Kurt Lewin: The "Practical Theorist" for the 21st Century

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Kurt Lewin (1890–1946) is considered to be the father of social psychology and in Cartwright's words, "when the intellectual history of the twentieth century is written, Kurt Lewin will surely be counted as one of those few men whose work changed fundamentally the course of social science" (1951: 159). Lewin's contribution to social psychology in general and to the theory and practice of planned change has been well documented and described (Patnoe, 1988; Burke, 2002). Lewin's influence is everywhere in contemporary management: running meetings, work design, training, team development, systems change, leadership styles, participative methods, survey feedback methods, consultation skills, change theory and action research. In the words of Kleiner, "Nearly every sincere effort to improve organisations from within can be traced back to him, often through a thicket of tangled, hidden influences" (1996: 30).

Marrow's (1969) biography of Lewin remains the authoritative work on the subject. Lewin was born in Prussia in 1890. After his family moved to Berlin, he enrolled in the University of Berlin and began doctoral studies in psychology, an emerging offshoot of philosophy. After serving in the First World War, he returned to academia and embarked on a teaching career in Berlin. In contrast with the class-conscious academic norms of the day, Lewin was charismatic, egalitarian, accessible to his students and constantly sitting with his students in cafes and in his home engaging them in long hours of vigorous and provocative discussions of philosophy, psychology and everyday problems. His *Quasslestrippe* group was the best known of these informal settings and from it emerged considerable research (de Rivera, 1976).

With the rise of Nazism, Lewin knew that, as a Jew, he could not get a permanent position so he left Germany in 1933 and settled in the United States. After two years at Cornell, he held a research position at the University of Iowa. As Lewin's work became known, many of the most distinguished social psychologists of the current and next generation came to visit him: Margaret

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Mead, Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow, Alvin Zander, Alec Bavelas, Ronald Lippitt, Dorian Cartwright, John French and Leon Festinger among others.

By 1944, Lewin was seeking to move beyond Iowa. Douglas McGregor invited him to MIT where he founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics. The Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT was founded with three objectives: to develop a scientific understanding of the functioning of groups, to bridge the gap between social science knowledge and practice, and to set up a doctoral programme in social psychology (Cartwright, 1959). The list of those who worked with Lewin at MIT reads like a "who's who" of social psychology: Leon Festinger, Morton Deutsch, Ron Lippitt, Stanley Schachter, Kurt Back, Harold Kelley, John Thibaut, to name the more famous (Patnoe, 1988). After Lewin's untimely death in 1947, the Center moved to the University of Michigan and joined with Likert's Survey Research Center to form the Institute for Social Research.

Lewin never wrote a book. His writings are spread across a series of papers. A great deal of Lewin's early work is in German and has not been translated. In 1997, the American Psychology Association published a volume comprising two previously published, out-of-print collections of Lewin's papers, *Resolving Social Conflicts* (1948) and *Field Theory in Social Science* (1951), the former reflecting Lewin's practical action research work and the latter his theoretical work. Two years later it published a second volume, a collection of Lewin's papers (Gold, 1999). So now, with the publication of these two volumes, some of his important papers are readily accessible. There are two major treatises on Lewin's work, Cartwright (1959) and Deutsch (1968), and some commemorative volumes (Stivers and Wheelan, 1986; Wheelan, Pepitone and Abt, 1990; *Journal of Social Issues*, 1992). A popular introduction to Lewin's impact on management thinking and organisation studies is found in Weisbord (1987).

Overall his contribution to management was his way of thinking. This article reflects on Lewin's contribution to methodology in social science research and explores how his concerns with linking theory and practice and the high value he placed on democracy have shaped the development of action research.

ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE: LEWIN'S CONTRIBUTION

For Lewin, it was not enough to try to explain things; one also had to try to change them and to involve others in that process of understanding and change. It was clear to Lewin and others that working at changing human systems often involved variables that could not be controlled by traditional research methods developed in the physical sciences. These insights led to the development of action research and the powerful notion that human systems could only be understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself. So the tradition of involving the members of an organisation in the change process, which is the hallmark of organisation development, originated in a scientific premise that this is the way to get better data and to effect change. The Harwood pajama factory is credited with being the first industrial site where Lewin's notion of action research was

implemented (Coch and French, 1948). The researchers were essentially addressing the question of how to introduce technological change into the company where there was strong resistance to change. They set up two approaches to introducing the change: representative participation and total participation in discussing the implementation. Using these two approaches, they were able to show differing effects of each approach on productivity and on the acceptance of the change. The results indicated that productivity increased faster and beyond previous levels in groups where total participation was used as a means of introducing the change.

Lewin was a pioneer researcher in producing actionable knowledge. Argyris (1993) identifies four core themes in Lewin's work.

1. For Lewin, sound theory was practical and he integrated theory and practice in several ways: by framing the social sciences as the study of problems; by electing to study problems that were critical to society; by beginning research by observing real life; and by connecting all problems, however big or small, to theory (Sandelands, 1990). This was not the norm among social scientists of his day.
2. He designed his research by framing the whole and then differentiating the parts. He drew on metaphors and representations. One well-known metaphor of his is the "gatekeeper", i.e. the one who controls the gate that permits or inhibits members to fulfil their goals (Lewin, 1948b). His topological representations are the forerunner of systemic representations.
3. He produced constructs to both generalise and to understand the individual situation. He was the researcher–interventionist and sought to enact change in social systems.
4. He was concerned with placing social science at the service of democracy. He was explicit about his concern for developing a better world and in this regard, he predated those who sought to empower the dispossessed. An integral part of the contemporary action research community follows in this tradition.

In Argyris' view, by enacting these four values, Lewin changed the role of those being studied from subjects to clients. He wanted to be of help and if successful would improve the quality of the client's life and produce actionable knowledge.

The famous Iowa studies provide a good illustration of Lewin at work and are an example of Argyris' four themes discussed above. The US government was seeking to respond to meat shortages during the war by changing meat-eating habits. As Lewin asked himself the question, "Why do people eat what they eat?" he found himself examining a variety of social, economic and technological processes. The critical task at the outset was to enable the women (as the "gatekeepers" to their families' dinner tables) to unlearn their well-embedded habits with regard to the forms of meat they supplied to their families and to relearn new habits which were inclusive of forms of meat they previously

considered to be inferior and would not supply to their families. It was through the research that Lewin developed his theory of quasi-stationary equilibrium, gatekeepers and change. The results of these experiments led to Lewin's conceptualisation that people change when they experience the need for change (unfreezing), move to a new standard of behaviour and values (moving) and stabilise the change in normative behaviour (refreezing) (Lewin, 1948b, 1951). Later Schein (1961, 1996) developed Lewin's framework by articulating the psychological dynamics that occur within Lewin's three stages of change. Lewin further asserted that change occurs given conditions which emphasise reduction of those forces restraining change, rather than an increase in the forces driving change. These two learnings from the Iowa studies became the basic philosophical tenets of organisation development (OD) (Coghlan and Mc Auliffe, 2003). Attending to creating the motivation to change by helping people see the need for change and take ownership of it is as important as the changing process itself and the efforts to reinforce change and ensure it survives. Reducing threat and creating psychological safety enable members of organisations to engage in a change process and help make it work. Another outcome from the Iowa studies was Lewin's notion of the theorist and practitioner co-operating to advance theory and improve social practice (Cartwright, 1978).

ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is one of Lewin's enduring legacies (Dickens and Watkins, 1999). Action research focuses on research *in* action rather than research *about* action. Nowadays, the term "action research" is a generic one and is used to refer to a broad range of activities and methods. At its core, action research is a research approach that focuses on simultaneous action and research in a participative manner. Within this approach are multiple paradigms or methodologies, each of which has its own distinctive emphasis (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). Some action research methodologies have developed from sociology and focus on how communities as socio-political systems enact change. These approaches tend to focus on structural emancipatory issues, relating to, for example, education, social exclusion, and power and control (Whyte, 1991; Lynch, 1999; Fals-Borda, 2001). Other action research methodologies have their origins in applied behavioural science and have developed in the organisational context (Schein, 1995; Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). It provides a vehicle for academic–practitioner collaboration and for research by practitioners (Coghlan, 2003; Adler, Shani and Styhre, 2004).

For Argyris (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985), the core tenets of action research as Lewin conceived and used it are:

1. It involves change experiments on real problems in social systems. It focuses on a particular problem and seeks to provide assistance to the client system.
2. Like social management more generally, it involves iterative cycles of

identifying a problem, planning, acting and evaluating.

3. The intended change in an action research project typically involves re-education, a term that refers to changing patterns of thinking and action that are presently well established in individuals and groups. Effective re-education depends on participation by clients in diagnosis, fact-finding and free choice to engage in new kinds of action.

4. It challenges the status quo from a participative perspective, which is congruent with the requirements of effective re-education.

5. It is intended to contribute simultaneously to basic knowledge in social science and to social action in everyday life. High standards for developing theory and empirically testing propositions organised by theory are not to be sacrificed nor the relation to practice lost.

A significant feature of all action research is that the purpose of research is not simply or even primarily to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge/theory and action so that each inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons and their communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). It is participative, in that the members of the system that is being studied participate actively in the process. It aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Coghlan and Brannick, 2001; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Since its intended outcomes include both an action and a theory outcome, it does not recognise the traditional distinction between academic and practitioner knowledge. According to principles of action research, the traditional split between research and action is, in many respects, a false distinction and it is based typically on extreme views of what academic researchers and practitioners are.

There is a resurgence of interest in and use of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). One reason for this is the increasing dissatisfaction with positivist science and the gap it inherently creates between theory and practice (Susman and Evered, 1978; Thomas and Tymon, 1982; Lowendahl and Revang, 1998; Starkey and Madan, 2001). As Reason and Torbert (2001: 6) argue, following the linguistic turn of post-modern interpretism of the past 30 years, which views reality as a human construction based on language, it is time for an "action turn" that aims at "timely, voluntary, mutual, validity-testing, transformative action in all moments of living".

In contemporary discussions of social science research, pragmatic—critical realism is an approach that differs from positivism and post-modernism in that it articulates a clear position on action. A premise underlying pragmatism is that all human behaviour and all human knowledge take place within and simultaneously reconstruct culturally derived meanings. Pragmatic—critical realism demands a reflexive political praxis. In other words, knowledge claims do not relate to some quest for foundational knowledge, as is the case for positivists and post-modernists, but instead look to practical and political consequences (Johnson and Duberley, 2000).

CONCLUSION

By all accounts Kurt Lewin was an extraordinary person. His curiosity, constant inquiry and energy in engaging those around him in vigorous conversation created both tough rigorous research and warm-hearted communities of inquiry (Deutsch, 1992). After his experiences in the Germany of the 1930s, his deep commitment to democracy underpinned all his work. In the words of Kleiner and Maguire, "Lewin was a complete psychologist – a theorist, a methodologist and a practitioner" (1986: 12). If the research we conduct into the processes of organisations and how they are managed, into how organisations and communities contribute to the development and flourishing of our world and planet is conducted in the real world of action and contributes to forging "a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment to moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the ecosystems of which they are part" (Reason and Torbert, 2001: 6), then we can rightly acknowledge Lewin and his legacy as our own.

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