

THE LEWINIAN LEGACY IN SPSSI

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It is impossible to talk about the *Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues* (SPSSI) without talking about Kurt Lewin. His words are on our web page, his work remains a source of citation and inspiration, and his vision and values are the soul of our organization. In my comments today, I want to tell something about that history of association and contribution – about the legacy that continues to live on more than a century after Lewin's birth.

We begin our account in the early 1930s, prior to the establishment of SPSSI. Already an established and recognized scholar in Germany, Lewin first came to the United States in 1929 to attend the International Congress of Psychology at Yale University and again in 1932 as a visiting professor at Stanford University (Marrow, 1969). Back in Germany by 1933, with the Nazis in power, Lewin left his country of birth once again, this time with greater anger and despair (Lewin, 1986). He came first to Cornell University through the assistance of former students involved in bringing out Jewish refugees through a grant from the Emergency Committee on Displaced Scholars (Lewin, 1992; Marrow, 1969). This appointment was intended to be temporary and made available to other refugees. Accordingly, two years later, a place at the University of Iowa, Child Welfare Research Station was secured for Lewin. In the nine-year period that followed (1935-1944), although the appointment did not carry tenure, Kurt Lewin's creativity would transplant. He was able to further his work on topological psychology and to recreate the *Quasselstrippe* (Hot Air Club/Seminar) of his Berlin Institute days with students who gathered around him, as well as to immerse himself in American life.

It was during this same period that the *Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues* was formed. SPSSI was initially promoted as a national society for the study of psychology in relation to pressing issues of the day: the rise of fascism, the crisis of the Depression, labor-management conflicts, as well as religious and racial strife in American society (Finison, 1976, 1979, 1986). In one of its earliest flyers (1937) to recruit members after its establishment at the 1936 American Psychological Association meeting at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, the purpose of the Society was stated as follows.

The Society has two principal objectives. One is to encourage research upon those psychological problems most vitally related to modern social, economic and political policies. The

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second is to help the public and its representatives to understand to use in the formation of social policies, contributions from the scientific investigation of human behavior.

In part, the early founders of *SPSSI* – both during the Depression and during World War Two – were responding to the plight of their own under- and unemployment (Capshew, 1999; Finison, 1979) through their attempts to force the conservative and restrictive American Psychological Association to take a more expansionist approach to the employment situation (Finison, 1976). More than that, by the mid-1930s, a core group of psychologists, some of them learning theorists like Tolman and Krech, believed that scientific principles could be useful to the solution of large scale social problems.

It is generally agreed by historians of social psychology (Capshew, 1999; Finison, 1976; 1979, 1986; Harris, 1986) that *SPSSI's* early engagement with radical politics was moderated by strong internal conflicts about the proper role of the social scientist in political life, the mounting tensions of war and growing American anti-communism. Whereas *SPSSI's* first President, Goodwin Watson, had organized a political third party around socialist ideals, Finison (1979) argues that *SPSSI* members were deeply divided in their affiliations with the labor movement and radical politics, a tendency that only strengthened during World War Two “when national unity against fascism and ‘national morale’ became the dominant concerns, even among political radicals (p. 34). According to Finison, the shift to liberalism in the *Society* was evidence of an “underlying attitude of the ‘socialist’ psychologists in *SPSSI*” that “was all along more Deweyist than Marxist” (p. 35).

It is here where *SPSSI's* outlook and Kurt Lewin's increasing interests in participatory democracy converged and where Lewin's approach to the relationship between science and society began to shape *SPSSI's* outlook. As President of the American Psychological Association at the turn of the 20th century, John Dewey had called for a social psychology that would link social and cognitive aspects of life and just as importantly, one that would join theory and research to social practice (Barone, Maddux & Snyder, 1997). The key phrase was *practice*, buttressed by laboratory science, but nonetheless a science that could account for naturally occurring phenomena. Barone et al. have argued that Kurt Lewin's action research model was just such a linking science that could aid in the practice of democratic citizenship. Both during and after the war, this translated into research that would focus on small group processes that recognized each member's unique interpretation of a situation. Historian Roger Smith has argued that for Lewin, whether one was a manager or a scientist, there was always a “need to recognize the continuously changing dynamics of the social relations that form the context of individual action” (1997, p. 775).

In his memorial tribute to Kurt Lewin at the American Psychological Association meetings in 1947, Allport recalled asking Lewin when he had become interested in the psychological problems of democracy. Lewin had answered that it was “a direct result of his centering his life space in America” and the comparisons that evoked with his previous life in Germany (1947, p. 8). Miriam Lewin has also recounted how the contrast of the authoritarian regimes of Europe and the democratic ethos of the United States impressed her father and were reflected in papers he wrote contrasting American and German cultures and national character, as well as in the inspired studies of authoritarian and democratic styles of leadership that were conducted in the Iowa years (Lewin, 1948; M. Lewin, 1986; Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939). While American political democracy appealed to Lewin, substantial debate continues as to whether whether liberalism was an outgrowth of his American experience or a modification of an earlier socialist outlook. A Marxist, he was not¹ (Harris, 1986; G. Lewin, 1948; van Elteren, 1993).

For *SPSSI* types, the World War II years presented numerous opportunities for social scientists to contribute research expertise to the war effort at a national level and to gain greater organizational visibility. Some of this work was coordinated through *SPSSI*'s Committee on War Service and Research (Capshew, 1999; Cartwright, 1948; Herman, 1995; Johnson & Nichols, 1998). Anthropologist Margaret Mead, who had been invited to chair the National Research Council's Committee on Food Habits, immediately asked Kurt Lewin to become involved. She had been an undergraduate in psychology and always had an interest in the intersection of culture and behaviour. For her, anthropologists worked in the field, while psychologists tested out more general ideas experimentally. Lewin was asked to apply his model of the group to food habits, resulting in the much cited study on the importance of participatory decision-making in the case of homemakers' food choices (Lewin, 1947)².

In the post-war years, Lewin was turning his attention to the possibility of building institutions that would enhance work on the important issues of minority group identity, action research and group dynamics, issues that have been central to *SPSSI* (Lewin, 1948). Throughout the Iowa years, and most significantly for *SPSSI*'s development, Lewin had nurtured the many students who would participate in *SPSSI* in the post-war period (Marrow, 1969; Patnoe, 1988; Smith, 1997). Lewin saw the need for building institutions from which students could work back and forth between the laboratory and the world of work, education and community. His enthusiasm for building institutions was palpable. Back in Iowa City, after a fund-raising trip to the East Coast, he wrote to Roger Barker in July of 1943: "By the way, strictly confidential, that means not to talk to *anyone** [the asterisk referred to a statement at the bottom of the page explaining that wives were always excepted] about it; I am dreaming about a research institute for leadership and group problems" (Lewin, July 15, 1943a).

In fact, it is difficult to disentangle Lewin from the multiple organizations with somewhat overlapping memberships (e.g., the Commission on Community Interrelations of the American Jewish Congress and the Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT, among others) that were intended to promote a unique way of doing research on social problems. To facilitate his work, Lewin moved from Iowa to Cambridge, Massachusetts and in 1944, set up both the Research Center for Group Dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Commission for Community Interrelations of the American Jewish Congress in New York (Cherry & Borshuk, 1998). He proceeded to shuttle between Boston and New York City in those few years before his death, generating enthusiasm for a myriad of projects (Marrow, 1969) that would outlive him.

Throughout this period of enormous activity, Lewin's involvement with *SPSSI* continued without interruption until his death. He was first elected to *SPSSI* Council in 1939, serving until 1941, at which point he was elected President of *SPSSI*. Leaving that position in 1942, he served another term on Council from 1942 to 1944; he was again serving on *SPSSI* Council when he died in 1947. Lewin was appointed to the Editorial Board of the *SPSSI Bulletin*, published

¹ Intense debate continues with regard to Lewin's notion of participatory democracy, particularly in the workplace, such that action research techniques have been assessed as manipulative rather than emancipatory (see Van Elteren, 1993, for a good overview of the issues). What is clear is that once in America, Lewin became committed to the small group level of analysis and practice for creating social change in industrial settings rather than the more macro-level of restructuring society through trade unionism.

² Lewin and Mead were to publish their extensive surveys of food habits in one of *SPSSI*'s post-war Yearbooks, but that plan did not materialize.

between 1939 and 1944 as part of the *Journal of Social Psychology*. Here he published the well-known study with Ron Lippitt and Ralph K. White (Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939) that compared the impact of leadership styles, as well as his 1942 "Presidential" Address, "Psychology and the Process of Group Living," an address in which he discussed the relationships between psychologists and the societies in which they live (Lewin, 1943b).

At a meeting convened with some difficulty at a time when the United States had just entered World War II, Lewin rejected what he saw as the typical form of a presidential address, characterized by him as the fair evaluation of recent research, presented with "well-balanced words of approval and criticism with which presidential addresses feel themselves entitled to reward the good and to punish the bad colleagues" (1943, p. 113). Instead, in a talk that revealed his pain and anger at the conditions in his country of birth, Lewin argued passionately for a social psychology that is engaged with its community – for a "co-operative endeavor deeply connected with the culture of the people in which it occurs" (1943b, p. 129) – and called on social psychologists to live up to the responsibility and to take advantage of the opportunities that the U.S. made possible.

Lewin also took an active part in the earliest issues of the new *Journal of Social Issues*, which began publication in 1945, contributing editorial guidance as well as articles that focused on prejudice reduction, minority perspectives and action research (Lewin & Grabbe, 1945; Lewin, 1946). He promoted other SPSSI publications such as yearbooks and its sponsored book series (Perlman, 1986), as well as doing his share of SPSSI committee work, chairing the Elections Committee and heading the Subcommittee on Leadership Research during the war years. Clearly, Lewin's imprint in the early years of the organization was both broad and deep.

SPSSI's logo is taken from Lewin's writings in those years. In its entirety, the well-known "nothing so practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1943) reads as follows:

Many psychologists working today in an applied field are keenly aware of the need for close cooperation between theoretical and applied psychology. This can be accomplished in psychology, as it has been accomplished in physics, 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 there is nothing so practical as a good theory.

There is no question that the post-war period continued to provide SPSSI members an opportunity to meet the intent of these words. In the post-war years, many SPSSI members turned their attention and research efforts to issues of prejudice and discrimination; race relations commissions abounded. One of the earliest – the Connecticut State Inter-Racial Commission – in 1946 had asked Lewin to train leaders and to conduct research on ways in which racial and religious prejudice could be reduced at the community level. Lewin had obtained a grant from the Office of Naval Research to fund a follow-up in Bethel, Maine that established, the following summer, the National Training Laboratories and the subsequent group dynamics movement in the United States. This was only one of the many projects initiated in the post-war period that Lewin did not live to see. Others include SPSSI's publication of the two-volume *Research Methods in Social Relations* texts (Jahoda, Deutsch & Cook, 1951) and the contribution of SPSSI members to the Social Science Statement in the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, both of which brought together research methods and knowledge in the interests of social issues (Jackson, 1998). These two events are landmarks for those of us in SPSSI, and indeed for the broader social science community.

SPSSI organized a memorial in Lewin's honor during the 1947 convention of the American Psychological Association in which Gordon Allport, E.C. Tolman and Alfred J. Marrow paid

tribute. Out of that meeting came the initiative to create the Kurt Lewin Award. *SPSSI* honors Kurt Lewin's memory annually with its highest award and the recipient's talk is published in the *Journal of Social Issues*³ (see Appendix A for a complete list of Lewin award winners). In 1963, the *SPSSI* Council dedicated funds from the Kurt Lewin Fund that resulted in Joseph De Rivera's (1976) book, "Field Theory as Human Science". Here one can find Lewin's European students' dissertations translated with commentaries that clarify Lewin's unique approach to experimentation (De Rivera, 1976; Danziger, 2000). In 1992, an issue of *JSI* was dedicated to the legacy of Kurt Lewin (Bargal, Gold & Lewin, 1992). One can see his impact most directly on *SPSSI* and the progressive vision that it has held for almost 70 years in many of the issues of *JSI*. More recently, *SPSSI* offered a meeting place for the Society for the Advancement of Field Theory (SAFT) at its second stand-alone meeting in Minneapolis, in 2000⁴.

The period of 1936 to 1960 was one of enormous growth in American social psychology. Group dynamics, the importance of minority perspectives, and action research stand as the powerful legacies that emerged from Lewin's circle; both took hold and overlapped considerably with the founding of *SPSSI* in 1936 and continue to guide practitioners and researchers alike.

The goals and the focus of *SPSSI* differ little, in many respects, from those goals that Kurt Lewin articulated so many years ago. At our most recent convention, for example, the organizing theme of "From desegregation to diversity" would resonate well with the goals that Lewin had when he established the Commission for Community Interrelations. Not long before its establishment, Lewin wrote:

"to my mind, there is hardly anything more essential for the survival and the progress of democracy than that every citizen understand more clearly how the "right to be different" and the "cooperation for the common good" can and should be integrated for harmonious group relations in a democracy" (Lewin, n.d.).

Although the specifics of history that Lewin faced in his time are different from those that confront us now, many of the underlying issues remain unchanged and the challenges that psychologists face today in making their work relevant to the current scene seem even greater, despite advances in methods and theory. As we address those issues, it is helpful to recall the words that Lewin himself used in closing his *SPSSI* presidential address:

"The success of the *S.P.S.S.I.* and the success of the psychologist at large will depend on the same factors which determine the success of other group endeavors in a democracy; namely, on the courage and the determination of its members and on the vision and the wisdom of its leaders" (Lewin, 1943b, p. 131).

³ The first nine Lewin Award talks were published as separately bound supplements to the *Journal of Social Issues*.

⁴ While *SPSSI* became an affiliate of the APA in 1937, after World War Two the APA restructured into Divisions and in 1946 *SPSSI* was invited to become Division 9 of the APA. *SPSSI* maintains both its autonomy as an incorporated organization, based in Washington, D.C., as well as being a Division of the APA. Since 1996, *SPSSI* has held stand-alone biennial conferences as well as participating in the annual meetings of the American Psychological Association.

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Appendix

Kurt Lewin Memorial Awardees and Addresses

Year	Name	Address Title
1948	George B. Chisholm	<i>Social Responsibility</i>
1949	Edward C. Tolman	<i>The Psychology of Social Learning</i>
1950	Gordon Allport	<i>Prejudice: A Problem in Psychological and Social Causation</i>
1951	Tavistock Institute of Human Relations	<i>Some Aspects of Social Process</i> (Presented by A. T. M. Wilson)
1952	Gunnar Myrdal	<i>Psychological Impediments to Effective International Cooperation</i>
1953	Gardner Murphy	<i>Human Potentialities</i>
1954	Margaret Mead	<i>Cultural Discontinuities and Personality Transformation</i>
1956	Otto Klineberg	<i>The Role of the Psychologist in International Affairs</i>
1957	Lawrence K. Frank	<i>Research for What?</i>
1958	Research Center for Group Dynamics	<i>Some Things Learned: An Evaluative History of the Research Center for Group Dynamics</i> (Presented by Dorwin P. Cartwright)
1959	Fritz Heider	<i>On Lewin's Method and Theory</i>
1960	Stuart Cook	<i>The Systematic Analysis of Socially Significant Events: A Strategy for Social Research</i>
1961	Robert MacIver	<i>Disturbed Youth and the Agencies</i>
1962	Theodore M. Newcomb	<i>The Persistence and Regression of Changed Attitudes: Long Range Studies</i>
1963	Roger G. Barker	<i>On the Nature of the Environment</i>
1964	Alfred J. Marrow	<i>Risks and Uncertainties in Action Research</i>
1965	Kenneth B. Clark	<i>Problems of Power and Social Change: Toward a Relevant Social Psychology</i>
1966	Daniel Katz	<i>Group Process and Social Integration: A System Analysis of Two Movements</i>
1967	Muzafer Sherif	<i>If the Social Scientist Is to Be More Than a Mere Technician</i>
1968	Morton Deutsch	<i>Conflicts: Productive and Destructive</i>
1969	Ralph K. White	<i>Three Not-So-Obvious Contributions of Psychology to Peace</i>
1970	R. Nevitt Sanford	<i>Whatever Happened to Action Research</i>
1971	Charles E. Osgood	<i>Exploration in Semantic Space: A Personal Diary</i>
1972	Jerome D. Frank	<i>Galloping Technology: A New Social Disease</i>
1973	Herbert C. Kelman	<i>Violence Without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers</i>
1974	Donald T. Campbell	<i>Qualitative Evaluation in Action Research</i>
1975	Isidor Chein	<i>There Ought to be a Law-But Why?</i>

1976	Jessie Bernard	<i>Homosociality, Solidarity, and Sex</i>
1977	Urie Bronfenbrenner	<i>Lewinian Space and Ecological Substance</i>
1978	Dorwin P. Cartwright	<i>Theory and Practice</i>
1979	Orville G. Brim, Jr.	<i>On the Properties of Life Events</i>
1980	Marie Jahoda	<i>To Publish or Not to Publish</i>
1981	Tamara Dembo	<i>Some Problems in Rehabilitation as Seen By a Lewinian</i>
1982	Joseph McVicker Hunt	<i>The Significance of Twig Bending or Plasticity in Early Psychological Development</i>
1983	Bluma Zeigarnik	<i>Kurt Lewin and the Soviet Psychology</i>
1984	Milton Rokeach	<i>Inducing Change and Stability in Belief Systems and Personality Structures</i>
1985	Irving Janis	<i>Problems of International Crisis Management in the Nuclear Age</i>
1986	M. Brewster Smith	<i>War, Peace and Psychology: A Semi-centennial Perspective</i>
1987	Thomas Pettigrew	<i>Influencing Social Policy with Social Psychology</i>
1988	Robert L. Kahn	<i>Nations as Organizations: Research on the Prevention of Nuclear War</i>
1989	Robert Sommers	<i>Local Research</i>
1990	Harold Kelley	<i>Lewin, Situations, and Interdependence</i>
1991	Eleanor Maccoby	<i>Metamorphoses in the Study of Childhood Socialization</i>
1992	John R. P. French, Jr.	<i>A Symposium was chaired by Robert Kahn</i>
1993	Ethel Tobach	<i>...Personal is Political is Personal</i>
1994	Jyuji Misumi	<i>Development of Group Dynamics in Japan and Leadership PM Theory</i>
1995	Ed Zigler	<i>Americais Child Care Crisis and Its Solution</i>
1996	Marilynn Brewer	<i>The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations: Can Research Inform Practice?</i>
1997	Chris Argyris	<i>Field Theory as a Basis for Scholarly Research-Consulting</i>
1998	Bertram Raven	<i>Interpersonal Influence, Social Power, and the Mechanisms of Social Control</i>
1999	Jacqueline Eccles	<i>(Information not available)</i>
2000	Norman Miller	<i>Personalization and the Promise of Contact Theory</i>
2001	James M. Jones	<i>Trios: A Psychological Theory of the African Legacy in American Culture</i>
2002	Claude Steele	<i>Practical Theorizing: The Role of Social Context and the Case of Social Identity Threat</i>
2003	Daphne Bugental	<i>Thriving in the Face of Early Adversity</i>
2004	Jack Dovidio & Sam Gaertner	<i>Understanding and Addressing Contemporary Racism: From Aversive Racism to the Common Ingroup Identity Model</i>

No Award was granted in 1955