

**KURT LEWIN AND
THE RESEARCH CENTER FOR GROUP DYNAMICS
– PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF THE MAN, PLACE, AND TIMES**

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Despite the long time interval between now and the early years of the Research Center for Group Dynamics – more than half a century – I find it surprisingly easy to recall the people and the events that were then prominently represented in my life space. And when one looks back at earlier life space configurations, the question of how they came about becomes a pressing issue. Out of many retrospective musings I have come to believe – and I am surely not alone in this – that chance plays a major role in establishing the highway that defines the direction and goals of a career. Only unpredictable work assignments and contacts with persons previously unknown to me can explain my becoming part of the Research Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the Fall of 1946.

Before that, I had been in the U.S. Airforce, working in what were called Psychological Research Units. The main job of these units was to develop tests that could select the best pilots, navigators, and other airforce specialists. When World War II was nearing an end, the Units began to phase out. As each one closed down, the personnel would be transferred to assist other units to end their operation. So it was that a few of us were transferred to Virginia from Nebraska to help the unit there, concerned with the selection of radar operators, with the final report. The first element of chance was that the Director of the Virginia unit was Stuart Cook whom I had never met before. It was also totally adventitious to meet and become a lifelong friend of one of the men in the unit engaged in the final report – Harold Kelley. And so I did what I could to help.

At about the same time, Fall of 1945, the Research Center for Group Dynamics was established by Kurt Lewin at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Some financial support came from that illustrious institution, but the major funding came from foundations and organizations whose interests coincided with the goals of the Research Center – the development of group dynamics as a science and as a method of helping improve social relations. One strong supporter of the dual objectives of the MIT Research Center was the America Jewish Congress. Their interest was in theories and methods that can bring about a reduction in racism and antisemitism. With help from Kurt Lewin in the planning, the AJC created the Commission on Community Interrelations in New York City to carry out research in this area. It hints at my ascription to chance the career paths we follow to note that Lewin became an active consultant to CCI.

Two events in the first half of 1946 determined the path I would follow most of my working life. Number one, the eminently qualified, and extraordinarily human Stuart Cook was appointed Research Director of CCI. Number two, in the early Spring of that year, Stuart contacted me and asked if I would be interested in joining the research group at CCI.

During the weeks following my exit from the airforce, I was in a quandary about which graduate school to return to for my Ph.D. I had been at Yale for a Masters Degree, and had worked with Donald Marquis on an original technique for the measurement of psychological expectancy. But Marquis wasn't at Yale anymore; he had moved to become Chairman at the University of Michigan (a later chapter in my story). And I had doubts about the Yale Department, even though the emphasis on animal research and Clark Hull's theory of reinforcement was not as dominant as it had been three years earlier. So I went up to New Haven and talked with Carl Hovland who was then Chairman. Listening to his description of an "attitude change" program based on learning theory, though a new approach to human psychology, was uninspiring. Nor did he seem impressed with me and my vision of social psychology. In the days that followed, while I was pondering alternatives to Yale, Stuart called to assure me that I could be hired at CCI for a short term and leave without penalty when it became time to move to graduate school.

So I accepted the job at CCI and moved into an apartment in New York City near the office. Almost immediately I started a literature review of the techniques and procedures employed in the study of ethnic and racial prejudice. One day I returned from the Columbia University Library and dropped into Stuart's office to tell him what I had found. He asked me about my graduate school plans, and I told him I had made no decision and was still looking for the right place. He then described the new MIT Research Center, the faculty there, and some of the research programs. We agreed that group dynamics is a new and exciting field of social psychology, one that falls between the traditional, individualistic approach and mass or collective psychology. It appealed to my current interest which had edged close to the social sciences. It is easy for me to recall what happened next; Kurt Lewin would soon come to CCI on a consulting visit, and would be pleased to talk with me. My memories of Kurt begin with this fateful interview.

Kurt appeared on a hot Summer afternoon. He was in a hurry, and came directly toward my desk. Standing before me was a man with pink-colored face, wearing rimless glasses, and smiling. He said to me in his German sounding English: "Pepitone, I would like to talk with you but it is very hot. Can we go for an iced coffee?" The interview took place at the counter of a well-known refreshment stand called Nedicks on the famous avenue called Broadway. For at least two hours the talk was mostly about research in the area of racial and ethnic prejudice and the influence of mass media on attitudes toward ethnic groups. Lewin did much of the talking in response to my brief comments in these areas and to my accounts of the airforce experience in the U.S and the Pacific theatre of war. As was frequently confirmed later, I sensed that Lewin had an uncanny ability to process comments about psychology made in the most informal discussions into conceptual forms, and to come up with formulations that were questions for research. As we talked through our second round of drinks, I felt no status barrier, nor age barrier between us; Lewin was friendly, optimistic, and amusing. Before he hurried off to a meeting, he told me I should write to the Research Center and arrange to visit. And so I was interviewed by the MIT faculty, and became one of the twelve Ph.D students at the Research Center for Group Dynamics.

The Kind Lewin Hand

Some few weeks after my arrival, in the students' office at the Research Center, I was preparing a paper for a Methodology seminar on "creative" applications of the Chi Square statistic. It was an exercise in imagination and after the fourth or fifth design I put my head on my arms

and fell asleep. I woke up some minutes later, and as I was asking myself – “How many original Chi Square designs does he want?” – I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned my head and looked up. It was Kurt Lewin smiling benevolently “Pepitone, you should get some sleep”. I mumbled something about storing energy for the next class.

The Question in the Library

In that fall semester I would sometimes see Lewin get up from his desk and walk through the hall. He would pop into someone’s office and chat for a few minutes then head back to his desk. I never expected he would stop by to talk to me. But it happened. One day I was in the library of the Research Center looking for a reference in social perception. I remember hearing the door open and seeing Kurt Lewin looking around the room. He saw no one but me, and came over a little breathless and said something to the effect that he was on some committee that will make a “creativity” award to a psychologist. “Who should I recommend?” I stumbled for a moment, thinking - “Has he confused me with someone else?” Then, I thought who in psychology is creative; with the one exception standing in front of me, I noted that I never used that term for outstanding people in psychology. In desperation, I offered the name of one of the most prominent psychologists of the time and a strong supporter of Lewin. The offering was met with a thank you, an accented “I see”, and he was on his way out of the library still searching for a nominee. I never did find out who received the award, but the encounter illustrated Lewin’s elemental democratic egalitarianism. True, we graduate students were older and at advanced stages of doctoral training: it is fair to say we knew who the stars and semi stars were in the field, but Lewin regarded us as resource persons generally, and would ask our opinion about almost anything.

The Last Meeting

In early 1947, a three person committee was organized to update a chapter on Hodology which Lewin had written in Iowa. Hodology is the mathematics that would complement topology and provide measures of direction and distance. After doing some preliminary work, a meeting was held in February, to get Lewin’s reaction to our initial efforts and his suggestions for next steps. He sat on my right and allowed each of the committee members to comment on the project. What was unusual during this first half-hour was that Lewin hardly spoke, and his eyes closed several times. After a few general suggestions on how to structure the chapter he complimented us, and the meeting was over. The next evening was his last.

Kurt Lewin is a legendary person but what is said about him is not exaggerated, even now more than five decades since he left us. The originality of his theoretical ideas are mostly in print, as are his writings in philosophy of science. His practical wisdom and talent in both purely theoretically driven experiments and applied human relations research are evident in the vast number and variety of empirical investigations which he carried out or in which he played a significant advisory role. His energy, ebullience, humor, friendliness, egalitarianism have been described by colleagues and students in each of the four major venues that make up his career: University of Berlin, University of Iowa, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, and the University of Michigan.

At MIT, Kurt – and we called him that – was a ball of fire, constantly on the move, often to New York, to raise funds for the Research Center, writing in his office until late in the night what were to be his last papers – “Frontiers in Group Dynamics” – published posthumously in *Human Relations* (1947). When not occupied thus, he attended our periodic colloquia, traditionally called *Quasselstrippe*, which means an unraveling string and refers to a meeting where discussion is free for all to participate, with no rigid agenda, and often “rambling” in this or that direction. At these sessions, Kurt would sit quietly on the side of the room looking inconspicuous which maybe he was trying to be. The speaker or someone in the audience would make a point, and suddenly Kurt was dashing up to the front of the room, and while making rapid comments he would draw topological and other diagrams on the blackboard. After some minutes of digesting the material, the speaker would continue, more comments from here and there, maybe Lewin again, and so on.

The graduate students were a mixed lot. There were some whose interests were in human relations training in community groups, education, industry, and other applied settings, and those more closely identified with experimental social psychology. Despite the diverse orientations, the relations among the students were positive. There was much cooperation on their research projects. The cohesion-building sentiment was that we were a pioneering group creating a new area of social psychology. Many of us took courses at Harvard and were pleased that the faculty and students accepted us as the advanced guard of a new movement in social psychology, which of course fitted well with our own self-image. The students registered for their degrees at MIT included: Kurt Back, Morton Deutsch, David Emery, Gordon Hearn, Murray Horwitz, David Jenkins, Harold Kelley, Albert Pepitone, Richard Snyder, Stanley Schachter, John Thibaut, and Ben Willerman. In addition, there were visiting students from abroad - Simon Herman from Israel comes to mind, and a Fellow from in the Industrial Relations department who had worked on the Lewin group decision project at the University of Iowa-Alex Bavelas.

The faculty in addition to Kurt Lewin, included Dorwin Cartwright, Leon Festinger, John R. P. French, Ronald Lippitt, Marion Radke, and Alvin Zander. Their interests varied: Lippitt and Zander were most closely identified with the application of group dynamics to human relations training; French did experimental work in industry; Radke had been in child development and introduced the students to Lewinian field theory. Cartwright was the Director of the Research Center but also active in both theory development and research; Festinger was a creator and executor of focussed theory and research programs including a major one on the sources of uniformity pressures in groups.

The productivity of the MIT group during its short life span of less than three years is, by any standard, extraordinary. In his biography of Lewin (*The Practical Theorist – The Life and Work of Kurt Lewin*) Alfred Marrow lists the publications from each of the Lewin venues. I believe the large output owes to the focus and drive of the dissertation research, the amazing energy of Lewin, and perhaps most of all to the theoretical framing of all the research which gave it direction and structure.

The University of Michigan

After Lewin's sudden death in February, 1947, there was a period of uncertainty about the future of the Center but later in the year offers of a home were being considered. In the following year the Center moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The new university home was both a continuation of the MIT Research Center and a different entity. The sameness reflected the identity of the faculty and students who transferred from MIT. Of course, some graduate students had finished their degrees at MIT and left the group, and there was the huge gap made by the loss of Lewin. But the students who migrated carried on their research with the same zeal and purpose. All but one of the faculty arrived at Ann Arbor, Michigan, and continued with the same projects. Nevertheless, the position of the Research Center in the University was different. It was no longer isolated but placed organizationally and physically next to another social science group – the Survey Research Center. Later both units would become parts of the Institute for Social Research. Some faculty members and graduate students of the Research Center received university appointments in the Psychology and other departments. In general, the Research Center became more closely connected with a university and economically more securely based.

Within only a few years, however, there were events that inevitably had long term effects on the character of the Research Center. Leon Festinger, the leader of experimental social psychology, left the group. Graduate students finished their dissertations, and after a year or two of postdoctoral research, all had left to start their careers in other universities.

On the other hand, new programs of theory and research were developed. For example, French, together with a graduate student Bertram Raven focussed on the relatively undeveloped concept of social power and created a conceptual taxonomy. French also directed the work of Emmy Pepitone on cooperation and competition in children's groups. Cartwright worked with Frank Harary, a mathematician, on formal group structures.

Then, down the road came retirements, a new director, a different faculty, new students, and a group in social psychology that is no replica of Iowa or MIT, but is still the Research Center for Group Dynamics.

Lewin's influence is no longer associated with any institution, and its range is far beyond any graduate school program, including the application of group dynamics to human relations in many areas of life, and social psychology as a science. In the latter domain, Lewin's influence is mostly at the level of his metatheory – the nature of theory and the relation between theory and empirical research, properties of dynamic and structural concepts, principles of causality, and the importance of socio-cultural, and ecological contextuality. Though his life was cut short, this broad vision combining the theoretical and empirical, the basic and the applied, will continue to enlist theorists and researchers of every denomination. This international conference perfectly reflects that vision.