

Field Theory - Kurt Lewin

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Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) was a famous, charismatic psychologist who is now viewed as the father of social psychology. Born in Germany, Lewin emigrated to the USA as a result of World War II.

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.

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.

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.

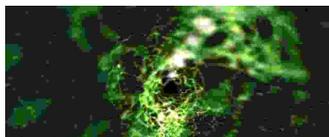
Later on, Yoda in Star Wars brought field theory back into vogue, with his kind wish for Luke Skywalker, "may the force [field] be with you." But likewise, Luke had to influence the force.

The following two passages offer a more detailed summary of Lewin's field theory.

From [Smith \(2001\)](#):

For Kurt Lewin behaviour was determined by totality of an individual's situation. In his field theory, a 'field' is defined as 'the totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent' (Lewin 1951: 240). 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 'lifespaces', within which people acted had to be viewed, in order to understand behaviour. 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 (Lewin 1952).

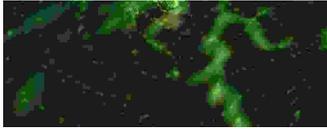
Hall and Lindzey (1978: 386) summarize the central features of Kurt Lewin's field theory as follows:



Behaviour is a function of the field that exists at the time the behaviour 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 behaviour and, hence, expressed 'a preference for psychological as opposed to physical or physiological descriptions of the field' (*op. cit.*).

In this we can see how Kurt Lewin drew together insights from topology (e.g. lifespaces), psychology (need, aspiration etc.), and sociology (e.g. force fields – motives clearly being dependent on group pressures). As Allport in his foreword to *Resolving Social Conflict* (Lewin 1948: ix) put it, these three aspects of his thought were not separable. 'All of his concepts, whatever root-metaphor they employ, comprise a single well-integrated system'. It was this, in significant part, which gave his work its peculiar power.

From [Jones \(n.d.\)](#):

Lewin is most renowned 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 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" (Tesser 340).

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.



Quotes by Kurt Lewin

"A successful individual typically sets his next goal somewhat but not too much above his last achievement. In this way he steadily raises his level of aspiration."

"Learning is more effective when it is an active rather than a passive process."

"If you want to truly understand something, try to change it."

[Discussion about Kurt Lewin and this quote...](#) (theoretical, interesting)

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