

Kurt Lewin

1890 - 1947



Kurt Lewin is considered to be by many, the most charismatic psychologist of his generation. He was born in the village of Moglino in the Prussian province of Posen in 1890. His formal training in psychology began in 1910 in Berlin and led to a Ph.D. in the experimental study of associative learning. He completed his requirements for a Ph.D. in 1914

During World War I Lewin served in the German army. He was wounded in action and received an Iron Cross. After the war he returned to the Psychological Institute in Berlin where he became Privatedozent in 1921. In 1927, at the age of 37, he advanced to Ausserordentlicher Professor. While at the University of Berlin, Lewin "found many of the department's courses in the grand tradition of Wundtian psychology irrelevant and dull"

Lewin came to the United States in 1932 as a visiting professor to Stanford University. His influence in America was immediate. Lewin published many books before his arrival to the United States and after. With

Fritz Heider, a fellow refugee friend from Berlin, and his American wife Grace, he wrote *Lewin's Principles of Topical Psychology*. Lewin left Stanford for Cornell and eventually settled down at the University of Iowa from 1935 to 1944.

He is well known for his term "life space" and work on group dynamics, as well as t-groups. Lewin's commitment to applying psychology to the problems of society led to the development of the M.I.T. Research Center for Group Dynamics. "He wanted to reach beyond the mere description of group life and to investigate the conditions and forces which bring about change or resist it"

Lewin is most renown for his development of the field theory. The field theory is the "proposition that human behavior is the function of both the person and the environment: expressed in symbolic terms, $B = f(P, E)$."(Deaux 9) This means that one's behavior is related both to one's personal characteristics and to the social situation in which one finds oneself.

The field theory may seem obvious to us now, but most early psychologist 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" (Tesser 340).

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Lewin's field theory led to the development of actual field research on human behavior. 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.

In 1947 Lewin defined Action Research as "a three-step spiral process of (1) planning which involves reconnaissance; (2) taking actions; and (3) fact-finding about the results of the action."

Clearly, Kurt Lewin's field theory and action field research has one of the most outstanding impacts on modern social psychology. His field theory explained that our actions are a result of both environmental and psychological traits. We are not just beings who act from internal impulses. Instead we are greatly influenced by our surroundings.

Lewin's belief that social-psychological phenomena can be studied experimentally was a huge impetus for scientific research. He was the first to test human behavior in a controlled setting. His research also showed events must be studied in relation to one another, and that both the individual and the group are important. His research helped to better explain leadership atmospheres and group dynamics.

In 1946 Kurt Lewin was engaged in a project for the American Jewish Congress in New York - the Commission of Community Interrelations. It made use of Lewin's model of action research in a number of significant studies into religious and racial prejudice. It was also out of some

of this work with community leaders and group facilitators that the notion of 'T' groups emerged. He and his associates were able to get funding from the Office of Naval Research to set up the National Training Laboratories in 1947 in Bethel, Maine. However, Lewin died of a heart attack in Newtonville, Mass. on February 11, 1947, before the Laboratories were established.

Kurt Lewin's influence on scientific research is his legacy. He was a groundbreaking psychologist who greatly impacted his field. Kurt Lewin will continue to influence both theory and research all the way to and beyond the twenty-first century.

Bibliography

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