

F.Emery 6 March 90.

The emergence of the Society for the Advancement of Field Theory is an occasion to review Lewin's contribution: it was he above all others who directed attention to the need for a field-theoretical approach in the social sciences. Such a review is called for only insofar as the program that Lewin initiated remains unfulfilled.

In 1986, on the occasion of a festschrift for Eric Trist, I attempted to formulate an agenda for the social sciences. This took me back, very naturally, to the last time we had such an agenda. The last time, in fact the only time that we had anything that might be called an agenda for the social sciences was with Lewin's posthumous paper on "Frontiers in group dynamics", 1947. That program envisaged an integration of the social sciences to contribute to the important practical affairs of democratic societies. However, "There can be no doubt but that he thought our success in building on the practical achievements depended, first and foremost, on the development of a field theoretical social science. For all of his efforts to apply topology and evolve a non-Euclidean geometry, namely hodology, for the description of purposeful behaviour, he failed. With that failure, I suggest, the integrative force of the post-war program was lost." (Emery, 1986, p97)

A mathematical breakthrough of the kind that Lewin sought in Principles of Topological Psychology and Conceptual Representation and Measurement of Psychological Forces might have compelled widespread acceptance of field theory. In any case it did not happen.

That failure has certainly discoloured the perception of field theory for later generations of social sciences. It is more realistic to see it as a failure of premature formalization. Lewin warned several times (1940 & 1951) of the dangers in this but it would appear that he was overly motivated to personally achieve the breakthrough (I gather that in his last days his desk was occupied with books on the mathematics that economists were apparently successfully using).

We have to go back to clarifying what is a field theoretical approach and re-trace our tracks from there. This time we might resist the temptation of early formalization (it is not easy, e.g. Ackoff & Emery, 1972). As we shall see the critical problems that crippled Lewin's venture were conceptual matters that precede formalization.

Morton Deutsch (1954) summed up in his section on metatheory the key characteristics of what Lewin saw as field theory in psychology :-

- a) the psychological explanation of psychological events. Lewin did not take a phenomenological position as he did not equate awareness with conscious awareness (i.e. awareness of awareness).
- b) explanation in terms of the total situation of the person and the effective environment- the psychological field or life space.. The 'effective environment' was that which was having effects on the person and that on which the person was having effects. In both cases the person's behaviour may prove awareness without the person being aware, conscious, of that awareness. Thus a modern mother might be quite shocked by tapes of her discourse to discover how far she had been manipulating her daughter's choice of boy friends. This requirement of field theory could NOT be met by the traditional scientific method of studying the interaction of conceptually isolated elements. What field theory required was study of "the mutual relations among the totality of existing facts which comprise the life space." Field theory starts from a general description of this totality as a system of parts and proceeds to more particularized descriptions of the totality.
- c) explanation in terms of contemporaneous causation NOT historical. A field theoretical explanation must be an explanation not just in terms of the totality of person-environment facts but of the CO-EXISTING totality. That is, field determination is contemporaneous with the behaviour being explained, whether the behaviour is the mere hint of a smile. a choice of dessert or persistence in a lifetime of folly. Any

psychological field is characterized by overlapping temporal gestalts marked off by qualitative changes. A field theory seeks to explain such a temporal gestalt in terms of totality of, co-existing facts

d) 'constructs' not classificatory concepts. Lewin followed Cassirer in pressing for relational concepts. vs things concepts. A field theoretical approach requires concepts that map the coexisting totality of concrete person and environmental facts. This mapping requires concepts that are logically related to each other in ways that reflect the interrelations of the structural and dynamic relations of the totality of facts coexisting with the temporal gestalt that is to be explained. Advances in this sort of conceptual mapping takes us from the first more general approximation to successively more precise approximations of the particular. Classifying abstracted elements ignores the structural and dynamical characteristics that constitute the total field. Advances in the rigour and precision of classification only increase the gap between the general and the particular.

The above four points are the fundamentals of a field theoretical approach. As stated they are what Lewin should have spelt out. He did not spell them out in this way because, as a theoretician, he got off on the wrong foot. Lewin took his metatheoretical guidance from Cassirer, a follower of Kant. Lewin's seminal paper on "Aristotelian and Gallilean modes of thought" was first delivered to the Berlin Kant Gesellschaft (Marrow, 1969, p55).

Lewin was always locked in, as a theoretician, to the Lockean view that perception can yield us no more than what is given in our sensations. Like Cassirer, and Kant, he firmly believed that we do have knowledge of a world out there but had no way of knowing how. The best that these gentlemen could manage was to assume that we have an uncanny ability to construct real worlds that yield what we sense.



