion of existence in a given life space can be completely independent of anything else in the same life space. This interdependence of parts poses many special problems in relation both to research methods and to conceptualizing. Problems of both types interested Lewin immensely. In the Appendix to this volume is presented his careful treatment in formal mathematical

terms of the concept of interdependence. He believed strongly that a set of interdependent facts can be adequately handled conceptually only with the mathematical concept of space and the dynamic concepts of tension and force. These points are developed to some degree in virtually every chapter in this book. The methodological consequences of the interdependence of parts of the life space are elaborated in Chapter 3 (where the interdependence of the size of unit observed and the length of a unit of time is explored), in Chapter 7 (where the problems of observation and analysis of social events are discussed), and in Chapter 10 (where many phenomena which must be viewed as properties of an interdependent whole are described in detail).

Contemporaneity. Lewin's assertion that the only determinants of behavior at a given time are the properties of the field at the same time has caused more controversy than any of his other systematic principles. This principle asserts that the life space endures through time, is modified by events, and is a product of history, but only the contemporaneous system can have effects at any time. The principle of contemporaneity of causation seemed to many to be an attack upon psychoanalytic theory, which asserts the extreme importance of early childhood for later personality, and a denial of the efficacy of learning. In fact, neither of these implications was intended. The discussion in Chapter 3 shows that the essential problem is twofold: one of keeping concepts rigorous and the other of designing appropriate research techniques. The discussion of regression in Chapter 5 provides an excellent example of the gains to be derived from conceptual rigor in regard to the time dimension. The useful distinction made there between regression and retrogression is a result of this concern. The methodological consequences of the principle of contemporaneity are evident in the abstract discussion of anamnesis as a method of determining an individual's present state (Chapter 3) and in the more detailed treatment of the problems of conducting research on group culture and history (Chapter 7).

FORMALIZATION AND PROGRESS

The great emphasis placed by Lewin upon the formal properties of scientific constructs and his insistence that the determinants of human behavior can be represented in rigorous mathematical terms have led some to exaggerate and misinterpret the significance that he attached to formalization in the human sciences. It is true that he devoted great energy to such work as the development of "hodological" space (presented in *The Conceptual Representation and the Measurement of Psychological Forces*) and to the mathematical treatment of differentiated wholes (presented in the Appendix to this volume). It is also true that he believed that these parts of his work would have a more lasting significance than many of his more empirically related studies. And yet his most basic attitude toward science was a practical one, full of common sense, and he was fearful that an enthusiasm for formal systems might lead to a substitution of mere verbalisms for empirically descriptive theories.

In Chapter 1, where he discusses the place of formalization in scientific progress, there is revealed most vividly a man who views his job mainly as that of taking the next possible step in solving the puzzles that nature presents to him. His comparison of the scientific enterprise to that of building "highways and superhighways" across an undeveloped continent is compelling because it is so evident that it was written by an expert builder who had tried out the whole variety of possible tools of building and who therefore knew the value and function of each. Formalization and mathematization, if prematurely done, he asserts, may lead us to the building of a logical superhighway which turns out to be a "dead end leading nowhere." The essential wisdom of an experienced and productive scientist is revealed in his summary statement: "Enthusiasm for Theory? Yes! Psychology can use much of it. However, we will produce but an empty formalism, if we forget that mathematization and formalization should be done only to the degree that the maturity of the material under investigation permits at a given time." (Chapter 1, p. 1.)

The method of successive approximation, he maintains, is the key to scientific productivity. He rarely gave advice to his students, but he never hesitated to advise a young researcher, "Only ask the questions in your research that you can answer with the techniques you can use. If you can't learn to ignore the questions you are not prepared to answer definitely, you will never answer any."

This attitude resulted in his introduction of many "semipopular" concepts which represented only modest steps toward rigorous conceptualization, but which inspired much research. Examples of this

sort are the concepts of level of aspiration, group decision, and gate-keeper. Other terms of a similar nature he borrowed from Freud (among others) and proceeded to refine to a next higher level of precision. Examples of this sort are his treatment of substitution, conflict, and regression.

To those who worked closely with him it was repeatedly dramatized how easily and spontaneously he moved from the practical, empirical, and intuitive, to the abstract, rigorous, and formal. I recall vividly a conversation with him shortly before his death in which we were discussing technical problems of constructing an interview for an action-research project on intergroup relations. Suddenly, in the midst of phrasing a question, he interrupted himself with great enthusiasm to say, "Within the next year we'll be able really to measure psychological forces." He was always striving for rigor and precision and he made constant use of the formal constructs available, but he refused to let formalization become an end in itself.

Many people who knew Kurt Lewin have asked how much his rich productivity derived from his theories and beliefs, and how much it resulted simply from his keen sensitivity and clinical insight. That he possessed unusual sensitivity cannot be denied. That his warm and receptive personality contributed to his productivity is also without question. It is my own conclusion, however, from a number of years of close association with him that he was unusually productive because he took seriously and practiced continuously the principles of scientific thinking and methodology which he advocated in the publications contained in this volume.

Kurt Lewin's basic attitude toward science building is perhaps best revealed in a passage where he describes the work of Ernst Cassirer, a man to whom he felt a great intellectual indebtedness:

He discloses the basic character of science as the eternal attempt to go beyond what is regarded scientifically accessible at any specific time. To proceed beyond the limitations of a given level of knowledge the researcher, as a rule, has to break down methodological taboos which condemn as "unscientific" or "illogical" the very methods or concepts which later on prove to be basic for the next major progress.¹

D C

¹ Kurt Lewin: Cassirer's Philosophy of Science and the Social Sciences, in Paul Arthur Schilpp (Ed.): *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, p. 275. Evanston, Ill.: Library of Living Philosophers, 1949.

Preface

This is the second of two volumes of collected writings by Kurt Lewin which are intended to bring together for convenient reading a number of papers he published during the fifteen years he lived in the United States. The two volumes are integrally related parts of Lewin's total work and yet they contrast in their emphasis. While the first, Resolving Social Conflicts, is oriented toward practical problems of society, this second volume deals with more theoretical issues. While in the first volume the emphasis is placed upon the building of a better world, in this volume the concern is that of a scientist attempting to construct a scientific system for understanding man and society. More particularly the papers presented here discuss the working problems of the social scientist. His conceptual and methodological tools are the object of study.

This volume divides rather naturally into three major parts. The first three chapters, together with the Appendix, constitute an examination of several basic problems in the philosophy of science. They set up certain guiding principles which serve as a basis for understanding why the more specific problems in the following chapters are treated as they are. The six following chapters take up these principles and demonstrate their application to research in the fields of learning, development and regression, social psychology and group dynamics, and to research on selected problems of cultural anthropology, sociology, and economics. The final chapter constitutes an excellent, though concise, summary of the major theoretical and substantive findings derived from the research carried out under his immediate supervision.

These two volumes, together with A Dynamic Theory of Personality, Principles of Topological Psychology, and The Conceptual Representation and the Measurement of Psychological Forces, now make readily available to the English reader a good coverage of the major writings of Kurt Lewin. There remain untranslated, however, several

important contributions which appeared in German, and it is to be hoped that these may soon be made available. In a real sense, too, much of his work remains scattered throughout the many journals and monographs where his students and colleagues published research in which his contribution was unmistakable. His modest insistence that he not be listed as a co-author of these publications resulted in an imperfect reflection of his role in most of this research. Those wishing to study fully Lewin's work are referred to the bibliographical references at the end of the various chapters (especially Chapter 10), to the long series of studies that he edited for the Psychologische Forschung, and to the series of monographs, Studies in Topological and Vector Psychology, contained in the University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare.

Editing this volume has been a gratifying task. It has been a rare intellectual experience to discover the essential coherence that the various papers collected here possess. It has been literally thrilling to see the systematic and integrated structure emerge from the mere bringing together of long familiar publications not before read in immediate sequence. For the most part it has been possible to leave the single papers without editorial modification. Certain duplication had to be omitted here and there and certain transitional paragraphs had to be supplied, but the material was written almost as though it had been intended for publication in a single volume. The only substantial modification of form is found in respect to Chapters 2, 7, and 8. In Chapter 7, "Problems of Research in Social Psychology," are presented excerpts from Lewin's presidential address before the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues and a section from the paper, "Constructs in Psychology and Psychological Ecology" (the bulk of which appears as Chapter 2). In Chapter 8, "Psychological Ecology," Lewin's theory of social channels is presented. Since he developed this theory in three separate places, the editorial problem consisted of bringing together from these sources a single and complete statement of this theory. It proved to be possible to extract a coherent presentation from the much longer treatment, "Forces behind food habits and methods of change." Certain brief sections are also included from "Constructs in psychology and psychological ecology" and from "Frontiers in group dynamics, II." (More specific reference to these sources is given below.)

We are greatly indebted to the publishers of the original papers for permission to print them here. Below are listed the original sources of each of the chapters.

Chapter 1. Formalization and progress in psychology, University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare, 1940, 16, No. 3, 9-42. Reprinted

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Chapter 2. Constructs in psychology and psychological ecology, University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare, 1944, 20, 1-29. Reprinted by permission of Iowa Child Welfare Research Station.

Chapter 3. Defining the "field at a given time," Psychological Review, 1943, 50, 292-310. Reprinted by permission of the Psychologi-

cal Review and of the American Psychological Association.

Chapter 4. Field theory of learning, Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, 1942, 41, part II, 215-242. Reprinted by permission of the Society.

Chapter 5. Regression, Retrogression, and Development (Chapter 1), Frustration and Regression by Roger Barker, Tamara Dembo, and Kurt Lewin. University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare, 1941, 18, No. 1, 1-43. Reprinted by permission of Iowa Child Welfare Research Station. The co-authors have informed the editor that Dr. Lewin was the author of this chapter and of the appendix.

Chapter 6. Field theory and experiment in social psychology: concepts and methods, American Journal of Sociology, 1939, 44, 868-897. Reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

Chapter 7. Psychology and the process of group living, Journal of Social Psychology, 1943, 17, 113-131. Reprinted by permission of The Journal Press. Constructs in psychology and psychological ecology, University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare, 1944, 20, 23-27. Reprinted by permission of the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station.

Chapter 8. Forces behind food habits and methods of change, Bulletin of the National Research Council, 1943, 108, 35-65. Reprinted by permission of the National Research Council. Constructs in psychology and psychological ecology, University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare, 1944, 20, 17-20. Reprinted by permission of the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station. Frontiers in group dynamics, II, Human Relations, 1947, 1, 143-153. Reprinted by permission of Human Relations.

Chapter 9. Frontiers in group dynamics, Human Relations, 1947,

1, 2-38. Reprinted by permission of Human Relations.

Chapter 10. Behavior and development as a function of the total situation. Reprinted by permissi from *Manual of Child Psychology*, by L. Carmichael, published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., copyright 1946.

Appendix. Analysis of the concepts whole, differentiation, and unity, *University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare*, 1941, 18, No. 1, 226-261. Reprinted by permission of the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station.

I wish to express here my great debt to Dr. Albert Pepitone who helped immeasurably in all phases of editing this volume.

DORWIN CARTWRIGHT

Ann Arbor, Michigan June 15, 1950