KURT LEWIN

A Pioneer in Human Relations Research

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SEVERAL years ago the leading article in *Science* told of two laboratories in a large European city. One of the laboratories was located in a beautiful modern building and had the latest and best of equipment and apparatus. The other was situated in old, badly run down buildings and had limited resources of equipment and apparatus. And yet the first laboratory was producing far less scientifically significant results than the second. The reason for this difference in productivity lay in the difference in leadership. The director of the poorly equipped, yet productive laboratory was filled with a burning curiosity and a contagious enthusiasm for careful research on significant problems. He inspired all those around him and stimulated them to tackle important but difficult research problems. It is not surprising that thinking about Kurt Lewin and his leadership in social-psychological research brought to mind this article.

When one speculates about the relatively slow progress that has been made in developing a science of human relations, there are certain questions that are hard to escape. Psychology, as the science of human behavior, seems to have focused its scientific resources too often on sterile problems and techniques. Numerous examples can be cited of continued and substantial expenditures of time and money for research on problems long after it was clear that such work was unproductive. The problem itself often was so unimportant that to measure its dimensions precisely and to understand it thoroughly yielded little of scientific importance.

Why has this wasteful expenditure of valuable scientific resources occurred while problems of much greater significance have been ignored? It apparently was not due solely to the intellectual curiosity of the researchers and their insistence on doing pure research. The evidence suggests that at least two factors were important. First, certain problems came to have " scientific respectability " and those persons who did painstaking work on these problems were given a crown of scientific glory. Second, the greater prestige enjoyed by the physical and natural sciences caused many researchers in psychology to seek scientific prestige by working on problems where existing methodology permitted precise measurements regardless of whether the problem itself was fundamentally important.

In the past, as at present, it frequently has required real courage for an individual to undertake a program of research on a fundamental problem and to develop his methodology as he proceeds. Usually the first attempts at developing a systematic methodology to permit a quantitative attack on any new problem have been crude and readily open to criticism from those who are hypercritical of the methodology used by others. Nevertheless, many of the great strides in psychology, as in other sciences, have occurred because of the courage and ability of those persons, like Lewin, who recognized the really fundamental problems and then developed the methodology to do important research on these problems.

Unfortunately, few persons had the opportunity to know Kurt Lewin for the full span of his richly productive scientific career. Some of us came to know him well only in recent years, and yet all who knew him had a singular unanimity of feeling about him. Here was an individual who was a great scientist, a great teacher and a great man.

The reasons for his greatness as a scientist have already been intimated. He was a great inspiration to those who had the good fortune of working closely with him. He had the contagious enthusiasm of youth for new and important ideas. He was outstanding in his ability and willingness to recognize the fundamental, theoretical problems of social psychology, in the imagination and courage he used in devising experimental methods of studying them, and in the brilliance with which he devised a theoretical structure to systematize and guide his experimental research. He continuously endeavored to apply quantitative and experimental methods to the problems of human relations and he emphasized at all times the need for an experimental approach to problems.

One of Lewin's great abilities was the way he could cut through minutiae to the core of important problems. He recognized more clearly than his colleagues and students the fundamental motivational forces underlying the processes of leadership and sharply differentiated in his thinking the different kinds of leadership. His approach to the phenomena involved in group behavior will set a pattern for research for years to come.

At times the complexity of the problems being studied and the limited resources he had available permitted only relatively crude measurements. Nevertheless, the theoretical and practical value of the results and the insights they yielded demonstrated the soundness, both of his work and of the fundamental concepts upon which it was based.

Lewin's eagerness to see imaginative research on the basic problems of human relations and his impatience with mediocre work on traditional problems was exemplified in the last meeting he attended. During the session it was suggested that a series of sub-committees be given the responsibility of defining and initiating a program of research. He objected effectively by pointing out that to use committees for such a purpose is likely to lead to unproductive research. Research to be productive must push into the new, the unexplored, the areas recognized only by the occasional research pioneer. To restrict the program to activity approved by a majority would necessarily limit the research to the traditional and unimportant. This very concept may help to explain the sterility of much research that is supported or governed by committee action. There is need for administrators and committees to keep Lewin's point in mind when appropriating research funds if the maximum results are to be obtained from the funds expended. At the same time, it should be mentioned that Lewin believed deeply in the team

approach to research problems. He felt keenly that a group of scientists, *if properly organized and working under the inspiration of a creative mind*, could produce research incomparably better than that possible by a lone worker. The productive working relation which he maintained with his colleagues and students was remarkable because of the balance which he could maintain between individual leadership and group participation in the scientific process.

In light of Lewin's imaginative leadership in research on important developments it is not surprising that one of the last tasks that he was working on with great energy was the formulation of a theoretical statement of motivation which could be used to explain and predict behavior in activities of interest to other social sciences. He was endeavouring to encompass in his theory such activity as economic and political behavior.

No statement about Lewin and his work would be adequate which failed to mention his qualities as a person. There have been few teachers who have been as devoted and loyal to their students. There are few men who are as sincere and generous in their dealings with their fellow men. There are so few genuinely kind persons that it is a real loss to all of us not to have Lewin among us.

If social psychology and more especially the broad field of human relations is to make the progress that is so urgently needed, it is imperative that research in this field be infused with the dynamic spirit that dominated Lewin's work and that he radiated to all those who came close to him. All of us who are concerned about research on human relations must examine the values that dictate the kind of prestige we seek in our own research. Similarly there is need to examine the values that dominate our behavior in granting prestige and recognition to others in this field. If we embrace and emphasize the values that motivated Lewin and share as well his energetic enthusiasm for research on fundamental problems, it is safe to predict that great progress in research will be made in the years that lie ahead. Let us hope that this progress may be fast enough to overtake the lead that the physical sciences have established. Lewin clearly saw that extremely rapid progress, both in research in human relations and its applications, is necessary if we are to enjoy the full benefits that the physical and natural sciences are making possible rather than experience the disaster which threatens.

A MEDICAL TRIBUTE*

ONE of the clearest and simplest formulations of Kurt Lewin was his distinction between the scientific concepts of Aristotle and Galileo. In dynamics Aristotle emphasised the " nature " of the object : he held that a stone fell to the ground because it was " earth " and had therefore to go towards the earth. Galileo, on the other hand, made physicists pay more attention to the object's relation to its environment. According to Aristotelian thought the environment played a part by " disturbing " the processes which followed from the nature of the object concerned; but in Galileian thought it is the concrete whole, which comprises the object and the situation, that determines the dynamics of the event defined: that is to say, an object is always in and part of its environment—an obvious notion, but one with far-reaching implications if taken literally and always applied.

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Its application to medicine is plain. We cannot isolate a person from his environment. When we examine an individual we are also examining a part of a genetic and social field at the same time, if our ways of thought are thorough. When a patient comes to us our training leads us to see an object with an extension in time: It begins as a speck smaller than a pin's head, and ends some day as a life-size corpse. That speck grows by reason of forces in the cell and in the tissues in which it is embedded; that embryo, that child, develops through adolescence to adulthood and withers in old age; we see on examination at any one time a small slice in that long history, but we also see one event which displays the interaction of forces within the organism and of those outside it—and the knowledge of both are necessary for the understanding of that event before us, the patient in the consulting room.

Our work requires that we " take a history," but in making our investigation, in so far as we use the methods of science, our mode of thought is a-historical: in other words, we consider exhaustively what is happening here and now, what is observable here and now, how we might by laboratory or other techniques extend our knowledge of the events occurring here and now. We do not, in so far as we are scientists, think of the patient as belonging to a " type," as Aristotle would have done, but as a product of forces operating in an inter-connected set of fields, which (to use Lewin's term) is to employ a Galileian mode of thought. This does not deny us the right to use intuition or " hunches " or any other process of thought, including a " feeling for " those historical developments which lead to present events; but the Galileian mode of approach does impel us to check our hunches a-historically, i.e., by the fullest observation of events occurring here and now.

The point of entry into a problem does not necessarily determine its point of emergence. As doctors we know this in our dealing with patients; they come to us for relief from pain (physical and mental) and that is our point of entry into their private world. Our treatment of them, however, is essentially an effort to improve their internal stability and external adaptability—which includes relief from pain. Lewin applied the same principles to social problems. Here the point of entry was some symptom of social unrest, and from that starting point he made a study of social dynamics with the aim of bringing about a stability in the social organisation he was advising. In yielding thus to the demands of " applied science " he did not feel that he was any the less a " pure scientist," for science is a method of thought and of testing ideas, and not an activity that can take place only in a region of social isolation. For Lewin, moreover, there could be no research without therapy, nor therapy without research, and his searching mind has given great help to those who try to assess the forces acting within the individual and within social groups.

KURT LEWIN

Biography

Born at Mogilno, Prussia, September 9, 1890. Died at Newtonville, Massachusetts, February 12, 1947. Educated at the Kaiserin Augusta Gymnasium, Berlin; University of Frieberg; University of Munich; and the University of Berlin, where he received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1914.

KURT LEWIN: BIOGRAPHY—*Continued*

Instructor, University of Berlin, 1922; Asst., Psychol. Inst., Berlin, 1921-26; Professor of Philosophy and Psychology, University of Berlin, 1926-33; Visiting Professor Psychology, Stanford University, 1932-33; Acting Professor of Psychology, Cornell University, 1933-35; Professor of Child Psychology, Child Welfare Research Station, State University of Iowa, 1935-45; Professor of Psychology and Director of the Research Center for Group Dynamics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1945-47. Visiting Professor of Psychology at University of California, 1939, and at Harvard University, 1939-40.

Consultant to the Department of Agriculture, 1942-44; Consultant to the Office of Strategic Services, 1944-45; Chief Consultant to the Commission on Community Interrelations of the American Jewish Congress, 1944-47; Vice-President, Institute of Ethnic Affairs, 1945-47. Member of Advisory Board on Human Relations, Office of Naval Research, Navy Department, 1947; Consultant to U.S. Public Health Service, 1947.

Member of the Council of the International Psychological Association; Honorary member of the French Psychological Society; Member of the American Psychological Association; Chairman of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, 1942-43, member of its governing council, 1939-47; Member of Sigma XI; Member of Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion; Member of Committee on Personality in Relation to Culture of the National Research Council; Member of the Society of Recreation Workers of America; Member of the National Association for the Study of Group Work; Member of the American Sociological Association; Honorary Member of Phi Epsilon Pi; Member of the National Faculty Advisory Committee of Avukah; Starred scientist in American Men of Science, *1938*. Editorial board of the journal *Human Relations*, 1946-47.

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Other Contributors to this Issue

ADAM CURLE

READ History and Anthropology at Oxford. Visited Upper Egypt with Professor Evans Pritchard, who has just taken over the Department of Anthropology at Oxford. In the immediate pre-war years he had field experience in other European areas, and was six years in the Army. His last year in the Army was spent as Research Officer, Civil Resettlement Headquarters, and it was while there that he undertook the investigation which he now reports. He intends to continue his work in this field, mainly by extending his study of the subject matter of his present paper so that it will become an examination of the origin, development and functions, both social and psychological, of norms of behavior. He hopes shortly to undertake further field investigations in communities in the British Isles.

THEODORE NEWCOMB

Theodore M. Newcomb is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan. He is a graduate of Oberlin College and received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Columbia University. During the recent war he was associated with the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service, the Division of Program Surveys, and the Office of Strategic Services. Dr. Newcomb is the author of numerous publications in the field of social psychology, his most recent being a book entitled " Personality and Social Change " (Dryden: New York, 1943). He has long been active in professional organizations, holding among other offices the Chairmanship of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues for the year 1946.

D. W. WINNICOTT

Dr. Winnicott took a master's degree in Arts at Cambridge and later qualified in Medicine. He has the double qualification of being a formal pediatrician—he is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians—as well as Director of the Child Department of the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London. He is author of *Clinical Notes on Disorders of Children* and many articles on allied educational and other problems. In his department at Paddington Green Children's Hospital it is possible to see in operation pediatric techniques for helping parents and children, which integrate routine clinical and psychoanalytic concepts.

CLARE BRITTON

Miss Britton is a Psychiatric Social Worker who qualified at the London School of Economics, and has in addition a background which comes from a personal experience of psychoanalysis. When the wartime Children's Hostels Scheme, described in this issue, came to an end, she joined the National Association for Mental Health, and is at present in charge of the design and running of training courses for the staff of statutory homes for children.

COMMISSION ON COMMUNITY INTERRELATIONS

The Commission on Community Interrelations was established in 1944 by the American Jewish Congress to serve as an " action-research " agency in the field of inter-group relations. Its staff is composed of experts in various branches of the social sciences and in group work. Since its foundation it has conducted a number of intensive investigations concerning the phenomenon of anti-Semitism and the effectiveness of various measures designed to control its development and spread. Directing the work of the Commission is Dr. Stuart W. Cook, a psychologist trained at the University of Minnesota.

PEARL KING

Miss King graduated in Psychology from Bedford College, University of London, in 1941, trained—briefly—for personnel management, and spent the next 2½ years in that type of work in war industries. In 1944 a firm of industrial consultants endowed research in methods of industrial training and she undertook work in this field. Later still, she became attached to the Medical Research Council Building Research Unit, which is concerned with training problems of the building industry and is now attached to the Department of Professor C. A. Mace, Birkbeck College, University of London. The problem of training " linkers " discussed in her paper, arose in the work and planning of an industrial firm with whom she had been concerned.