

## KURT LEWIN: A STUDENT REMEMBERS SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

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I arrived at the University of Iowa in 1938 at the age of 20 to study with Kurt Lewin having been told by my college professors that Lewin was doing "interesting things" in psychology. I was pretty insecure about the whole thing but soon became reassured by a coterie of welcoming students and by Kurt Lewin himself whose friendly greeting belied the imposing manner of a German Professor that I had come to expect. To my amazement, I was soon asked to call him "Kurt" as did his other students. Such a testimony that was to the value he gave to meaningful egalitarian relationships! It was only after being invited to the present Conference that I learned that his birthplace, Mogilno, is in Poland.

The question of "What's in a name?" leads to the next story. You need to know that the American pronunciation of the name, Lewin, is "Loo-en" but during Lewin's Iowa years, we pronounced it as he did, "Leveen". In his class on Topological Psychology, Lewin asked us to read a chapter from his book on this subject. At the next class session, a student came to him in despair, "Dr. 'Leveen'," she said, "I have trouble understanding you in class, but I don't understand 'Loo-in' any better!". Perhaps incidents like this prompted Lewin to use the American pronunciation of his name when he left Iowa in 1945 for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In any case, it is a story about the personality of Kurt Lewin, how approachable he was. I would like to mention that the Topology class was memorable for me for another reason; it was in that class that I met my future husband, M. Erik Wright, also one of Lewin's doctoral students.

The following incident is one of "culture shock" on the part of both Kurt and his students. He was always eager to engage students in discussion, but when he disagreed with them, he might say, emphatically, "Vut utter nonsense!". After witnessing one such interaction, I took heart and said to Kurt, "When you say that, students are devastated". He was so surprised and said, "Oh, I only mean I'm sorry to disagree with you". I never again heard him say, "Vut utter nonsense!". Don't you think this story reflects Lewin's readiness to change, his sensitivity and understanding?

There is a story I would like to share about Danny, Kurt's six-year old son. It speaks to the question of understanding and how father and son made use of it in everyday life. Danny began jumping from the stairs to the floor of the living room where Lewin's students were gathered to discuss something. When Danny continued jumping, Kurt asked him to stop by saying, "Danny, don't you understand we are discussing here and jumping bothers us". Danny quickly replied, "But I'm trying NOT to understand!" and then quit jumping.

Memorable were the weekly brown-bag luncheon meetings, known as the "Quasselstrippe". We translated that as "hot air". All the students who worked with Lewin and Tamara Dembo, his

former student in Berlin and now his colleague, gathered to discuss research in progress by one of us. Some examples: Autocracy-democracy, level of aspiration, rigidity, frustration, and social support, and in my case, the development of ideology (guided by both Lewin and Dembo). Ideas bounced around, touching wherever they would land in the vast arena of problems and issues. The students were always allowed to choose from the bounty of ideas those that would improve their own work. Basic was a consideration of the field of forces represented in the life space in contrast to the stimulus-response and conditioning approaches that were in vogue at the time.

As a student, I was only peripherally aware of Lewin's desperate effort to get his mother out of Germany, but I was keenly aware of his interest in questions having to do with societal concerns. A case in point is Lewin's famous autocracy-democracy-laissez faire experiment carried out with Ronald Lippitt and Ralph White. I helped record the behavior of boys in activities under the three different leadership styles. Another case in point is Lewin's investigation on changing eating habits to ease the meat shortage during World War II. The data supported the positive effect of group decision-making on subsequent compliance with the recommendation to eat less-favored organ meats. Both cases foreshadowed what later became known as "group dynamics" and "action research". Bear in mind that Lewin's ideas about region goals, barriers, tension systems and locomotion were conceptualizations that lent themselves to these advances, inspired as they were by his social concerns.

Another memorable event was the annual Topology Meeting, held at various Colleges and Universities during the Christmas vacation. Psychologists, and a few people from related fields, who were friendly to Lewin's ideas, met to discuss the work of the presenters. At the Eighth Annual Meeting held at the end of December, 1940 at Smith College, Massachusetts, Lewin spoke on, "Progress in Methodology and Theory". He described the work of his students in demonstrating this progress, a testimony to his mentoring and support of students. This meeting was the last of the Topology meetings attended by Lewin because of their suspension during World War II and Lewin's untimely death in 1947 a year before they were resumed in 1948. A photo of the 30 or so persons in attendance at the meeting together with other mementoes have been put on CD for Lewinian archives. Portrayed are a number of well known people, such as Kurt Lewin of course, Kurt Kofka, Gregory Bateson, Henry Murray, Margaret Mead, Erik Erikson, Tamara Dembo, Ronald Lippitt, Ralph White, and Fritz Heider. My husband and I also appear in the photo.

Besides serious discussion and hard work, we had a lot of fun during those graduate years. At a party held once a year, the students delighted in "roasting" members of the faculty. This was a tradition in some graduate departments, probably purely American, at which students "poked fun" at their professors with good humor and friendly spirit. On one such occasion, we sang the following song to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic".

*On have you seen the system that belongs to Kurt Lewin?  
Looks like a baked potato – all the parts that we have seen.  
It's got the force, it's got the strength, it's got the ideal goal,  
But has it got a soul?*

*Glory, glory for frustration (Fortissimo)*

*Glory, glory for frustration*

*Glory, glory for frustration*

*Break down the barrier!!*

About the ubiquitous "potato" which encircled the life-space, I remember joining other students in joking about Kurt's driving, with the warning that he might spontaneously draw a "potato" on the windshield to clarify a point.

Throughout all the stimulation, fun, work and worry during my four Iowa years, I kept being impressed with Lewin's interest in *any* observation of behavior, his excitement at weaving a conceptual framework on the spot to understand the phenomena, and later his readiness to modify the explanatory framework as the data warranted. Lewin believed that the process of doing science is best served by a theoretical approach to problems to be followed by altering or "fine-tuning" the theory according to the evidence. What an experience those Iowa years were, so much so that lurking somewhere in whatever I may have contributed to psychology are the ideas that took root then.

Now for the grand surprise I promised Professor Trepala. I relay this from the American Psychological Association to the Polish Psychological Society, the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Kazimierz Wielki University of Bydgoszcz, and to all of you. The American Psychological Association is in the process of identifying 250 books in Psychology as the most distinguished in the field. I am happy to announce that three books by Kurt Lewin have been included in the initial selection of the first 50 of these books; namely, *Principles of Topological Psychology*, *Resolving Social Conflicts*, and *Field Theory in Social Science*. I am also pleased to announce that two of my books have been included in this list: *Physical Disability-A Psychological Approach*, and *Physical Disability-A Psychosocial Approach*. Added to my pleasure is to be able to hold up before you, my book in its Polish translation published more than 40 years ago. Finally, I have the distinct honor to present, on behalf of the American Psychological Association, the three official citations of Lewin's contributions to the canon of distinguished books in psychology.