



kurt lewin: groups, experiential learning and action research

Kurt Lewin was a seminal theorist who deepened our understanding of groups, experiential learning, and action research. What did he actually add to theory and practice of informal education?

contents: [introduction](#) · [life](#) · [field theory](#) · [group dynamics](#) · [democracy and groups](#) · [t-groups, facilitation and experience](#) · [action research](#) · [conclusion](#) · [further reading and references](#) · [links](#). see, also : [the groupwork pioneers series](#)

Kurt Lewin's (1890-1947) work had a profound impact on social psychology and, more particularly for our purposes here, on our appreciation of experiential learning, group dynamics and action research. On this page we provide a very brief outline of his life and an assessment of his continuing relevance to educators. Kurt Lewin was born on September 9, 1890 in the village of Mogilno in Prussia (now part of Poland). He was one of four children in a middle class Jewish family (his father owned a small general store and a farm). They moved to Berlin when he was aged 15 and he was enrolled in the Gymnasium. In 1909 Kurt Lewin entered the University of Frieberg to study medicine. He then transferred to the University of Munich to study biology. Around this time he became involved in the socialist movement. His particular concerns appear to have been the combating of anti-Semitism, the democratization of German institutions, and the need to improve the position of women. Along with other students he organized and taught an adult education program for working class women and men (Marrow 1969).



His doctorate was undertaken at the University of Berlin where he developed an interest in the philosophy of science and encountered Gestalt psychology. His PhD was awarded in 1916, but by then he was serving in the German army (he was injured in combat). In 1921 Kurt Lewin joined the Psychological Institute of the University of Berlin - where he was to lecture and offer seminars in both philosophy and psychology. He was starting to make a name for himself both in terms of publishing, and with regard to his teaching (he was an enthusiastic lecturer who attracted the interest of students). His work became known in America and he was invited to spend six months as a visiting professor at Stanford (1930). With the political position worsening considerably in Germany and in 1933 he and his wife and daughter settled in the USA (he became an American citizen in 1940). Kurt Lewin was first to work at the Cornell School of Home Economics, and then, in 1935, at the University of Iowa (this was also the year when his first collection of papers in English - *A Dynamic Theory of Personality* - was published).

The University of Iowa remained Kurt Lewin's base until 1944. There he continued to develop his interest in social processes, and to undertake research in that area. Significantly, he became involved in various applied research initiatives linked to the war effort (from 1940 onwards). These included exploring the morale of the fighting troops, psychological warfare, and reorienting food consumption away from foods in short supply. His social commitments were also still strong - and he was much in demand as a speaker on minority and inter-group relations. He wanted to establish a centre to research group dynamics - and in 1944 this dream was

realized with the founding of the Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT. At the same time Kurt Lewin was also 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 (research directed toward the solving of social problems) in a number of significant studies into religious and racial prejudice. It was also out of some of this work in 1946 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.

Field theory

Here we will not enter into the detail of Kurt Lewin's field theory (it is beyond our remit). However, it is necessary to note its key elements. To begin it is important to recognize its roots in Gestalt theory. (A gestalt is a coherent whole. It has its own laws, and is a construct of the individual mind rather than 'reality'). 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 'lifespace', 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. lifespace), 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.

Group dynamics

It is not an exaggeration to say that Kurt Lewin had a profound impact on a generation of researchers and thinkers concerned with group dynamics. Brown (1988: 28-32) argues that two key ideas emerged out of field theory that are crucial to an appreciation of group process: interdependence of fate, and task interdependence.

Interdependence of fate. Here the basic line of argument is that groups come into being in a psychological sense 'not because their members necessarily are similar to one another (although they may be); rather, a group exists when people in it realize their fate depends on the fate of the group as a whole' (Brown 1988: 28). This is how Lewin (1946: 165-6) put it when discussing the position of Jews in 1939:

[I]t is not similarity or dissimilarity of individuals that constitutes a group, but rather interdependence of fate. Any normal group, and certainly any developed and organized one contains and should contain individuals of very different character.... It is easy enough to see that the common fate of all Jews makes them a group in reality. One who has grasped this

simple idea will not feel that he has to break away from Judaism altogether whenever he changes his attitude toward a fundamental Jewish issue, and he will become more tolerant of differences of opinion among Jews. What is more, a person who has learned to see how much his own fate depends upon the fate of his entire group will be ready and even eager to take over a fair share of responsibility for its welfare.

It could be argued that the position of Jews in 1939 constitutes a special case. That the particular dangers they faced in many countries makes arguing a general case difficult. However, Lewin's insight does seem to be applicable to many different group settings. Subsequently, there has been some experimental support for the need for some elementary sense of interdependence (Brown 1989).

Task interdependence. Interdependence of fate can be a fairly weak form of interdependence in many groups, argued Lewin. A more significant factor is where there is interdependence in the goals of group members. In other words, if the group's task is such that members of the group are dependent on each other for achievement, then a powerful dynamic is created.

These implications can be positive or negative. In the former case one person's success either directly facilitates others' success or, in the strongest case, is actually necessary for those others to succeed also... In negative interdependence – known more usually as competition – one person's success is another's failure. (Brown (1989: 30)

Kurt Lewin had looked to the nature of group task in an attempt to understand the uniformity of some groups' behaviour. He remained unconvinced of the explanatory power of individual motivational concepts such as those provided by psychoanalytical theory or frustration-aggression theory (*op. cit.*). He was able to argue that people may come to a group with very different dispositions, but if they share a common objective, they are likely to act together to achieve it. This links back to what is usually described as Lewin's field theory. An intrinsic state of tension within group members stimulates or motivates movement toward the achievement of desired common goals (Johnson and Johnson 1995: 175). Interdependence (of fate and task) also results in the group being a 'dynamic whole'. This means that a change in one member or subgroups impacts upon others. These two elements combined together to provide the basis for Deutch's (1949) deeply influential exploration of the relationship of task to process (and his finding that groups under conditions of positive interdependence were generally more co-operative. Members tended to participate and communicate more in discussion; were less aggressive; liked each other more; and tended to be productive as compared to those working under negative task interdependence) (Brown 1989: 32; Johnson and Johnson 1995).

Democracy and groups

Gordon W. Allport, in his introduction to *Resolving Social Conflicts* (Lewin 1948: xi) argues that there is striking kinship between the work of Kurt Lewin and that of John Dewey.

Both agree that democracy must be learned anew in each generation, and that it is a far more difficult form of social structure to attain and to maintain than is autocracy. Both see the intimate dependence of democracy upon social science. Without knowledge of, and obedience to, the laws of human nature in group settings, democracy cannot succeed. And without freedom for research and theory as provided only in a democratic environment, social science will surely fail. Dewey, we might say, is the outstanding philosophical exponent of democracy, Lewin is its outstanding psychological exponent. More clearly than anyone else has he shown us in concrete, operational terms what it means to be a democratic leader, and to create democratic group structure.

One of the most interesting pieces of work in which Lewin was involved concerned the exploration of different styles or types of leadership on group structure and member behaviour. This entailed a collaboration with Ronald Lippitt, among others (Lewin *et. al* 1939, also written up in Lewin 1948: 71-83). They looked to three classic group leadership models - democratic, autocratic and laissez-faire – and concluded that there was more originality, group-mindedness and friendliness in democratic groups. In contrast, there was more aggression,

hostility, scapegoating and discontent in laissez-faire and autocratic groups (Reid 1981: 115). Lewin concludes that the difference in behaviour in autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire situations is not, on the whole, a result of individual differences. Reflecting on the group experiments conducted with children he had the following to say:

There have been few experiences for me as impressive as seeing the expression in children's faces change during the first day of autocracy. The friendly, open, and co-operative group, full of life, became within a short half-hour a rather apathetic looking gathering without initiative. The change from autocracy to democracy seemed to take somewhat more time than from democracy to autocracy. Autocracy is imposed upon the individual. Democracy he has to learn. (Lewin 1948: 82)

This presentation of democratic leadership in groups became deeply influential. Unfortunately, as Gastil (1994) notes, Lewin and his colleagues never developed their definition beyond this rough sketch. This has left them open to the charge that their vision of democratic leadership contains within it some worrying themes. In particular Kariel (1956, discussed by Gastil 1994) argued that the notion is rather manipulative and elitist. What is more there has also been some suggestion that Mao's mass-line leadership in China, 'used a model like Lewin's to mask coercion under the guise of participative group processes' (discussed by Gastil 1994). Such a possibility would have been disturbing to Lewin, whose commitments and intentions were democratic. He argued that democracy could not be imposed on people, that it had to be learnt by a process of voluntary and responsible participation (1948: 39). However, the problem becomes clearer when he discusses the nature of democratic leadership at moments of transition. Change needed to be facilitated and guided.

To instigate changes toward democracy a situation has to be created for a certain period where the leader is sufficiently in control to rule out influences he does not want and to manipulate the situation to a sufficient degree. The goal of the democratic leader in this transition period will have to be the same as any good teacher, namely to make himself superfluous, to be replaced by indigenous leaders from the group. (Lewin 1948: 39)

There are some elements here that ring a little of [Rousseau's](#) view of the tutor's role in *Emile*. Is it up to the leader to manipulate the situation in this way – or is there room for [dialogue](#)?

'T' groups, facilitation and experience

In the summer of 1946 Kurt Lewin along with colleagues and associates from the Research Center for Group Dynamics (Ronald Lippitt, Leland Bradford and Kenneth Benne became involved in leadership and group dynamics training for the Connecticut State Interracial Commission. They designed and implemented a two-week programme that looked to encourage group discussion and decision-making, and where participants (including staff) could treat each other as peers. Research was woven into the event (as might be expected given Lewin's concern for the generation of data and theory). The trainers and researchers collected detailed observations and recordings of group activities (and worked on these during the event). Initially these meetings were just for the staff, but some of the other participants also wanted to be involved.

At the start of one of the early evening observers' sessions, three of the participants asked to be present. Much to the chagrin of the staff, Lewin agreed to this unorthodox request. As the observers reported to the group, one of the participants - a woman - disagreed with the observer on the interpretation of her behaviour that day. One other participant agreed with her assertion and a lively discussion ensued about behaviours and their interpretations. Word of the session spread, and by the next night, more than half of the sixty participants were attending the feedback sessions which, indeed became the focus of the conference. Near the conference's end, the vast majority of participants were attending these sessions, which lasted well into the night. ([NTL Institute](#))

Lippitt (1949) has described how Lewin responded to this and joined with participants in 'active dialogue about differences of interpretation and observation of the events by those who had participated in them'. A significant innovation in training practice was established. As Kolb (1984: 10) has commented:

Thus the discovery was made that learning is best facilitated in an environment where there is dialectic tension and conflict between immediate, concrete experience and analytic detachment. By bringing together the immediate experiences of the trainees and the conceptual models of the staff in an open atmosphere where inputs from each perspective could challenge and stimulate the other, a learning environment occurred with remarkable vitality and creativity.

It was this experience that led to the establishment of the first National Training Laboratory in Group Development (held at Gould Academy in Bethel, Maine in the summer of 1947). By this time Lewin was dead, but his thinking and practice was very much a part of what happened. This is how Reid (1981: 153) describes what happened:

A central feature of the laboratory was "basic skills training," in which an observer reported on group processes at set intervals. The skills to be achieved were intended to help an individual function in the role of "change agent". A change agent was thought to be instrumental in facilitating communication and useful feedback among participants. He was also to be a paragon who was aware of the need for change, could diagnose the problems involved, and could plan for change, implement the plans, and evaluate the results. To become an effective change agent, an understanding of the dynamics of groups was believed necessary.

What we see here is the basic shape of T-group theory and the so-called 'laboratory method'. Initially the small discussion groups were known as 'basic skill training groups' but by 1949 they had been shortened to T-group. In 1950 a sponsoring organization, the National Training Laboratories (NTL) was set up, and the scene was set for a major expansion of the work (reaching its heyday in the 1960s) and the evolution of the encounter group (Yalom 1995: 488).

The approach was not without its critics – in part because of what was perceived as its Gestalt base. In part, because it was seen by some as lacking substance. Reid (1981: 154) reports that Grace Coyle, who had spent time at Bethel, felt that many of the training groups handled group situations badly; and that the leaders were starting to believe that they had 'discovered everything there was to know about group relations and were unaware of the inquiry and work of others'. There may have been some element of this – but there was also innovation here. Four elements of the T-group are particularly noteworthy here according to Yalom (1995: 488-9) (and they owe a great deal to Lewin's influence):

Feedback. Lewin had borrowed the term from electrical engineering and applied it to the behavioural sciences. Here it was broadly used to describe the adjustment of a process informed by information about its results or effects. An important element here is the difference between the desired and actual result. There was a concern that organizations, groups and relationships generally suffered from a lack of accurate information about what was happening around their performance. Feedback became a key ingredient of T-groups and was found to 'be most effective when it stemmed from here-and-now observations, when it followed the generating event as closely as possible, and when the recipient checked with other group members to establish its validity and reduce perceptual distortion' (Yalom 1995: 489).

Unfreezing. This was taken directly from Kurt Lewin's change theory. It describes the process of disconfirming a person's former belief system. 'Motivation for change must be generated before change can occur. One must be helped to re-examine many cherished assumptions about oneself and one's relations to others' (*op. cit.*). Part of the process of the group, then, had to address this. Trainers sought to create an environment in which values and beliefs could be challenged.

Participant observation. 'Members had to participate emotionally in the group as well as observe themselves and the group objectively' (*op. cit.*). Connecting concrete (emotional) experience and analytical detachment is not an easy task, and is liable to be resisted by many participants, but it was seen as a essential if people were to learn and develop.

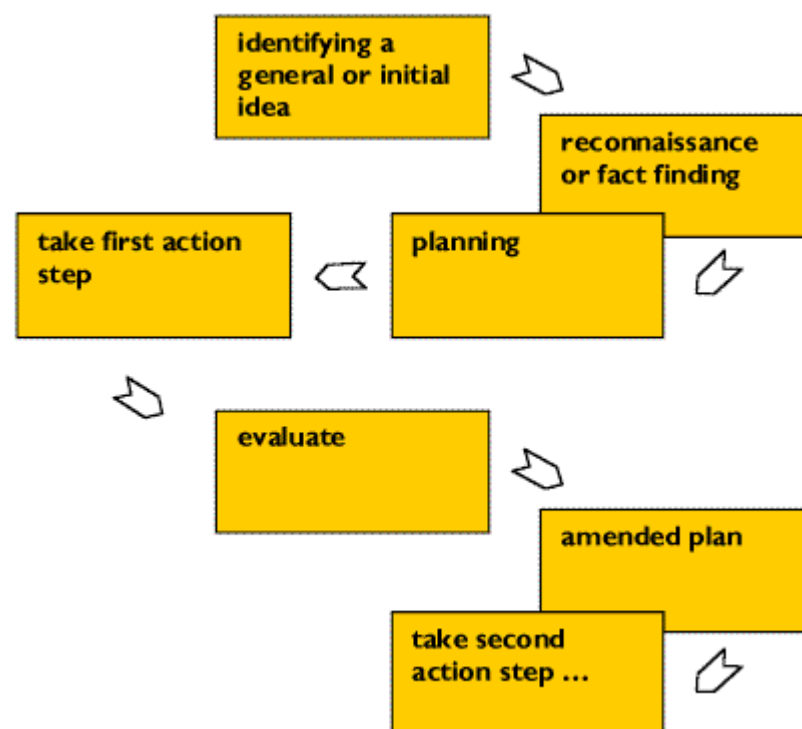
Cognitive aids. This particular aspect was drawn from developments in psychoeducational and cognitive-behavioural group therapy. It entailed the provision of models or organizing ideas through the medium brief lectures and handouts (and later things like film clips or video). Perhaps the best known of these was the *Johari Window* (named after, and developed by, Joe Luft and Harry Ingram). Yalom (1995: 490) comments, 'The use of such cognitive aids, lectures, reading assignments, and theory sessions demonstrates that the basic allegiance of the T-group was to the classroom rather than the consulting room. The participants were considered students; the task of the T-group was to **facilitate** learning for its members'.

Action research

Kurt Lewin is also generally credited as the person who coined the term '[action research](#)'.

The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice (Lewin 1946, reproduced in Lewin 1948: 202-3)

His approach involves a spiral of steps, 'each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (*ibid.*: 206). The basic cycle involves the following:



This is how Lewin describes the initial cycle:

The first step then is to examine the idea carefully in the light of the means available. Frequently more fact-finding about the situation is required. If this first period of planning is successful, two items emerge: namely, "an overall plan" of how to reach the objective and secondly, a

decision in regard to the first step of action. Usually this planning has also somewhat modified the original idea. (*ibid.*: 205)

The next step is 'composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact finding for the purpose of evaluating the results of the second step, and preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and for perhaps modifying again the overall plan' (*ibid.*: 206). What we can see here is an approach to research that is oriented to problem-solving in social and organizational settings, and that has a form that parallels Dewey's conception of learning from experience.

The approach, as presented, does take a fairly sequential form – and it is open to literal interpretation. Following it can lead to practice that is 'correct' rather than 'good' – as we will see. It can also be argued that model itself places insufficient emphasis on analysis at key points. Elliott (1991: 70), for example, believed that the basic model allows those who use it to assume that the 'general idea' can be fixed in advance, 'that "reconnaissance" is merely fact-finding, and that "implementation" is a fairly straightforward process'. As might be expected there was some questioning as to whether this was 'real' research. There were questions around action research's partisan nature – the fact that it served particular causes. There were also questions concerning its rigour, and the training of those undertaking it. However, as Bogdan and Biklen (1992: 223) point out, research is a frame of mind – 'a perspective that people take toward objects and activities'. Once we have satisfied ourselves that the collection of information is systematic, and that any interpretations made have a proper regard for satisfying truth claims, then much of the critique aimed at action research disappears. In some of Lewin's earlier work on action research (e.g. Lewin and Grabbe 1945) there was a tension between providing a rational basis for change through research, and the recognition that individuals are constrained in their ability to change by their cultural and social perceptions, and the systems of which they are a part. Having 'correct knowledge' does not of itself lead to change, attention also needs to be paid to the 'matrix of cultural and psychic forces' through which the subject is constituted (Winter 1987: 48).

Action research did suffer a decline in favour during the 1960s because of its association with radical political activism (Stringer 1999: 9). However, it has subsequently gained a significant foothold both within the realm of community-based, and participatory action research; and as a form of practice oriented to the improvement of educative encounters (e.g. Carr and Kemmis 1986). The use of action research to deepen and develop classroom practice has grown into a strong tradition of practice (one of the first examples being the work of Stephen Corey in 1949). For some there is an insistence that action research must be collaborative and entail groupwork.

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of those practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out... The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members. (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 5-6)

Just why it must be collective is open to some question and debate (Webb 1996), but there is an important point here concerning the commitments and orientations of those involved in action research. One of the legacies Kurt Lewin left us is the 'action research spiral' – and with it there is the danger that action research becomes little more than a procedure. It is a mistake, according to McTaggart (1996: 248) to think that following the action research spiral constitutes 'doing action research'. He continues, 'Action research is not a 'method' or a 'procedure' for research but a series of commitments to observe and problematize through practice a series of principles for conducting social enquiry'. It is his argument that Lewin has been misunderstood or, rather, misused. When set in historical context, while Lewin does talk about action research as a method, he is stressing a contrast between this form of interpretative practice and more traditional empirical-analytic research. The notion of a spiral may be a useful teaching device – but it is all too easily to slip into using it as *the* template for practice (McTaggart 1996: 249).

Conclusion

As this brief cataloguing of his work shows, Lewin made defining contributions to a number of fields. He had a major impact on our appreciation of groups and how to work with them; he pioneered action research; he demonstrated that complex social phenomenon could be explored using controlled experiments; and he helped to move social psychology into a more rounded understanding of behaviour (being a function of people and the way they perceive the environment). This is a formidable achievement. Sixty years on, he still excites discussion and argument, and while we may want to qualify or rework various aspect of his work (and that of his associates) we are deeply indebted to him both for his insights and the way he tried to bring a commitment to democracy and justice to his work. The consistent theme in all Kurt Lewin's work, according to David A. Kolb (1984: 9) was his concern for the integration of theory and practice. This was symbolized in his best known quotation: 'There is nothing so practical as a good theory' (1951: 169). It's a lesson that we still need to learn.

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Links

[Force field analysis](#) - brief article at accel-team.com

[Kurt Lewin - timeline and and brief biography](#) - prepared by Julie Greathouse plus a brief description of his theoretical contribution to psychology

[the groupwork pioneers series](#)

Picture and diagram credits: Detail of plaque commemorating Kurt Lewin on the house where he was born.

Action research cycle (we believe to be in public domain)

Bibliographical reference: Smith, M. K. (2001) 'Kurt Lewin, groups, experiential learning and action research', *the encyclopedia of informal education*, <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-lewin.htm>

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First published June 2001. Last update: November 04, 2009

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