JOURNAL OF SOCIAL ISSUES
VOLUME 34, NUMBER 4, 1978

Theory and Practice

Dorwin Cartwright

University of Michigan

When Kurt Lewin proposed that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory," he intended to encourage the development of the kind of theory that can be used for the solution of social problems. He believed that such a theory would have to meet three requirements: (a) behavior should be conceived as the product of an interdependent field of determinants, (b) explanatory concepts should refer to the situation as it exists for the individual whose behavior is to be explained, and (c) causes of behavior should be viewed as contemporaneous with behavior itself. Lewin's adherence to these requirements led him progressively to broaden his conception of the life space to encompass an increasing range of determinants that originate in the social, political, economic, and technological environment. It is argued here that the development of social psychology has, on the contrary, become progressively restricted to processes occurring within individuals and that, as a result, social psychological theory is unable to contribute optimally to the improvement of social practice.

I consider it a very great priviledge to have been given this opportunity of adding my tribute to the memory of Kurt Lewin, for he was one of the truly great figures in the history of social psychology. We all share a great indebtedness to people like Lewin who contributed so much to the early development of social psychology and who established the intellectual framework of the discipline as it exists today. We should be grateful to SPSSI for providing an annual occasion of this sort on which we can renew our links with the past. It was my good fortune to have worked with Lewin during the better part of the last decade of his life. And this award has a special significance for me personally since it falls on the fortieth anniversary of my first association with him.

When I first met Lewin at the University of Iowa in the

Correspondence regarding this article may be addressed to D. Cartwright, 643 Island View Drive, Santa Barbara, CA 93109.

summer of 1938, he had been in this country just five years and was still actively engaged in the process of adapting to American culture. I quickly discovered, however, that for Lewin this was not simply a matter of learning a new language and new customs but that it also constituted a challenge to him as a psychologist, for he saw life as an interdependent whole which could not be compartmentalized into isolated spheres of science and everyday living. He was impressed by the pervasive differences that he observed between Germany and the United States and had already begun a program of research to illuminate their psychological and social significance. He was distressed by the political and social events that had forced him and so many others to leave Germany and was convinced that the developments in the world at large were leading inevitably to war. But despite his gloomy predictions of the immediate future, which unfortunately proved to be remarkably accurate, he remained basically optimistic, since he believed that social psychology, if properly developed, could provide the information and understanding required for the solution of society's fundamental problems. And he was fully committed to the task of helping social psychology achieve this important objective.

In order to understand the nature of Lewin's thinking about the way in which social psychology can best contribute to the improvement of social practice, it is essential to remember that he was, above all, a theorist and that throughout his career he was primarily concerned with the problem of constructing an empirically based theory of human behavior. But he did not see this commitment to theory as irrelevant to, or in any way incompatible with, his concern for the solution of social problems. He was convinced that the interests of the theorist and the practitioner are inextricably interrelated, and he was disturbed by the fact that psychologists had come to specialize so completely either in theory or practice that a gulf had developed between those concerned with these two objectives. It was his desire to counteract this separation that motivated his famous assertion that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory."

Over the years, this aphorism has become part of the folklore of social psychology and has often been invoked to provide pragmatic justification for our theoretical activities. But if one is to appreciate the full import of what Lewin had in mind when he made this statement, it is necessary to view it in context, since it was only part of the concluding sentence of a rather complex discussion of the problem of how theory should relate to practice.

Lewin's treatment of this problem was premised on the assumption that every field of science must be primarily concerned with theory, since it is theory that illuminates the causal structure of the empirical world. He then observed that, in social psychology, theory does more than advance knowledge, for it also provides the sort of understanding required for the solution of social problems. He then pointed out that if theory is to contribute effectively to the attainment of either of these objectives, it must deal with those variables in society that make a difference. And he proposed that this can best be accomplished by close cooperation between the theorist and the practitioner, since it is through such cooperation that the theorist is kept in close contact with social reality and the practitioner gains a deeper understanding of the nature of the social problems that confront him. And he concluded this discussion with the following observation:

> [Close cooperation between theoretical and applied psychology] can be accomplished . . . if the theorist does not look toward applied problems with highbrow aversion or with a fear of social problems, and if the applied psychologist realizes that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. (Lewin, 1951, p. 169)

When viewed in context, it is clear that Lewin's famous statement about the practicality of theory was not intended merely to reassure us as social psychologists that our theoretical efforts have social value. And it was certainly not intended to shift the responsibility for the improvement of social practice from the theorist to the practitioner. Lewin's essential point was that the theorist and the practitioner share common interests, that they have interdependent tasks, and that it is the special obligation of the theorist to provide the kind of theory that can be used for the solution of social problems. It is therefore somewhat ironical that only his advice to the practitioner should have gained such widespread popularity.

Unfortunately, Lewin did not live long enough to develop this line of thinking in much detail, but it is possible from the work he did publish to see in general terms how he intended to proceed. And I would like to draw on this literature, together with my personal association with him during the latter part of his life, to examine the question of what Lewin meant by "good theory" and what he believed is needed to make theory useful. I shall also attempt to indicate some of the implications of his approach for the problems we face today, although I realize, of course, that one can only speculate as to how Lewin might have modified his thinking in the light of subsequent developments.

Good Theory: Useful Theory

Before Lewin came to the United States, he had been primarily interested in developing a systematic, empirically based theory of individual behavior. His approach to this problem reflects both the influence of the Gestalt movement, which was centered at that time in Berlin, and the work of Ernst Cassirer on the philosophy and history of science. It is perhaps best summarized in his important paper on Aristotelian and Galileian modes of thought in psychology (Lewin, 1935), in which he presented what he considered to be the essential prerequisites for the construction of psychological theory. Lewin believed that behavior should be conceived as the product of two sets of determinants, which he called the *person* and the *psychological environment.* And he maintained that these should be conceived as constituting an interdependent whole. It was this assumption that gave rise to his well-known heuristic equation, $B = f(P,E)$, or in other words, that behavior is a function of the person and the environment.

When Lewin turned his attention to social psychology, he assumed that this same approach could be employed to account for the social determinants and consequences of individual and collective behavior. And he devoted the remaining years of his life to the task of extending his field theoretical approach in such a way that it would be capable of dealing with the social determinants of social behavior.

If one is to gain a proper understanding of Lewin's approach to the problem of theory construction in social psychology, it is necessary to understand one fundamental metatheoretical assumption that guided all of his thinking. The most concise statement of this assumption, which he called the *principle of concreteness,* can be found in a brief passage in his book, *Principles of Topological Psychology,* in which Lewin wrote as follows:

> Only what is concrete can have effects. This proposition may seem obvious. But one often ignores it in explaining an event by development, by adaptation . . . [or] by an abstract drive, and in treating these principles as concrete causes. . . . These fallacies arise in part from a confusion between the law that governs the effects of certain concrete events and these events themselves. Effects can be produced only by what is "concrete," i.e., by something that has the position of an individual fact which exists at a certain moment. (Lewin, 1936, pp. 32-33)

When Lewin first formulated the principle of concreteness, he was primarily concerned with issues involved in the construction of theory, but when he became interested in the question of how social psychology could best contribute to the improvement

of social practice, he saw its immediate relevance. For if it is true that effects can be produced only by what is concrete and if it is the purpose of theory to show how particular concrete situations bring about particular forms of behavior, it then follows that the theorist and the practitioner share a common interest in wanting to understand the concrete determinants of behavior.

Lewin believed that the principle of concreteness has several implications which set requirements for the construction of what he considered to be good theory. And I would like to discuss three that seem to me to be most relevant to the relation between theory and practice.

The first of these requirements is that behavior should be conceived as the product of an interdependent field of determinants and that causal explanations of behavior must therefore be of such a nature that they can deal with the total situation in which behavior takes place. Lewin understood, of course, that it is not feasible to investigate all of the determinants of behavior in any one research project and that a single hypothesis must be concerned with a limited number of variables. But he was nevertheless convinced that any theoretical system that does not treat the person and the environment as an interdependent whole is doomed to failure. And he was critical of such theoretical formulations as the frustration-aggression hypothesis or the proposition that attitudes directly determine behavior because he believed that, by focusing on only one aspect of the total field of determinants, they fail to recognize that the hypothesized relationship is contingent upon the context in which it occurs.

It is instructive, I believe, to see how Lewin's adherence to this requirement influenced the course of his own intellectual development. When Lewin first became a psychologist, he was primarily interested in the topics of learning and perception, but as he examined the determinants of these processes he came to recognize their interdependence with motivation. It was at this point that he formulated the concept of the *life space* which was intended to represent the cognitive and motivational determinants of behavior. He quickly realized, however, that not all of the motivational forces that influence behavior derive from the person's own needs and drives but that some of them are "induced" by the actions of other people. And once he recognized the importance of these social influences on processes occurring within individuals, he was forced to broaden his conception of the life space to include other individuals, groups, and even nations. When Lewin reached this stage of his thinking, he was

forced to move to the United States and was henceforth a full-fledged social psychologist. And during the last few years of his life, his major theoretical interests were devoted to the task of developing the basic concepts for what he called a theory of *psychological ecology,* which would be capable of dealing with the influences on behavior that are exerted by groups, institutions, social gatekeepers, technology, and the political and economic system.

Throughout his professional life, Lewin's intellectual interests were constantly broadening to encompass an ever-increasing range of phenomena. And unlike so many others, he resisted the pressures to become a specialist in some particular topic, because he was convinced that behavior can be properly understood only if one has the sort of theory that can deal with the full complexity of those concrete situations in which behavior actually takes place. And he believed that social psychological theory would have to be of such a nature that it can deal, not only with processes occurring within individuals, but also with those social, political, and economic processes that influence behavior. He realized that this requirement means that the social psychologist will have to disregard the boundaries traditionally drawn around the various social sciences. He was, in this sense, a social psychological imperialist.

Lewin's second requirement for good theory is that it must include concepts which refer to the situation as it is experienced by the individual or other social entity whose behavior is to be explained, since it is this subjective environment that provides the immediate determinants of behavior. He could not agree with those behaviorists and logical positivists who at that time were arguing that in order to be scientific, psychology must exclude all reference to the so-called private world of individuals. For he was convinced that behavior cannot be properly explained if one does not understand the way in which individuals and groups come to view the world in which they live. And despite his reluctance to engage in theoretical controversy, he could not hide the intensity of his feelings when he wrote the following comments about the issue of subjectivity vs. objectivity in psychological theory:

> To describe the situation "objectively" means to describe the situation as a totality of those facts and only those facts which make up the field of that individual. . . . [And] to substitute for that world of the individual the world of the teacher, of the physicist, or of anybody else is to be, not objective, but wrong. (Lewin, 1951, p. 62)

It is important to understand that Lewin was not, in the strict meaning of the term, a phenomenologist, since he recognized the role of unconscious determinants of behavior and did not believe that psychological concepts should be based solely on conscious experience. But he did insist on the critical importance of perception and cognition, and he was firmly convinced that the behavior of any particular individual should always be viewed from the perspective of that individual and that individual alone. He was, in this sense, a subjectivist.

The third implication that Lewin drew from the principle of concreteness is that the causes of behavior can only be found in the concrete situation as it exists at the same time that behavior takes place. Lewin recognized, of course, that every situation has a history and leaves residues from the past and that individuals (and groups) have expectations of the future. But he insisted that it is these residues and expectations, and not the past or future events themselves, that constitute the actual causes of behavior. And he rejected all historical or teleological explanations which attribute causation either to past or future conditions.

It was this aspect of Lewin's thinking, I believe, that made it possible for him to remain so optimistic about the contribution that good social psychological theory can make to the improvement of social practice. For he believed that even though one cannot change history, it is possible to counteract the evils of the past by modifying the present determinants of behavior if one has a proper understanding of the nature of these determinants.

Social Psychological Theory Today

Most social psychologists today would agree, I believe, with the proposition that only what is concrete can have effects and with the requirement that behavior should be explained in terms of its contemporaneous determinants. But despite this agreement in principle, the fact remains that many of the concepts now used to explain behavior, such as social class, ethnicity, social role, previous learning, childhood socialization, or even personality, cannot be unambiguously related to the concrete situations in which behavior actually takes place. And as a result, they do not provide the kind of guidance that the practitioner needs in order to design programs of social action. It is this lack of concreteness and the reliance upon historical explanations, rather than a lack of interest in social problems, I believe, that makes social psychology vulnerable to the criticism that it is not relevant to the major social issues of the day.

The developments within our discipline over the past thirty

years or so would also indicate that most social psychologists have shared Lewin's belief in the critical importance of the subjective element in behavior. And even though McDougall failed in his attempt to convince social psychologists that there is any such thing as a "group mind," only the radical behaviorists would now argue that behavior should be conceived simply as physical responses to physical stimuli. If one examines the empirical research undertaken during recent years, it is quite clear that most of it has been devoted to the task of obtaining detailed information about the ways in which individuals in various segments of society view their social environment. And the major theoretical advances, such as balance theory, dissonance theory, social comparison theory, attribution theory, information integration theory, decision theory, reactance theory, and equity theory, have all been primarily concerned with cognitive processes within individuals. The past few decades, it seems, has brought about the golden age of cognition throughout all of psychology. The proposition that an individual's behavior can be properly understood only when one knows how that individual views his environment has become a basic tenet of social psychology and constitutes what is generally regarded as the social psychological point-of-view within the social sciences.

We have good reason to be proud of these accomplishments, for they have greatly advanced our understanding of how individuals acquire, organize, and use information about the world in which they live. We are now able to make quite accurate assessments of the state of public opinion on the basis of interviews with a remarkably small sample of the population. We have accumulated a vast storehouse of information about the nature and distribution of attitudes and opinions concerning a great variety of social issues. And we are now better equipped than we were just a few years ago to assist in the design of programs of mass persuasion and public education.

But despite these impressive achievements, I must admit that I am left with certain misgivings. For it seems to me that our heavy concentration on intrapersonal processes has led us to give insufficient attention to other equally important influences on behavior that are exerted by such things as groups, organizations, institutions, social power, laws, bureaucratic regulations, technology, and the distribution of economic resources. Social psychology has in recent years, I regret to say, become increasingly less social, and as a result we do not have the kind of theory that can be used in the construction of programs of social action that are intended to solve some of our most serious social problems. For

the solution of these problems requires changes in behavior. And if it is true, as it surely must be, that cognition is only one of the many determinants of behavior, it follows that programs of social reform which rely solely on persuasion and education cannot be fully successful. And I believe that an objective evaluation of such programs would tend to support this conclusion.

It would, of course, be a mistake to underestimate the importance of the mass media in modern society. They are the major sources of information about the world in which we live, and they undoubtedly exert a pervasive influence on social values, moral development, the conceptions people have of what constitutes appropriate and feasible forms of behavior, and the aspirations of individuals, groups, and nations. But it would also be a mistake to underestimate the importance of other influences on behavior. And there is a real danger, it seems to me, that our fascination with the cognitive processes within individuals may lend inadvertent support to those who believe that social problems can be solved simply by changing beliefs and attitudes without dealing directly with the sources of these problems.

Social psychology has received a good deal of criticism, especially in recent years, on the grounds that it has not produced the kind of results that can be used by those who want to bring about fundamental changes in society. And some of the more radical critics claim that this is because social psychology has become a tool of certain vested interests in society who are intent on maintaining the status quo. It is true, of course, that social psychology as we know it today has been largely an American enterprise and thus reflects the dominant values of American society, which since the eighteenth century have not been especially revolutionary. And there can be little doubt that much of our research has been inexcusably ethnocentric. But my experience over the past thirty years, both as a recipient of research grants and as a participant in a variety of professional activities, makes me doubt that social psychology has been the victim of any sort of conspiracy, for it is clear that social psychologists have been deeply concerned with social problems and have made serious attempts to find ways of solving them. And if social psychology has not yet produced the kind of results that provide effective solutions to these problems, the fault must lie elsewhere.

Lewin was correct, I believe, in insisting that programs of social action that are intended to bring about significant improvements in the functioning of society can be effective only to the extent that they are based on a proper understanding of the actual determinants of the behavior of individuals, groups, and

social institutions. And he was convinced that if social psychology had an adequate theory concerning the nature of these determinants, it could provide valuable assistance in the design of programs of social reform. He would, I think, be pleased with the theoretical advances of recent years, but he would undoubtedly view these as only the first steps toward the construction of the kind of theory that is needed. And he would not be unduly distressed by the fact that social psychology has not yet become optimally useful.

I have argued in this paper that social psychology has progressively become so interested in the cognitive and motivational processes occurring within individuals that it has tended to neglect the social determinants and consequences of behavior. I do not, however, intend to suggest that the social aspect has been completely ignored, only that the emphasis has been one-sided. Important work has been done on such topics as conflict resolution, aggression and other forms of antisocial behavior, altruism, and the effects of social structure on health, personal development, and the quality of life. But the fact remains that this research has not been integrated with the work on cognition and motivation, and we do not yet have a comprehensive theory of social behavior.

The construction of such a theory will not be easy and will demand the best theoretical talent that we possess. It will require the development of new concepts and methods for describing the social environment in such a way that we can show in specific detail how this environment influences behavior and, in turn, is affected by it. I believe that a good beginning has been made in Barker's work (1968) on ecological psychology, in the research by French and his colleagues (French, Rodgers, & Cobb, 1974) on person-environment fit, and in the work reported by Bronfenbrenner (1977) last year in his Kurt Lewin Memorial Address. Approaches such as these deserve our support and serious consideration, for they have broadened our perspective and have provided the kind of concepts and methods needed for dealing with the environmental determinants of behavior. But if we are to achieve a comprehensive theory of behavior, these results will have to be integrated with those concerned with cognition and motivation.

Toward a More Comprehensive Theory

As I review the state of theoretical social psychology today, I am struck by its similarity to the stage of thinking that Lewin

had reached in the last few years of his life. For he, too, was beginning to have serious misgivings about the great emphasis that he had placed on the cognitive and motivational determinants of behavior. And I find it especially interesting that these misgivings were prompted by his realization that the social pathologies which disturbed him most, such as racial, religious, and sexual discrimination, dictatorship, war, and social injustices of all kinds, could not be effectively counteracted simply by bringing about changes in the kinds of things that were contained in the life spaces of individuals.

Lewin's doubts about the adequacy of his earlier theoretical work were intensified, I think, by certain criticisms of a more theoretical nature that were advanced by his good friend Egon Brunswik (1943) who argued that Lewin's conception of the life space had led him to focus his attention almost exclusively upon those determinants of behavior that are, as Brunswik put it, "post-perceptual and pre-behavioral." Lewin took this criticism seriously because he recognized that, by concentrating so completely on the cognitive and motivational components of behavior, he had failed to meet his own requirement that behavior should be conceived as the product of the total situation in which behavior takes place. And he immediately began to search for concepts that could be incorporated into a more comprehensive theory of individual and group behavior.

Perhaps the best illustration of how Lewin went about this task is provided by the research he conducted for the government during the Second World War on the problems that it would face if food shortages were to require changes in the food habits of the population (Lewin, 1951). He began this research by considering the concrete situation in which eating takes place and by asking the apparently simple-minded question, "Why do people eat what they eat?" The answer he proposed, however, was far from simple, for it led him into an analysis of a great variety of social, technological, and economic processes. It was in the course of this research that he developed his theory of quasi-stationary equilibrium, his concepts of channels and social gatekeepers, and what was then the radical idea that the theorist and the practitioner should collaborate in research having the two-fold purpose of advancing theory and improving social practice. One might say that for Lewin, at least, there was nothing so theoretical as a good practical problem.

During the last few months of his life, Lewin may well have been on the verge of a new outburst of creativity, for he was

deeply concerned with what he considered to be limitations in his theoretical system. I vividly recall a brief conversation that we had late one night just shortly before his death, when he came to my house in a state of great excitement to tell me that he had just had a brilliant insight which made him see, as he put it, that "Freud was wrong and Marx was right." And he was almost euphoric when he said that this meant that he would have to make a fundamental revision in his entire theoretical approach. I still remember how surprised I was that anyone could be so pleased upon discovering a basic flaw in his own work.

When I asked Lewin if he could be more specific about what he had in mind, he said that it was now obvious to him that behavior could not be adequately understood simply in terms of cognitive structure, wishes, and expectations, and that some way would have to be found for dealing with the constraints, opportunities, resources, and pressures that originate in the social, political, and technological environment. Lewin did not have time that night to tell me how he thought this could be accomplished, and I would not want to speculate as to what revisions in his earlier theory he might have made. But I have no doubt that if he had been able to develop this new line of thinking, social psychological theory would be considerably different today.

The most impressive thing about Lewin, as I knew him, was his capacity to maintain an interest simultaneously in both the highly abstract issues of theory construction and the very concrete problems of social action. An insightful description of the concerns that motivated Lewin's scientific life has been provided by his wife, Gertrud Lewin, in the preface to his posthumous book entitled, *Resolving Social Conflicts,* and I would like to quote part of it here.

> 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 make use of 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 vigor. . . . I recall the intense joy, almost ecstasy, that my husband used to feel when he drove his car across the great American bridges, across the Hudson River, across the San Francisco Bay. He never tired of admiring these achievements of engineering skill. No doubt he conceived of his particular field of research as equally capable of joining what seemed such widely separated stretches of territory. The construction of theory and the profoundly disturbing social issues of our reality . . . led him to experience [an] intense, persistent "tension." (Lewin, 1948, pp xv-svi)

It was this tension, I believe, that best accounts for Lewin's remarkable creativity. His deep concern for the ills that beset mankind kept him in close touch with social reality so that he was able to see the difference between a merely interesting intellectual problem and one of substantial significance. And his belief that the solution of social problems requires a scientific understanding of the nature of these determinants motivated his deep concern with the issues of theory construction. Since Lewin's day, we have been able to build a few rather primitive bridges between theory and practice. And these have served us well. But what is more important, they have demonstrated that it is possible for social psychology to construct the kind of practical theory that Lewin was beginning to envision some forty years ago.

REFERENCES

Barker, R. G. *Ecological psychology.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968.

Bronfenbrenner, U. Lewinian space and ecological substance. *Journal of Social Issues,* 1977, *33*(4) 199–212.

Brunswick, E. Organismic achievement and environmental probability. *Psychological Review,* 1943, *50,* 255–272.

French, J. R. P., Jr., Rodgers, W. L., & Cobb, S. Adjustment as person-environment fit. In G. Coelho, D. Hamburg, & J. Adams (eds.), *Coping and adaptation.* New York: Basic Books, 1974.

Lewin, K. *A dynamic theory of personality.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1935.

Lewin, K. *Principles of topological psychology.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936.

Lewin, K. *Resolving social conflicts.* New York: Harper, 1948.

Lewin, K. *Field theory in social science.* New York: Harper, 1951.