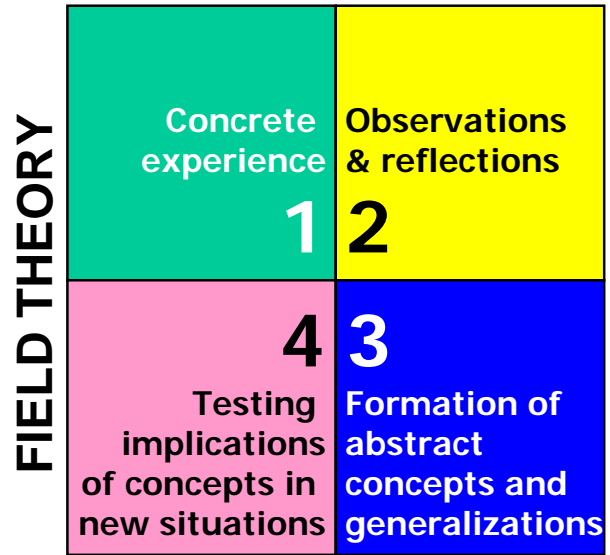


## Field Theory

**Background:** Kurt Lewin was greatly influenced by Albert Einstein and applied the idea of Einsteinian field physics to psychology. He proposed that human behavior is a function of both the person and the environment in which the behavior takes place, including the social parameters. He postulated that needs organize perception of the field and acting within the field. He understood a dynamic interaction of elements in the field. He believed behavior was purposeful and visualized the individual as existing in a field of forces which included +valence forces which attract people, and -valence forces which repel people. The blending of these fields produced an approach/avoidance dynamic. According to Lewin's theory, learning is essential to coping with these opposing force fields. Changes in valences and values are important to the learner's ability to deal with ongoing situations. This concept came to be known as Field Theory.

Lewin believed that individuals, and the groups that surround them, are not independent elements but are in fact an interdependent element of a social field. In field theory, he defined 'field' as 'the totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent'. The social group then is the primary shaper of a person's thoughts, feelings and behavior.

Lewin viewed the social environment as a dynamic field which impacted in an interactive way with human consciousness. Adjust elements of the social environment and particular types of psychological experience predictably ensue. In turn, the person's psychological state influences the social field or milieu.



The field theory is the "proposition that human behavior is the function of both the person and the environment: expressed in symbolic terms,  $B = f(P, E)$ ." This means that one's behavior is related both to one's personal characteristics and to the social situation in which one finds oneself.

For Lewin behavior was determined by totality of an individual's situation. Individuals were seen to behave differently according to the way in which tensions between perceptions of the self and of the environment were worked through. The whole psychological field, or 'lifespace', within which people acted, had to be viewed, in order to understand behavior. Within this individuals and groups could be seen in topological terms (using map-like representations). Individuals participate in a series of life spaces (such as the family, work, school and church), and these were constructed under the influence of various force vectors.

## Facilitators Body of Knowledge Research Project

Lewin was well known for his terms "life space" and "field theory". He was perhaps even better known for practical use of his theories in studying group dynamics, solving social problems related to prejudice, and group therapy (t-groups). Lewin sought to not only describe group life, but to investigate the conditions and forces which bring about change or resist change in groups.

Hall and Lindzey (1978: 386) summarize the central features of Kurt Lewin's field theory as follows:

- Behavior is a function of the field that exists at the time the behavior occurs,
- Analysis begins with the situation as a whole from which are differentiated the component parts, and
- The concrete person in a concrete situation can be represented mathematically.

Kurt Lewin also looked to the power of underlying forces (needs) to determine behavior and, hence, expressed 'a preference for psychological as opposed to physical or physiological descriptions of the field' (*op. cit.*).

In the field (or 'matrix') approach, Lewin believed that for change to take place, the total situation has to be taken into account. If only part of the situation is considered, a misrepresented picture is likely to develop.

With boldness, Lewin manipulated complex situational variables in natural settings. His approach has guided experiments in the field of social cognition, social motivation, and group processes. Most importantly Lewin helped develop action research. Action research uses empirical social research, social action, and controlled evaluation.

Lewin also believed that a holistic investigation of human behavior and learning must include the environment in which the learning is taking place, including the psychological environment of the learner and others with whom he interacts.

The field theory may seem obvious to us now, but most early psychologists did not believe in behaviorism. Many psychologists at the time believed in the psychoanalytic theory that held human motives to be blind pushes from within. Lewin thought of motives as goal-directed forces. He believed "that our behavior is purposeful; we live in a psychological reality or life space that includes not only those parts of our physical and social environment that are important to us but also imagined states that do not currently exist".

Perhaps the best remembered application of Field Theory translated for the modern movies was when the Star Wars Jedi Knight, Master Yoda said, "May the force [field] be with you" to Luke Skywalker.

### Resources:

<http://www.wilderdom.com/theory/FieldTheory.html>

<http://www.konnections.net/lifecircles/Lewin.htm>

<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/history/lewin.html>

