Kurt Lewin: Organizational Change

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Jeffrey Muldoon

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Abstract

I cover the life, career, and contributions of the German-born and trained psychologist Kurt Lewin, whose primary contribution to management thought was describing the process of organizational change. I argue that Lewin, despite the time in which he lived, was a deeply committed idealist and democrat. I argue that these values permeated his work. The merits and weaknesses of his work are discussed.

Keywords

Lewin · Organizational change · Taylor · Mayo

Kurt Lewin was a natural-born democrat both in his private and professional life (Marrow 1969). Democracy was an article of faith and scientific fact to Lewin. He believed that democratic societies would, in the end, overcome autocratic societies.

J. Muldoon (✉)
Emporia State University, Emporia, KS, USA
e-mail: jmuldoon@emporia.edu

This was not a popular viewpoint during his lifetime. His native Germany elected Adolf Hitler as Chancellor in 1933 despite his avowed totalitarian views. Even in the United States and Great Britain, there were those who no longer believed in democracy – preferring various types of authoritarian arrangements (fascism, communism, etc.). Lewin was born in 1890 at a time where humanities' hope in progress remained high; he died in 1947, after 30 years of bloodshed and destruction with the potential of more to come. Yet, despite the bloodshed (even within his own family), Lewin still believed in democracy (Lewin 1992).

Lewin never stopped believing that man was inherently good (Bargal et al. 1992). The idea that people can change their attitudes based on interventions indicates that prejudice and hatred were less the products of man's depravity but rather the circumstances that man found himself in. This was another bold belief since Lewin's native Germany had gone from a constitutional monarchy to a totalitarian society. Many of his contemporaries, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Hannah Ardent, and Daniel Bell, were convinced of man's rotten core (Brinkley 1998). Even professed liberals, like Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., felt the need to temper their liberalism with a more hard edged, skeptical view of human nature (Schlesinger 2000). Yet Lewin, despite his family loses in the Holocaust, believed that, through science, man would overcome the limitations of hatred and prejudice. Much like Frederick Winslow Taylor and Andrew Ure, Lewin was an optimist (Burnes and Bargal 2017).

After his death, Lewin was recognized as eminent a psychologist as Sigmund Freund – a bit of an overstatement to be sure – but he was still ranked 18th most influential psychologist of the twentieth century (Marrow 1969; Haggbloom et al. 2002). A remarkable feat is Lewin was consistently an outsider during his life – a Jew in Germany and a German Jewish refugee in America – among professors he was viewed as too practical, and among businessmen, he was considered to be too theoretical (Lewin 1992). Even his academic appointments in the United States were marginal – he was not in the psychology department at Cornell, but home economics – at the University of Iowa, he was at the childhood welfare department. Yet he was still able to attract a legion of top flight graduate students everywhere he went (Weisbord 2004).

Despite his career struggles, Lewin had a tremendous faith in science, not just science in terms of traditional science, such as chemistry and physics, but also psychology, then a field that was just an offshoot of philosophy. Yet there was little belief in psychology that issues such as emotions, attitudes, and other latent variables could be researched – making scholars doubt that rigor of the field. Lewin changed that perception – leaving contributions in a wide variety of fields from his home in social psychology to child psychology to leadership studies and management (Lewin 1992). Lewin was not only a theorist, but he was also an empiricist – validating his theories through painstaking research in laboratory experiments. His contributions in management have focused on organization and development. Lewin receives a high, but not universal, level of praise. Despite his works being published over 70 years ago, Lewin still casts a vast shadow on his work on how to initiate change, even with the criticisms that occurred over the years. Lewin's work and name are known to even undergraduate students. Yet some scholars have not

regarded him highly. For instance, in his 1974 work on management, Peter Drucker does not mention Lewin (Drucker 1973). This should not be taken as a deep dig at Lewin personally. Management scholars have had a difficult time demonstrating who is and who is not considered a management scholar (Muldoon et al. 2018). Scholars, such as Lewin, who wrote from a different field sometimes do not receive the recognition they are warranted. Yet despite the silence from Drucker and others, most management scholars acknowledge the deep debt the field has toward Lewin. As Hendry (1996: 624) wrote:

> Scratch any account of creating and managing change and the idea that change is a three-stage process which necessarily begins with a process of unfreezing will not be far below the surface.

In fact, some scholars such as Burnes (2004a, b) argue that we should revisit Lewin's ideas again to improve the ethical performance of management.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the contribution of Kurt Lewin to management thought. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section is a brief biography of Lewin where it covers his early life and career to his emergence as a notable social psychologist. The second section will examine the various contributions that Lewin made to management. Like Burnes, we argue that the three-step approach is complementary. The third section of the paper covers Lewin's relationship with other management thinkers, including Chris Argyris, Frederick Taylor, and Elton Mayo. The fourth section of the paper covers the various criticisms that have been leveled on the work of Lewin.

Biography

Kurt Lewin was born in 1890 in the Prussia province of Posen – now part of Poland – to Leopold and Recha Lewin. The village in which Lewin grew up was part of a very hierarchical society with aristocrats on top and Jews, like the Lewin family, at the bottom. As Miriam Lewin (1992) wrote "no Jew could become an officer in the military, obtain a position in the social service, or own a farm." Yet the Lewin family was well-regarded within the Jewish community and was relatively well-off. The family owned a store and a family farm (although the farm was legally under a Christian's name). Lewin was also blessed in that both parents stressed education. Leopold spoke Polish, Yiddish, and German and possessed a high school education. Lewin got his democratic notions from his family and from his surrounding environment. His family may have been a top Jewish family, but they were still considered second class citizens. Lewin was not pretentious in his dealings with people – this was a trait that he picked up from his father. From both of his parents, Lewin also developed a sympathetic understanding of the downtrodden. These traits would enable him to become an excellent mentor to his students (Marrow 1969).

When Lewin was 15, the family moved to Berlin so the children could receive a better education. Lewin was trained in the classics: mathematics, history, natural

science, Latin, Greek, and French. Lewin received good grades and started at the University of Freiburg to study medicine. He later transferred to the University of Munich. It was at Munich where Lewin took his first class in psychology. Lewin then transferred to the University of Berlin, where he continued his courses in medicine until he realized he hated dissection. He then switched to philosophy (which was then part of philosophy) taking a wide range of courses. One of the primary intellectual influences of Lewin was the work of Immanuel Kant, one of the fathers of German idealism (Lewin 1992). Kant differed from other idealist philosophers, however, in emphasizing how social change can be enacted through the use of one's reason. As he indicated in his 1784 study, *What is Enlightenment?*, Kant (1784: 1) believed that the first toward social enlightenment begins with personal enlightenment and the freeing of one's self from "self-incurred tutelage." This framework would become a major intellectual influence on Lewin, encouraging him that hatred and prejudice could be overcome through science and education.

Lewin's primary professor (and future dissertation advisor) was Carl Stumpf, one of the leading figures in psychology. In the department, Stumpf hired three stars of psychology: Max Wertheimer, Karl Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler. Stumpf also supported Gestalt psychology; his students Koffka and Kohler were the founding fathers. Gestalt psychology sought to research how perceptions emerge in chaos. The basis of this research was gained through laboratory analysis – to make psychology distinct from philosophy. Lewin and his professors were determined to demonstrate that research topics, such as group dynamics and social climate were compatible with scientific inquiry used in the natural sciences (Lewin 1977). Miriam Lewin (1992) noted that although American psychologists shared the same ends as Lewin did, there was a difference. For an American scholar, a commitment to rigor was only superficial; for Lewin it was a driving orientation to explore the inner logic of psychology.

Lewin wrote his dissertation under the direction of Stumpf, but it was a distant relationship, at best. He did not talk about his dissertation with Stumpf until the day of the defense. As Lewin and others have noted, this was not the behavior he would display when he became an advisor. In fact, he was the opposite. He was dynamic, engaged with his students, and in the process attracted many students, both in Germany and then later in the United States. Among his students were Bluma Zeigarnik, Jerome Frank, Donald Adams, Anitra Karsten, Ronald Lippett, Leon Festinger, Alfred Morrow, and John Thibaut (Marrow 1969; Weisbord 2004). Many of his doctoral students would become leaders in psychology. Festinger would become one of the preeminent social psychologists of his time. Lewin also directly influence Chris Argyris, who, although he was not a student of Lewin, was someone who was deeply influenced. Lewin convinced Eric Trist to abandon English Literature to become a psychologist. His conversation with Trist was so stimulating that Lewin needed to be forced onto his departing train. He also influenced Philip Zimbardo and Stanley Milgram.

The primary guiding virtue for Lewin was tolerance, whether it was another's opinion or their personal limitations. Lewin did not demand intellectual conformity from his students. During his famous study on leadership, one of his assistants,

Ralph White, made a mistake when providing directions. According to Wolf (1996):

> This was something between Kurt and Lippitt [Ron Lippitt]. The plan was to have two styles of leadership – democratic and autocratic – and they set up the experiment for these two styles. Ralph White is a very quiet man – in many ways the opposite of Lippitt. Lippitt came from Boy Scouts and from group work with youngsters, and was really tremendously helpful. I don't think Kurt could ever have done those experiments without him. Ralph White was supposed to be the democratic leader. Ralph is very quiet, and I don't think he ever had much experience with kids. When his group was discussed, Ronald Lippitt said 'that isn't democratic leadership. That is laissez-faire.' This was the typical way of Kurt's working with graduate students. He didn't throw anything out just because it wasn't planned that way. Kurt said 'okay, we'll make a third group. A laissez-faire group.'

The only thing that Lewin was not tolerant of was totalitarian beliefs or destructive behaviors. Lewin, however, was not a radical. He rejected Marxism because he believed that it did not have an empirical basis. Instead, he sought to reform society by developing better techniques. Lewin's attitude toward Marxism was similar to many American intellectuals at the time. Yet many of his comemporaires embraced destructive ideologies during the tumultuous events of the early twentieth century. Lewin himself lived through dark times, including combat experience in World War I, where he was wounded and a brother lost. Returning to university after recovering from his wounds, Lewin found refuge in his work, becoming more convinced for the need for science to promote solutions to societal problems. Lewin continued to work during the horrors of the war and also contributed a paper to Stumpf's 70th birthday. After the war, Lewin continued his career at Berlin Psychological Institute. In 1922, Lewin became a lecturer, a marginal position where he was paid by how many students he taught (Lewin 1992). Yet despite his heavy teaching loads, he remained a productive and insightful scholar. The rise to power of Hitler, however, threatened even that tenuous foothold in academia. Unlike many other Germans (whether Jewish or not), Lewin quickly grasped the unique evil of Hitler. Hitler soon imposed his anti-Semitic views on society (Evans 2003). The doctor who had delivered Lewin's children was very hesitant to deliver his next child as Hitler banned Jews from attending university (Lewin 1992). Lewin did not want to teach at a university where his children could not attend. He decamped to the home economics department at Cornell, thanks to the efforts of Ethel Warring. After a few years, Lewin left for the University of Iowa, where Lewin may have been at his happiest. Lewin created an agricultural-based community like the one he had grown up in. He attracted a wide range of brilliant students and visiting colleagues, such as Margaret Mead. Lewin loved to hold informal picnics where people could sing, play, and talk about psychology. It was during this time that Lewin was perhaps his most productive as well (Marrow 1969).

The Second World War and its resulting destruction provided a further incentive for Lewin to look to democratic solutions for societal problems. His study of leadership, conducted with White and Lippett (Lewin et al. 1939), convinced him that the "interdependence of fate" rather than similarity was key to fighting

prejudice. This viewpoint enabled him to come to two major conclusions. The first one, according to his daughter, was that the Jewish community needed to act as one, regardless of their differences in class, nationality, or religious outlook. The second conclusion was that proper leadership and experience can enable individuals to overcome bias and prejudice. However, all was not well in Lewin's world, the Holocaust consuming some of his family members, including his mother, and effectively destroying the German Jewish community.

Lewin left Iowa after he formed the "Research Center for Group Dynamics," a group at the cutting edge of action research which linked advanced theoretical academic research to social solutions (Weisbord 2004). During this time, Lewin was committed to doing both industrial research as well as research on prejudice. He also produced some very original research and published in the first editions of *Human Relations*, work which would stand as his major contribution to management. Lewin died in 1947 at the age of only 57, in the midst of things, overworked by his research agenda as well as his role as director for the "Research Center." Lewin left a major legacy and his influence continues to shine to this day. Very little research conducted these days is as practical as Lewin's work (Burnes 2009a). Today, management scholars wonder how much impact and relevance we have in management. The answer to this question is not much. If management wishes to remain a respected field, it must devote more energy to solving practical problems – in other words, take up Lewin's standard.

Lewin's Contribution to Management

Lewin left a deep impression on the field of management despite the fact that he was a social psychologist and not from the management field. He was almost the only early German psychologists who had an interest in management. Miriam Lewin (Papanek 1973) stated that Lewin made the following contributions:

> 1. the concepts of field theory, 2. action research (the interweaving of laboratory experiment, systematic research in the field, and client service), 3. the study of group dynamics, and 4. aspects of sensitivity training techniques. His ideas appear today in discussions of productivity, management by participation, job enrichment, organizational development, organizational stress, and organizational change.

William Wolf (1973) viewed Lewin's most significant contributions to be tracking the process of organization change and helping to develop some rudimentary understanding of open systems. Wolf also stated that Lewin had a direct influence on the work of Chester Barnard. Miriam Lewin stated that Lewin's biggest contribution was in the development group dynamics (Papanek 1973). Yet it is Lewin's refreezing/freezing framework that is still widely cited and influential. Even though we may have moved past Lewin's work, it still remains something that scholars need to grapple with. However, like Burnes, I would suggest that the unfreezing framework is an outcome of Lewin's other ideas such as leadership and force field

analysis. The next section of this chapter will document Lewin's work, the various recent studies influenced by it, and his relationship to other management thinkers.

Lewin's greatest contribution to management was his unfreezing/refreezing framework. However, we must consider, as did many of the people who knew, that there was great similarity to his work. Each of his theories was designed to produce some change, to create a more diverse, less discriminating society. As Lewin's widow wrote:

> Kurt Lewin was so constantly and predominantly preoccupied with the task of advancing the conceptual representation of the social-psychological world, and at the same time he was so filled with the urgent desire to use his theoretical insight for the building of a better world, that it is difficult to decide which of these two sources of motivation flowed with greater energy or vigour. (Lewin 1948b)

As Burnes (2004b, 2009a) has written, Lewin was a humanitarian who believed that using social science to reduce social conflict would produce a better world. Burnes (2009) agrees with both Lewin and his wife in noting the overall thematic coherence of Lewin's work, a coherence that saw each theme reinforce each other to produce relevant change within the group, organization, or society (Burnes and Bargal 2017).

In many minds, Lewin's contribution to management thought is forever associated with force field analysis. Force field analysis is an attempt to understand behavior by understanding the total forces that influence a behavior through the use of maps to understand the interaction and complexity of the forces behind the behavior (Lewin 1943). Lewin noted that status quo is maintained through an interplay between these forces. The key to understanding behaviors would be the relationship between the person and the environment in which they find themselves. For example, if a person is currently a smoker, whether they maintain or stop smoking will be an interplay between driving forces and restraining forces (Weisbrod 2004). A driving force that would stop a person from smoking could potentially be the cost of smoking, fear of cancer, or social pressure. The driving forces are those forces that would encourage a person to stop smoking. Yet these forces would face restraining forces, which would encourage the person to continue the current practice. Habit, for instance, would be a restraining force that would encourage people to continue smoking.

Lewin's work on force field analysis provides an early example that change will come only slowly due to the restraining forces within the organization. As Burnes (2004, pg. 982) has written:

> forces would need to be diminished or strengthened in order to bring about change. In the main, Lewin saw behavioural change as a slow process; however, he did recognize that under circumstances, such as a personal, organizational or societal crisis, the various forces in the field can shift quickly and radically.

The principal takeaway from force field analysis is that behavior is a function between the person and the environment or B $= f$(P, E) (Sansone et al. 2003). An individual may have certain desires and wishes, but they can be constrained or

encouraged by environmental factors. Another important consideration is that people do not make decisions on just past outcomes, but current desires as well. Often, routines are created and maintained due to the fact that the need for change is insufficiently enforced. Force field analysis remains arguably the most poorly understood part of Lewin's work. Nevertheless, several organizational change theorists have considered this approach in their work.

Group dynamics is another major contribution Lewin made to management (Lewin 1947). One of its basic referents is Lewin's equation about behavior. Several scholars (including Allport & Burnes) have noted that Lewin was one of the first scholars to write about group dynamics. According to Lewin, what determines a group is the interdependence of fate, namely, the idea that people in the group will share the same outcome. This idea explains why the difference in status or personality does not matter, a conceptualization that reflects Lewin's personal past as a Jewish refugee from Germany, where Jews were hunted down and murdered regardless of education or past service to the nation. As Kippenberger (1998a, b) noted, Lewin's interest in groups was also underpinned by his desire to understand the forces that cause groups to behave in a particular direction. Lewin went further in arguing that there was little point in attempting to change individual behavior. If behavior needs to be changed, it needs to occur at the group level. Scholars today are somewhat more skeptical of Lewin's analysis (Burnes 2009a). Oftentimes, the reason why a group exhibits similar behavior is that the people who are attracted to the group are often very similar. For example, if we take a personality score of accountants, we would probably discern similarities, namely, attention to detail and order. The interdependence here would not be of fate or outcome but similar interests, desires, and wants. Nevertheless, applied to change within an organization, we need to consider the roles that groups play.

Lewin recognized that while he had the basics, he needed more thorough and practical measures to lead to meaningful change. Two notable outcomes of Lewin's practical approach would become action theory and the three-step change approach (also called the unfreezing/refreezing framework). What is particularly noteworthy is that Lewin developed these ideas to answer the needs of various organizations that were seeking his help. This first approach is action theory. According to Burnes (2004: 983), action theory is designed to answer two major needs:

> Firstly, it emphasizes that change requires action, and is directed at achieving this. Secondly, it recognizes that successful action is based on analyzing the situation correctly, identifying all the possible alternative solutions and choosing the one most appropriate to the situation at hand.

The primary need to change is driven by the person's inner recognition that change is needed. Without this desire, the restraining forces maintain their hold over the individual. A key aspect of this change process reflects Lewin's Gestalt psychology background, which emphasized how we should make the person consider the totality of the situation.

This idea that we should consider the total role of change is one of the reasons why Lewin and others claimed that if we wish to change organization, we must understand the entirety of the situation. In this framework – which emphasizes both social forces and the interplay of groups – we see that action research is based on Lewin's complete ideas (Weisbord 2004). Lewin also understood that routines and patterns have value because they encourage group norms. Therefore, if we wish to enforce change, we need to consider changing routines and patterns. The major thrust of action research is learning. Often referred to as Lewin's spiral, Lewin's model is a course of planning, learning, and fact-finding. Lewin's work in action research was initially conducted with the Italian and Jewish street gangs in American cities to reduce their violence. Action research was later adopted by the British Tavistock Institute to aid with the nationalization of mines in that country (Weisbord 2004). Lewin recognized that for change to become permanent, the intervention is needed to support the permanence so that it was not a fleeting thing.

Force field analysis, action research, and group dynamics lead up to Lewin's greatest management accomplishment – the unfreezing/refreezing framework (Lewin 1947). There are two important considerations about this framework (Weisbord 2004). Firstly, Lewin meant to use it as a complement to his previous work. Secondly, he developed this framework for organizations that were not just business in nature, i.e., community organizations, government departments, etc. The unfreezing, change intervention, and freezing framework have their basics in force field analysis. Attitudes and behaviors are either changed or kept through the interplay of various forces that an individual faces. Force field analysis has its connection to group dynamics in that it considers how group interplay can influence a person's behavior and adoption of change. It also has its connection to action research in that it considers the totality of the situation.

The first step of the process is the unfreezing phase. Lewin recognized that for people to embrace change, they must begin to challenge the status quo. This status quo is kept at near equilibrium due to an interaction of forces on the individual. If there is to be change, there must be an action to disrupt the equilibrium. In essence, to use the analogy of freezing, at the first step, values and beliefs have been frozen by a series of forces. How an unfreezing takes place can come in multiple ways due to each situation having a distinct interplay of forces. Oftentimes, emotional appeals can produce fear or pride that can lead people to change the status quo. When either politicians or managers seek something different, there is an emotional appeal as part of getting other people to consider new things. When in 1947 Harry S. Truman launched America's involvement in European affairs to contain the Soviet Union, it had been recommended to him that he scare the American people (Hamby 1995).

Lewin recognized that unfreezing was not an end in and of itself. Once people are open to change, there must be change intervention to change behaviors and attitudes. At best unfreezing can get people to consider change. During a change intervention phase, learning new behaviors should take place. This phase of change considers the notions of training, explanation, and championing of new behaviors. Recent suggestions, regarding change intervention, are the need to establish small wins or minor victories to encourage adoption of new roles by making the task seem less

daunting (Wieck 1984). During this phase of the process, people understand that change is occurring but remain uncertain what the final step will be. The final phase of change is refreezing which is to arrange these new behaviors and attitudes in a new equilibrium. In another words, it is to make sure that people within the organization truly adopt the new ideas. In the words of Burnes:

> ….. degree, congruent with the rest of the behaviour, personality and environment of the learner or it will simply lead to a new round of disconfirmation (Schein 1996). This is why Lewin saw successful change as a group activity, because unless group norms and routines are also transformed, changes to individual behaviour will not be sustained.

In other words, when producing change within an organization, the people directing it must be careful not to stop the change intervention too soon. Rather they need to produce force fields to maintain these new ideas. This explains why, according to Lewin, change is very difficult to perform (Weisbord 2004). Thus, Lewin performed two distinct approaches to change. The first was to provide, through force field analysis and group dynamics, an explanation as to why values remain secure. Once we understand the forces that keep beliefs and behaviors steady, we can then break the forces that hold. This occurs through action research and its idea of education. Lewin also suggested that we need to create new forces to sustain the new beliefs.

Although not directly related to his work on change, Lewin's work on leadership, along with Lippett and White (1943), warrants consideration in this chapter for the reason that leadership is an important part of organizational change. Lewin and his co-authors argued that there are three types of leadership. The first is authoritarian leadership where the leader determines policy and sets tasks. This leader uses hostility and coercion to ensure individual cooperation. This type of leadership is not desirable becomes it causes discord and anguish in members in the group. Members often attack fellow members when the leader is not there. The second type is laissez-faire leadership whereby the leader does not provide any information and support. This type of leadership is also associated with poor outcomes. In the third type, democratic leadership, the leader creates an environment allows for choice and determination on the part of people in the group to make decisions. In addition, leaders show concern for members within the group as well as provide explanations as to why they are performing certain behaviors. In democratic leadership, we see higher performance, greater acceptance of leader's direction, and less destructive behavior.

I would argue that during the three-step approach to organizational change, it is a democratic leadership style in action. Namely, the leader in the three-step approach provides direction, explanations for why the change is occurring, gets feedback for the subordinates, and allows for both the leader and follower to work together to promote the change. This type of leadership style typically reduces the fields that impede the need to change, impediments that include politics, obstruction, and a lack of understanding. Over the years, scholars have reaffirmed such findings in relation to the important role of democratic leadership in both change and politics within the organization, thereby confirming the important role of leadership in organizational change.

Lewin and Other Management Thinkers

One of Lewin's first published articles was a criticism of Frederick Winslow Taylor. The criticism was so harsh that Marvin Weisbrod (2004) viewed Lewin as Taylor's antithesis. Lewin criticized Taylorism for not having much appreciation of intrinsic motivation. Lewin believed that job design that created boredom and reduced learning opportunities was one that denied the "life value" of work. Such designs diminished, rather than enabled, human aspirations. Weisbrod noted that, unlike Taylor – where the focus was on industrial engineers making decisions – Lewin sought real partnership between workers and managers in an environment where shared decisions were made in relation to conditions at work. Although Taylor did concede that workers and management should share decisions, it was often the reverse. Lewin was one of the first to recognize what we crave job satisfaction and psychological empowerment.

Several scholars, including Weisbrod, have argued that Lewin was a more democratic and enlightened version of Taylor. It should be noted, however, that democratic values are themselves normative and do not always fit. In fact, shared governance need not be democratic but should merely consider voices. Taylor was not a dictator (Nyland 1998). Rather, he believed that science should be the guide to behavior rather than democracy or dictatorship. Taylor noted that much of what workers and managers knew was based on faulty information. Therefore, a radical orientation of perspective was required of both workers and managers. Taylor also stressed that there should be a partnership between management and the worker. At his core, Taylor wanted to free workers from the tyranny of poor management (Locke 1982). Taylor also understood social motivation. Lewin's contribution was similar to Mayo encouraging scholars to consider social motivations in depth.

Elton Mayo and Kurt Lewin both deserve consideration as important figures in the forming of organizational behavior. There is a strong tendency in the literature to view Elton Mayo as the father of organizational behavior, but such a statement is ahistorical. Moreover, Mayo's work and Lewin's work should both be considered as providers of foundational concepts in organizational behavior. Both men researched roughly similar issues: attitudes, satisfactions, social motivations, and leadership activities (Minor 2002). Mayo's primary insight involved the recognition that the shift to the modern industrial order meant that there was a need to research how to create and maintain spontaneous cooperation (Homans 1949). Future research was needed to make this contribution for Mayo. Lewin's work was, by contrast, clearer and more precise. Lewin was a scholar in a way that the intuitive Mayo could not hope to be. Lewin was also theoretically stronger than Mayo, whose work had a ring of advocacy to it. Lewin hit the right mixture between advocacy and research rigor.

Both Wolf and Minor suggest that it was Lewin who provided the field with real scientific rigor. Minor (2002) goes even further, portraying Lewin up as a paragon of scientific rigor when compared with Mayo, the advocate. Consequently, Minor and Weisbrod are compelled to ask the question: why did Lewin receive little note in the literature as opposed to Mayo? Minor proposes several potential explanations: anti-Semitism and Lewin's liberal views. These explanations fail to consider actual facts.

Firstly, Daniel Bell (1947), who was Jewish, stated that research in organizational behavior (or work-life) commenced with Elton Mayo, but Lewin's research was also recognized. Secondly, Mayo's work was considered conservative and in many of the fields, such as sociology, liberalism reigned. Many sociologists admired Hawthorne and sought something similar but with liberal leanings in their own work (Muldoon 2017). Arguably, the secret of Mayo's success lay in the fact that he codified what people already knew and encouraged scholars to develop understanding as to what made spontaneous cooperation possible at work. Mayo had a cadre of researchers and theorists – including George Homans and Talcott Parsons – seeking to refine the studies or explain them theoretically (Smith 1998). Lewin did have followers, but he did not insist they follow his lead. Nor did he focus his entire research efforts on work life. Mayo, as was Taylor, was a mono-manic in that he focused in on one thing at a time.

There is one clear point of difference between the two men. Mayo was a conservative of an unusual sort. At Harvard, Mayo consorted with some of the most conservative, and even reactionary, members of the faculty, including President A. Lawrence Lowell, Lawrence Henderson, and George Homans (Traihair 1984). When he lived in Australia, he opposed both the election of Labor government and the marked extension of trade union power that occurred during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Mayo was also not unadulterated enthusiast for either the New Deal or attempts to nationalize industries. According to J.H. Smith, Mayo expressed viewpoints that were libertarian in nature – a viewpoint out of step with the professoriate. Mayo viewed the utilitarian viewpoint of the new modern world with skepticism, believing that the primitive world, through ritual, created adaptive societies based on systems of cooperation that looked beyond economic or material gain. For Lewin (and Taylor), the modern world allowed for the development of new ideas and knowledge that could overcome the prejudices and tyrannies of the past. Unlike Mayo, the modern world, despite its horrors, was a place of opportunity for Lewin – where education can be a light.

Chris Argyris (1997) is another scholar that Lewin influenced. Argyris was not, however, a formal student of Lewin. Rather, Argyris met with him during his time as an undergraduate at Clark University. Despite this limited interaction, Lewin would have a deeply profound influence on Argyris, an influence only exceeded by that of Argyris's only mentor, William F. Whyte. According to Argyris, Lewin's influence over his thinking mainly related to the nature of theory. As Argyris wrote:

> I believe that scholars are free to generate any theory about action research that they choose to develop. I also believe that they are not free not to make explicit what they believe are the features of sound theory, Lewin did say, in effect, that there was nothing as practical as sound theory. He defined the properties of any sound theory. I will make some of these properties explicit and illustrate their implications for scholarly consulting.

Argyris provided more functionality to the nature of learning. According to Finger and Asún (2001), "unlike Dewey's, Lewin's or Kolb's learning cycle, where one had, so to speak, to make a mistake and reflect upon it – that is, learn by trial and

error – it is now possible thanks to Argyris and Schön's conceptualization, to learn by simply reflecting critically upon the theory-in-action."

Two social psychologists, Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo, were also influenced by Kurt Lewin (Zimbardo 2016). Whereas Lewin sought to understand what factors encourage people to become more democratic and ethical, Milgram and Zimbardo researched circumstances that cause people to operate on an undemocratic and/or unethical basis. Zimbardo's study of prisons provided an overview that in prison circumstances both guards and prisoners adopt the roles that are assigned to them. Therefore, prisons are bad places, not because of the people involved but the circumstances involved. Although Zimbardo noted that his work carried on Lewin's understandings of behavior, the reality was that both Milgram and Zimbardo demonstrated that there are circumstances that cause a person to act in ways that eliminate the previous self. An interesting difference between Lewin and Zimbardo/Milgram is that Lewin, despite being persecuted and seeing members of his family murdered, remained optimistic about humanity. By contrast, Zimbardo/Milgram, members of the American meritocracy, and in a much more democratic and humane country (although far from perfect), had grave doubts about humanity's good nature.

Criticism

Like other prominent scholars, Lewin's work has come under attack by others over the years. The most serious charge labeled against Lewin is that his research is too simplistic to have real value for scholars and practitioners (Burnes 2004). Lewin's approach to change can be placed within the classical school of management, a school which believes that there are only a handful of goals that really matter to business (namely, profit-making) and that managers can plan and determine what types of techniques and interventions they wish to use. In addition, managers possess complete information and have clarity of goals. Lewin's work does share assumptions with classical management, albeit imperfectly. Lewin nevertheless understood, unlike others in the school, that workers can block and overcome managerial dictates. Lewin's framework was, moreover, for all organizations: not just for-profit corporations. Yet the same idealistic vein of information and rationality flows from Lewin's work. Lewin's force field analysis assumes that all forces can be considered as well as their direct proportion to each other. There is also an assumption that individuals can change their viewpoint – all they need is additional information and aid from others. Few scholars in strategy or organizational behavior believe these assumptions today (Whittington 2001).

Some of the major challenges to Lewin have come from evolutionary economics and the processual school of management (Whittington 2001). Both of these schools of thought have consistently challenged the underlying assumptions of the three-step process. Economists have long believed that managerial action is less important than environmental fit. Usually industries go through set patterns of change. A new industry is discovered, various companies enter into the field, there is fierce

competition, and then in the end, there are only a few surviving companies. Only fit companies will survive. Evolutionary economists believe that there is little managers can do to anticipate where the next change in the market will occur. Therefore, there is little a manager can do in the face of industry evolution. Managers can only control some part of the information in the market – prices and resources vary and fluctuate at random. Some companies become so large that they could actually pick the market they wish to function in. Nevertheless, such companies are rare. A company that sold buggy whips would have gone out of business when the car became popular – there was little they could do in the face of this new technology. They lacked the expertise and resources to compete in the new market. Once buggy whip manufactures realized that the car was here to stay, there were on their way to obsolesce. Chester Barnard (1938), although not traditional considered an evolutionist, recognized that all firms will eventually die. Barnard recognized that forces in the firm, the zone of indifference, make it difficult for change to occur. The constant turnover in companies that make the Dow Jones composite bears this out.

Andrew Pettigrew, the father of the processional school of management (Pettigrew 1987, 1997), has been a noted critic of Lewin's work. The processual school of management does not focus on a single outcome such as profit sharing. Nor does it believe that managers' actions are predetermined. Instead, it highlights how any given managerial action can have multiple outcomes, outcomes that often only make sense afterward. The assumptions that Pettigrew employs come from the Carnegie school (Whittington 2001), which states that individuals are bounded rational – meaning that they lack perfect information. Behaviors tend to become entrenched within the company because routines and standard operating procedures are often resistant to change due to political forces within the company. In fact, strategy creation is often a process managers use to reduce the uncertainty the company faces – akin to ducking under the desk when a nuclear bomb attack occurs. It provides a sense of control – but it does not really work. In fact, some companies actually come up with the solution and then search for the problem – a very different viewpoint to that of Lewin.

Despite such criticisms, we can conclude that Lewin's work was neither simplistic nor wrong; rather it was incomplete. Lewin's work is on firm ground when it examines the ways in which the various forces aligned within an organization can use politics or other techniques to resist managerial leadership within an organization. Lewin was correct when he asserted that certain types of change can be planned and then implemented. For instance, when a firm decides to implement a new recommendation from the government, it would use techniques similar to those that Lewin recommended. Yet Lewin's views are also incomplete. It seems that there are types of change that cannot be planned or prepared for. When they occur, there is little managers can do to prevent the destruction of their firm. Lewin's framework suggests that change is a one-time moment; dynamic capabilities literature suggests change cannot be a one-time moment to the evolutionary nature of the market, which makes continuous change a necessity (Teece et al. 1997). However, this criticism needs to be tempered with the work of Burnes (2004), who argued that Lewin's work can lead to continuous change. Rather, firms should align their recourse to be consistently learning and absorbing new information.

Lewin's famous thesis is that behavior is a function that results from the individual interacting with the environment or B = f(P, E). One of the most famous criticisms was issued by Benjamin Schneider (1987), who argued that environments were a function of people behaving in them or E = f{P, B]. Schneider's framework would become known as the attraction-selection-attrition model. Schneider argues that people are attracted to organizations based on a convergence of needs, selected by the organization based on perceived similarity, and those who do not fit well leave the organization. Schneider's basic point is that some people are hardwired to act a particular way. Interventions to change people's dispositions are limited. If an organization wishes to change, the implication is that it must bring in new workers and ideas. People are bigoted, sometimes not because of their environment or education or experience, but because they are, at root, the people that they are. The ASA model also suggests that people are more likely to be attracted to people who are similar to them. The idea of "shared experience" often fails in comparison with ethnic differences, belief systems, and personality differences. Research conducted both in management and elsewhere indicates that trust is something that emerges from institutions. Countries and groups characterized by high levels of diversity often have serious problems with trust. This indicates the world is more provincial and divided than Lewin thought.

Yet recent work theorizing in personality research indicates that people and their environment interact with each other. This theory, called trait activation theory, argues that task, social, and organizational cues can activate or, in certain aspects, deactivate traits (Tett and Burnett 2003). For example, scholars found that Machiavellianism, a personality trait that focuses on obtaining outcomes – either ethically or otherwise – was activated under abusive supervision (Greenbaum et al. 2017). Tett and Guterman (2000) found that personality traits would be activated if they found relevant cues. Kamdar and Van Dyne found that strong social exchange relationships can eliminate personality traits, such as conscientiousness and agreeableness. Likewise, some negative traits, such as neuroticism, can be overcome through positive relationships. It is possible, applying this framework to organizational change, that some personality types (conscientiousness and agreeableness) will be activated during a period of organizational change. This suggests a move back to some Lewinian concepts rather than the attraction-selection-attrition framework. Even such ardent personality researchers as Barrick and Mount propose that situational and personality interaction is perhaps more important than simple personality in the workforce.

One point needs to be made on Lewin's work versus the work that is conducted today. It is true that Lewin's work was simplistic in comparison of what has come to be. But his work still shines a deep light on a wide variety of topics in change management. The reverse could be claimed today as well: management research is too abstract and abstruse to provide managers with anything meaningful to properly run businesses. What advice we do offer is often basic knowledge, common sense, trivial, or legally suspect. We recommend that managers select on intelligence without really considering that such advice is legally circumspect. The field of management has lost its impact on practitioners.

It is surprising given Lewin's degree of fame and influence and that he has received little in the way of criticism. This finding bears an interesting comparison with Henry

Ford, Elton Mayo, Frederick Winslow Taylor, and Robert Owen, whose reputations appear to often wax and wane in historical circumstances. Lewin is still well considered even if he is not given full credit for his work. Several explanations for this research finding are as follows: one, Lewin was an exceptional man and scholar, whose rigor and pleasantness avoided negative feelings, and the second explanation is that Lewin's students helped to maintain his legacy. Nevertheless, Lewin still made certain mistakes that warrant examination in the little of recent research.

Conclusion

Lewin left a deep and lasting record on the field of management and psychology. He worked at a time when scholars were not bounded by profession nor blind to the problems of society. Despite the destruction of the old order, it was still possible for someone born during this time to remain confident about the ability of science, especially social science, to provide a new path for a better society. Yet Lewin's faith in both knowledge and humanity was a remarkable flame, one that was not extinguished by war, genocide, hatred, or economic depression. During Lewin's life, the fields of psychology, sociology, or management were launched and gained respect in the academic world, as well as business and government. No longer would bureaucrats and executives make decisions blindly, they would do so based on knowledge, verified through experiments.

Lewin was not just a passive observer to these events but an active participant in the development of knowledge. His accomplishments as a researcher and teacher developed new fields and redefined old ones. That Lewin did these accomplishments as an outsider, one with marginal appointments, and as a Jew at a time of extreme anti-Semitism, was a major accomplishment. It is right that Lewin's work is still read and taught today, both to undergraduates and faculty. Few scholars of this time period still continue to be more than a ceremonial cite, with Chester Barnard and Mary Parker Follett as most auspicious company.

Yet there was a deep sense of idealism in Lewin's writings that bordered on naivety. Some men, regardless of education or societal inducements, would continue antisocial behaviors. Lewin's Germany, despite having a highly educated populace, sunk into a barbarism not seen since the Middle Ages. Likewise, some people, regardless of the information provided, good intentions, or necessity, will not embrace change until the bitter end. Furthermore, change, especially in corporations, is often a signal that the corporation is in decline and will fall regardless of managerial actions. People are not as honest or rational than Lewin seemed to believe.

Cross-References

▶ Henry Ford and His Legacy: An American Prometheus
▶ Spontaneity Is the Spice of Management: Elton Mayo's Hunt for Cooperation
▶ Taylor Made Management

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