

## Topic Page: [Lewin, Kurt \(1890 - 1947\)](#)

Summary Article: **Lewin, Kurt (1890-1947)**

From *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*

Kurt Lewin is remembered as a “practical theorist” and considered the intellectual father of the modern discipline of social psychology. Born in 1890 in a German village that is now part of Poland, Lewin was educated in Germany and served as an infantry soldier during World War I. His experience growing up as a Jew in an authoritarian society rampant with anti-Semitism shaped his view of human behavior and his focus on group processes. Trained in philosophy and experimental psychology, and influenced by the German Gestalt theorists, Lewin did his pioneering work in the development of *field theory*, a framework for understanding human behavior that focuses on how an individual conceptualizes and responds to physical and social environments. Field theory provides a paradigm for understanding and conducting studies of group processes and intergroup relations.

Lewin is known as the practical theorist because he linked the study of applied problems to theory. He saw theory as essential for understanding practical social problems, and he viewed the conduct of empirical studies of applied problems as essential for the development of theory. He was vitally concerned with the central social and political issues of his era, in particular the role of democracy in promoting effective interpersonal relations and group dynamics. His maxim was that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory,” and he was as concerned with the problems faced by world as he was with developing theory to explain human behavior.

### **Lewin's Paradigm Shift in Social Psychology**

Lewin epitomizes Thomas Kuhn's description of a scientific revolutionary. He was acutely aware of the gaps in our understanding of human behavior and our ability to predict and change relations among people. In 1914, shortly after he completed his PhD, World War I began. As his biographer and daughter, Miriam Lewin, has written, he had a “strong revulsion” to militarism, but joined the military and served in an artillery unit. He was seriously wounded and spent nearly a year recovering in a hospital. Although we do not know precisely how his time on the front lines of this conflict between groups affected his outlook, it is not surprising that his subsequent theorizing and empirical studies focused on intergroup relations. His experience was exacerbated by the discrimination he experienced as a Jew, which in 1934 led him to flee Nazi Germany and immigrate to the United States.

No doubt, other psychologists and social theorists were similarly affected by the tumultuous events of the first part of the 20th century. What made Lewin unique and led to his enormous influence on modern thinking about group behavior is that he developed a broad theoretical framework that was linked to experimental methods. In Kuhnian terms, he created a paradigm that enabled us to think differently about human behavior and gave us the tools to study the complexity of social interaction. He was committed to developing psychology as a science but also mindful of the ways in which a science of the mind had to differ from physical science. His lasting contribution was reframing how we think about groups and the relationship of individuals to groups.

### **Lewin's Field Theory**

The fundamental postulate of Lewin's field theory was that human behavior should be understood as a function of the interaction between an individual and his or her psychological understanding of the physical and social environment. He used mathematical symbols to explicate his theory, and summarized

the essence of field theory in this formula:  $B = f(P, E)$ . Behavior ( $B$ ) was broadly construed (including action, thinking, and valuing) and person ( $P$ ) and environment ( $E$ ) were dynamically related. Together, the person and the environment form the *life space*. Understanding the structure and influences on the life space became the focus of Lewin's work.

The mathematical language used by Lewin (which was drawn from topological geometry) has not survived, but his perspective on how behavior is influenced by a person's perception of the environment continues to be a central influence on social psychology and, in particular, on the study of group processes. In its time, his approach was revolutionary and led to a host of discoveries about how human behavior is influenced by culture, education, and small group dynamics. Today, Lewin's approach is well represented in modern cognitive social psychology and in a variety of applications of psychology to group and societal problems.

Lewin's theorizing also spawned new ways of viewing collective behavior. In some ways it was more sociological than psychological, as it led to ascribing to groups the same kind of life space analysis that was used to analyze individual behavior. Thus, a group or institution could be seen not simply as the sum of the individuals or other units who make up the group, but as an entity that could be quite different. Groups could, for example, have their own norms, and the dynamic processes of the group were not necessarily predictable from understanding the life space of individuals.

### **Lewin the Empiricist**

Integral to his theorizing about personenvironment relationships was his commitment and approach to empirical research and, in particular, to experimentation. He pioneered the integration of laboratory and field research. Lewin created a science of studying group behavior that has persisted for more than half a century. He was a master of taking the most complex social phenomena and creating paradigms to study them in simple ways. Two of his research efforts, both conducted after he came to the United States, illustrate his theoretical methodological approach to the study of group processes and dynamics.

In the late 1930s, Lewin and his students conducted a series of studies to investigate the impact of different ways of organizing groups. Initially, his focus was to understand the impact of democratic versus authoritarian group leadership, operationalized in terms of whether the leader engaged the group in decision making or directed them without explanation; later, he studied what he called *laissez-faire* leadership, in which a group was allowed to function without direction from a leader. He studied the problem by conducting a series of experiments in which different leadership styles were tried with groups of young boys. He demonstrated that distinctive "group atmospheres" could be created with each leadership style. The democratic style was the most effective, and the authoritarian style yielded the most aggression among the boys.

In a later program of research, conducted during World War II, he studied ways to change food preferences to mitigate the impact of rationing and food shortages. It began as a study of food habits and "channels" of influence in decision making, and evolved into a series of studies of group decision making. Parallel to his studies of democratic and authoritarian leadership, his food habit studies experimentally compared lecturing and group discussion methods as approaches to changing behavior. Groups of women were exposed to different presentations and discussions of food preferences. He demonstrated that the way in which the group was engaged predicted behavior change. Active involvement in group discussion led to significantly more change in participants than did passive

listening to a lecture.

## Lewin's Action Research

One of Lewin's lasting contributions was his development of *action research*. It was based on his view that social problems should be central to the concerns of psychologists and that, to understand a phenomenon, one had to try to change it. Through action research, he promoted the systematic study of social problems and their solution. He saw it as a spiral process of data collection, theorizing, and assessment. Action research was, for Lewin, rooted in principles of group dynamics. He proposed that change occurred by phases: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. His goals, democratized by engaging researchers and practitioners, were to create knowledge, intervention principles, and support for those who carry out organizational and institutional change. One outcome of this work was the creation of the National Training Laboratory for Group Development (now known as the NTL Institute), dedicated to improving organizational effectiveness and the development of sensitivity training.

## The Legacy of Kurt Lewin

Lewin, through both his theoretical work and his approach to empirical studies of behavior, left a rich legacy. He changed our conception of individual behavior and identified how, while experiences may shape a person, the key to understanding behavior is to understand a person's life space how individuals perceive the world, and how changes in the environment affect their perceptions and behavior. The range of Lewin's work is extraordinary, in terms of both the issues he investigated and his efforts to integrate theory and method. When Kurt Lewin died in 1947, at the age of 57, he headed the MIT Center for Group Dynamics; after his death, the center moved to the University of Michigan. His students and research colleagues went on to become central figures in psychology and applied social science. His legacy is evident today, as it is difficult to view any topic in group processes and dynamics without seeing the influence of Lewinian thinking.

## See also

Action Research, Anti-Semitism, Culture, Group Performance, Group Problem Solving and Decision Making, Minority Groups in Society, Organizations, Research Methods and Issues, Sensitivity Training Groups

## Further Readings

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