

FIELD THEORY: KURT LEWIN (Lecture Series-1)

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BY

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Field Theory



Field theory is a psychological theory (more precisely: **Topological and vector psychology**) which examines patterns of interaction between the individual and the total field, or environment. The concept first made its appearance in psychology with roots to the holistic perspective of Gestalt theories. It was developed by **Kurt Lewin, a Gestalt psychologist, in the 1940.**

Kurt Lewin postulated that the **field** in which a person's behavior takes place is an intricate set of symbolic interactions and forces which, depending on their valence (strength), can either reinforce or change their behavior.

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According to field theory, a person's life is made up of multiple distinct spaces. **Image-1** is an example of the total field, or environment. **Image-2** is showing a person, and a goal they have. This image shows that there are forces pushing a person toward their goal. The dotted line is everything one must go through to reach their goal, and how one must go through many different spaces. Individuals may have the same goal, but the field to get there may be different. One's field may be adjusted in order to gain the most in life. Some fields may be deleted, and some added, all depending on certain events that occur in a persons lifetime (Burnes, Bernard; Cooke, Bill, 2013).

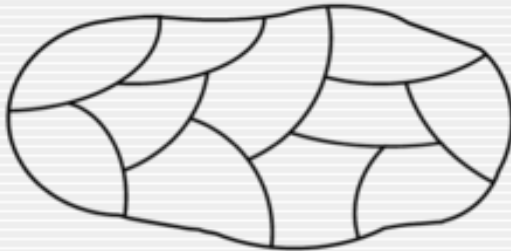


Image-1

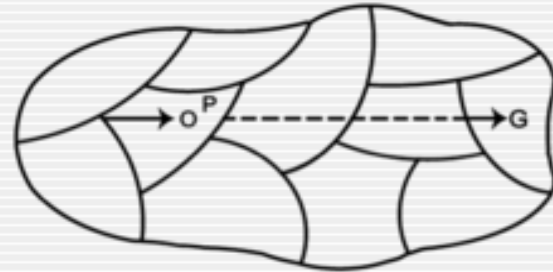


Image-2

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Field theory also includes the idea that every person holds a different experience for a situation. This is not to say that two people's experience of an event will not be similar, but that there will be some difference. This leads to the idea that no two experiences are the same for a person either, as the dynamic field is constantly changing. This is to say that the dynamic field is like a stream, constantly flowing while changing slightly. Another piece of field theory is the idea that no part of a person's field can be viewed as being pointless. Every part of a total field must be viewed as having possible meaning and importance. This must be done regardless of how pointless or non-important the part of the field may seem, it should still be accounted for. The totality of an individual's field seems to have no bounds, as research has shown that even an infant's experience of World War II could possibly affect life later on, due to the change in field. This is a good example of how broad field theory can span, as a person's preconsciousness may be altered due to field changes that occurred before any major development.

Kurt Lewin (1890–1947)



Kurt Lewin was born in Mogilno, Germany, and studied at universities in Freiburg, Munich, and Berlin. He received his Ph.D. in psychology from Carl Stumpf at Berlin in 1914, where he also trained in mathematics and physics. During World War I, Lewin served in the German army, was wounded in action, and received Germany's Iron Cross decoration. He returned to the University of Berlin and pursued Gestalt research interests in association and motivation so enthusiastically that he was often considered a colleague of the three Gestalt founders. He presented a version of his field theory to American psychologists at the 1929 International Congress of Psychology at Yale.

Thus, Lewin was already known in the United States when he became visiting professor at Stanford in 1932. The following year, he decided to leave Germany because of the Nazi menace. He wrote to Köhler, "I now believe there is no other choice for me but to emigrate, even though it will tear my life apart" (quoted in Benjamin, 1993, pp. 158, 160).



Kurt Lewin (1890–1947)

The 'Life Space' by Kurt Lewin



Throughout a career of 30 years, Lewin devoted himself to the broadly defined area of human motivation, describing human behavior within its total physical and social context (Lewin, 1936, 1939). His overall conception of psychology was practical, focusing on social issues that affect how we live and work. He sought to humanize the factories of the day so that work would become a source of personal satisfaction instead of solely a way to earn a living.

He was one of the first psychologists to propose that the development of an individual was the product of the interaction between inborn predispositions (nature) and life experiences (nurture). Lewin's knowledge of field theory in physics led him to consider that a person's psychological activities occur within a kind of psychological field, which he called the life space. The life space encompasses all past, present, and future events that may affect us. From a psychological standpoint, each of these events determines behavior in a given situation. Thus, the life space consists of the person's needs in interaction with the psychological environment.

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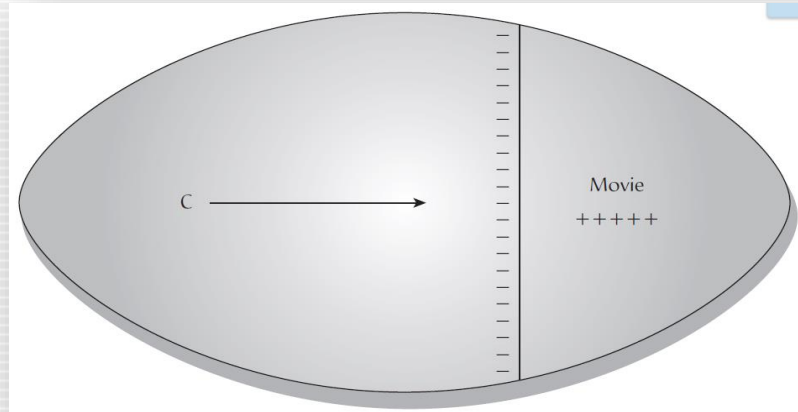


A life space shows varying degrees of development as a function of the amount and kind of experience we have accumulated. Because an infant lacks experiences, it has few differentiated regions in its life space. A highly educated, sophisticated adult has a complex and well differentiated life space showing a variety of experiences. Lewin sought a mathematical model to represent his theoretical conception of psychological processes. Because he was interested in the individual person (the single case) rather than groups or average performance, statistical analysis was not useful for his purpose. He chose topology, a form of geometry, to diagram the life space, showing at any given moment a person's possible goals and the paths leading to them.

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Within his topological maps, which he used to diagram all forms of behavior and psychological phenomena, Lewin used arrows (vectors) to represent the direction of a person's movement toward a goal. He added the notion of weighting these choices (valences) to refer to the positive or negative value of objects within the life space. Objects that are attractive or that satisfy human needs have a positive valence; objects that are threatening have a negative valence. His diagrams were sometimes referred to as a “blackboard psychology.”



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In the simple example presented in above Figure, a child wants to go to the movies but is forbidden to do so by his or her parents. The ellipse represents the life space; C represents the child. The arrow is the vector indicating that C is motivated toward the goal of going to the movie, which has a positive value. The vertical line is the barrier to the goal, established by the parents, and it has a negative valence.

Motivation and the Zeigarnik Effect



Lewin proposed a basic state of balance or equilibrium between the person and the environment. Any disturbance of this equilibrium leads to tension, which in turn leads to some action in an effort to relieve the tension and restore the balance. Thus, to explain human motivation, Lewin believed that behavior involves a cycle of tension-states or need-states followed by activity and relief.

An early experiment to test this proposition was performed by Bluma Zeigarnik in 1927 under Lewin's supervision. Subjects were given a series of tasks and allowed to finish some but were interrupted before they could complete others. Lewin made the following predictions:

1. A tension-system develops when subjects are given a task to perform.
2. When the task is completed, the tension is dissipated.
3. If the task is not completed, the persistence of tension results in a greater likelihood that the subjects will recall the task.

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Zeigarnik's results confirmed the predictions. The subjects remembered the uncompleted tasks more readily than they recalled the completed tasks. This effect has since become known as the Zeigarnik effect. Lewin's inspiration for this research on motivation came from observing a waiter in a café across the street from the Psychological Institute in Berlin. One evening, while meeting at the café with some of his graduate students,

... someone expressed amazement at the café waiter's apparent ability to remember what everyone had ordered without writing anything down. Some time after they had paid, Lewin called the waiter and asked what they had ordered. He replied indignantly that he no longer knew. (Ash, 1995, p. 271).

Once the waiter's customers had paid, his task was complete and the tension had dissipated. He no longer needed to remember what everyone had ordered.

Kurt Lewin's interest in Social Psychology



Lewin's interest in social psychology began in the 1930s. His pioneering efforts in this field are sufficient to justify his stature within the history of psychology. The outstanding feature of Lewin's social psychology is group dynamics, the application of psychological concepts to individual and group behavior. Just as the individual and his or her environment form a psychological field, so the group and its environment form a social field. Social behaviors occur within and result from coexisting social entities such as subgroups, group members, barriers, and channels of communication. Group behavior at any given time is a function of the total field situation. Lewin conducted studies on behavior in various social situations. A classic experiment involved authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles among groups of boys (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). The results showed that boys in the authoritarian group became very aggressive. Those in the democratic group were friendly toward one another and completed more tasks than those in the other two groups. Lewin's research initiated new areas of social research and spurred the growth of social psychology.



Thank You