Kurt Lewin and the Planned Approach to Change: A Re-appraisal

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ABSTRACT   The work of Kurt Lewin dominated the theory and practice of change management for over 40 years. However, in the past 20 years, Lewin's approach to change, particularly the 3-Step model, has attracted major criticisms. The key ones are that his work: assumed organizations operate in a stable state; was only suitable for small-scale change projects; ignored organizational power and politics; and was top-down and management-driven. This article seeks to re-appraise Lewin's work and challenge the validity of these views. It begins by describing Lewin's background and beliefs, especially his commitment to resolving social conflict. The article then moves on to examine the main elements of his Planned approach to change: Field Theory; Group Dynamics; Action Research; and the 3-Step model. This is followed by a brief summary of the major developments in the field of organizational change since Lewin's death which, in turn, leads to an examination of the main criticisms levelled at Lewin's work. The article concludes by arguing that rather than being outdated or redundant, Lewin's approach is still relevant to the modern world.

INTRODUCTION

> Freud the clinician and Lewin the experimentalist – these are the two men whose names will stand out before all others in the history of our psychological era.

The above quotation is taken from Edward C Tolman's memorial address for Kurt Lewin delivered at the 1947 Convention of the American Psychological Association (quoted in Marrow, 1969, p. ix). To many people today it will seem strange that Lewin should have been given equal status with Freud. Some 50 years after his death, Lewin is now mainly remembered as the originator of the 3-Step model of change (Cummings and Huse, 1989; Schein, 1988), and this tends often to be

dismissed as outdated (Burnes, 2000; Dawson, 1994; Dent and Goldberg, 1999; Hatch, 1997; Kanter et al., 1992; Marshak, 1993). Yet, as this article will argue, his contribution to our understanding of individual and group behaviour and the role these play in organizations and society was enormous and is still relevant.

In today's turbulent and changing world, one might expect Lewin's pioneering work on change to be seized upon with gratitude, especially given the high failure rate of many change programmes (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2001; Kearney, 1989; Kotter, 1996; Stickland, 1998; Waclawski, 2002; Wastell et al., 1994; Watcher, 1993; Whyte and Watcher, 1992; Zairi et al., 1994). Unfortunately, his commitment to extending democratic values in society and his work on Field Theory, Group Dynamics and Action Research which, together with his 3-Step model, formed an inter-linked, elaborate and robust approach to Planned change, have received less and less attention (Ash, 1992; Bargal et al., 1992; Cooke, 1999). Indeed, from the 1980s, even Lewin's work on change was increasingly criticized as relevant only to small-scale changes in stable conditions, and for ignoring issues such as organizational politics and conflict. In its place, writers sought to promote a view of change as being constant, and as a political process within organizations (Dawson, 1994; Pettigrew et al., 1992; Wilson, 1992).

The purpose of this article is to re-appraise Lewin and his work.. The article begins by describing Lewin's background, especially the origins of his commitment to resolving social conflict. It then moves on to examine the main elements of his Planned approach to change. This is followed by a description of developments in the field of organizational change since Lewin's death, and an evaluation of the criticisms levelled against his work. The article concludes by arguing that rather than being outdated, Lewin's Planned approach is still very relevant to the needs of the modern world.

LEWIN'S BACKGROUND

Few social scientists can have received the level of praise and admiration that has been heaped upon Kurt Lewin (Ash, 1992; Bargal et al., 1992; Dent and Goldberg, 1999; Dickens and Watkins, 1999; Tobach, 1994). As Edgar Schein (1988, p. 239) enthusiastically commented:

> There is little question that the intellectual father of contemporary theories of applied behavioural science, action research and planned change is Kurt Lewin. His seminal work on leadership style and the experiments on planned change which took place in World War II in an effort to change consumer behaviour launched a whole generation of research in group dynamics and the implementation of change programs.

For most of his life, Lewin's main preoccupation was the resolution of social conflict and, in particular, the problems of minority or disadvantaged groups. Underpinning this preoccupation was a strong belief that only the permeation of democratic values into all facets of society could prevent the worst extremes of social conflict. As his wife wrote in the Preface to a volume of his collected work published after his death:

> 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 use 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 vigour. (Lewin, 1948b)

To a large extent, his interests and beliefs stemmed from his background as a German Jew. Lewin was born in 1890 and, for a Jew growing up in Germany, at this time, officially-approved anti-Semitism was a fact of life. Few Jews could expect to achieve a responsible post in the civil service or universities. Despite this, Lewin was awarded a doctorate at the University of Berlin in 1916 and went on to teach there. Though he was never awarded tenured status, Lewin achieved a growing international reputation in the 1920s as a leader in his field (Lewin, 1992). However, with the rise of the Nazi Party, Lewin recognized that the position of Jews in Germany was increasingly threatened. The election of Hitler as Chancellor in 1933 was the final straw for him; he resigned from the University and moved to America (Marrow, 1969).

In America, Lewin found a job first as a 'refugee scholar' at Cornell University and then, from 1935 to 1945, at the University of Iowa. Here he was to embark on an ambitious programme of research which covered topics such as child-parent relations, conflict in marriage, styles of leadership, worker motivation and performance, conflict in industry, group problem-solving, communication and attitude change, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-racism, discrimination and prejudice, integration-segregation, peace, war and poverty (Bargal et al., 1992; Cartwright, 1952; Lewin, 1948a). As Cooke (1999) notes, given the prevalence of racism and anti-Semitism in America at the time, much of this work, especially his increasingly public advocacy in support of disadvantaged groups, put Lewin on the political left.

During the years of the Second World War, Lewin did much work for the American war effort. This included studies of the morale of front-line troops and psychological warfare, and his famous study aimed at persuading American housewives to buy cheaper cuts of meat (Lewin, 1943a; Marrow, 1969). He was also much in demand as a speaker on minority and inter-group relations

(Smith, 2001). These activities chimed with one of his central preoccupations, which was how Germany's authoritarian and racist culture could be replaced with one imbued with democratic values. He saw democracy, and the spread of democratic values throughout society, as the central bastion against authoritarianism and despotism. That he viewed the establishment of democracy as a major task, and avoided simplistic and structural recipes, can be gleaned from the following extracts from his article on 'The special case of Germany' (Lewin, 1943b):

> . . . Nazi culture . . . is deeply rooted, particularly in the youth on whom the future depends. It is a culture which is centred around power as the supreme value and which denounces justice and equality . . . (p. 43)

> To be stable, a cultural change has to penetrate all aspects of a nation's life. The change must, in short, be a change in the 'cultural atmosphere,' not merely a change of a single item. (p. 46)

> Change in culture requires the change of leadership forms in every walk of life. At the start, particularly important is leadership in those social areas which are fundamental from the point of view of power. (p. 55)

With the end of the War, Lewin established the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The aim of the Center was to investigate all aspects of group behaviour, especially how it could be changed. At the same time, he was also chief architect of the Commission on Community Interrelations (CCI). Founded and funded by the American Jewish Congress, its aim was the eradication of discrimination against all minority groups. As Lewin wrote at the time, 'We Jews will have to fight for ourselves and we will do so strongly and with good conscience. We also know that the fight of the Jews is part of the fight of all minorities for democratic equality of rights and opportunities . . .' (quoted in Marrow, 1969, p. 175). In pursuing this objective, Lewin believed that his work on Group Dynamics and Action Research would provide the key tools for the CCI.

Lewin was also influential in establishing the Tavistock Institute in the UK and its Journal, *Human Relations* (Jaques, 1998; Marrow, 1969). In addition, in 1946, the Connecticut State Inter-Racial Commission asked Lewin to help train leaders and conduct research on the most effective means of combating racial and religious prejudice in communities. This led to the development of sensitivity training and the creation, in 1947, of the now famous National Training Laboratories. However, his huge workload took its toll on his health, and on 11 February 1947 he died of a heart attack (Lewin, 1992).

LEWIN'S WORK

Lewin was a humanitarian who believed that only by resolving social conflict, whether it be religious, racial, marital or industrial, could the human condition be improved. Lewin believed that the key to resolving social conflict was to facilitate learning and so enable individuals to understand and restructure their perceptions of the world around them. In this he was much influenced by the Gestalt psychologists he had worked with in Berlin (Smith, 2001). A unifying theme of much of his work is the view that '. . . the group to which an individual belongs is the ground for his perceptions, his feelings and his actions' (Allport, 1948, p. vii). Though Field Theory, Group Dynamics, Action Research and the 3-Step model of change are often treated as separate themes of his work, Lewin saw them as a unified whole with each element supporting and reinforcing the others and all of them necessary to understand and bring about Planned change, whether it be at the level of the individual, group, organization or even society (Bargal and Bar, 1992; Kippenberger, 1998a, 1998b; Smith, 2001). As Allport (1948, p. ix) states: 'All of his concepts, whatever root-metaphor they employ, comprise a single well-integrated system'. This can be seen from examining these four aspects of his work in turn.

Field Theory

This is an approach to understanding group behaviour by trying to map out the totality and complexity of the field in which the behaviour takes place (Back, 1992). Lewin maintained that to understand any situation it was necessary that: 'One should view the present situation – the *status quo* – as being maintained by certain conditions or forces' (Lewin, 1943a, p. 172). Lewin (1947b) postulated that group behaviour is an intricate set of symbolic interactions and forces that not only affect group structures, but also modify individual behaviour. Therefore, individual behaviour is a function of the group environment or 'field', as he termed it. Consequently, any changes in behaviour stem from changes, be they small or large, in the forces within the field (Lewin, 1947a). Lewin defined a field as 'a totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent . . .' (Lewin, 1946, p. 240). Lewin believed that a field was in a continuous state of adaptation and that 'Change and constancy are relative concepts; group life is never without change, merely differences in the amount and type of change exist' (Lewin, 1947a, p. 199). This is why Lewin used the term 'quasi-stationary equilibrium' to indicate that whilst there might be a rhythm and pattern to the behaviour and processes of a group, these tended to fluctuate constantly owing to changes in the forces or circumstances that impinge on the group.

Lewin's view was that if one could identify, plot and establish the potency of these forces, then it would be possible not only to understand why individuals,

groups and organizations act as they do, but also what forces would need to be diminished or strengthened in order to bring about change. In the main, Lewin saw behavioural change as a slow process; however, he did recognize that under certain circumstances, such as a personal, organizational or societal crisis, the various forces in the field can shift quickly and radically. In such situations, established routines and behaviours break down and the status quo is no longer viable; new patterns of activity can rapidly emerge and a new equilibrium (or quasi-stationary equilibrium) is formed (Kippenberger, 1998a; Lewin, 1947a).

Despite its obvious value as a vehicle for understanding and changing group behaviour, with Lewin's death, the general interest in Field Theory waned (Back, 1992; Gold, 1992; Hendry, 1996). However, in recent years, with the work of Argyris (1990) and Hirschhorn (1988) on understanding and overcoming resistance to change, Lewin's work on Field Theory has once again begun to attract interest. According to Hendry (1996), even critics of Lewin's work have drawn on Field Theory to develop their own models of change (see Pettigrew et al., 1989, 1992). Indeed, parallels have even been drawn between Lewin's work and the work of complexity theorists (Kippenberger, 1998a). Back (1992), for example, argued that the formulation and behaviour of complex systems as described by Chaos and Catastrophe theorists bear striking similarities to Lewin's conceptualization of Field Theory. Nevertheless, Field Theory is now probably the least understood element of Lewin's work, yet, because of its potential to map the forces impinging on an individual, group or organization, it underpinned the other elements of his work.

Group Dynamics

> . . . the word 'dynamics' . . . comes from a Greek word meaning force . . . 'group dynamics' refers to the forces operating in groups . . . it is a study of these forces: what gives rise to them, what conditions modify them, what consequences they have, etc. (Cartwright, 1951, p. 382)

Lewin was the first psychologist to write about 'group dynamics' and the importance of the group in shaping the behaviour of its members (Allport, 1948; Bargal et al., 1992). Indeed, Lewin's (1939, p. 165) definition of a 'group' is still generally accepted: '. . . it is not the similarity or dissimilarity of individuals that constitutes a group, but interdependence of fate'. As Kippenberger (1998a) notes, Lewin was addressing two questions: What is it about the nature and characteristics of a particular group which causes it to respond (behave) as it does to the forces which impinge on it, and how can these forces be changed in order to elicit a more desirable form of behaviour? It was to address these questions that Lewin began to develop the concept of Group Dynamics.

Group Dynamics stresses that group behaviour, rather than that of individuals, should be the main focus of change (Bernstein, 1968; Dent and Goldberg, 1999). Lewin (1947b) maintained that it is fruitless to concentrate on changing the behaviour of individuals because the individual in isolation is constrained by group pressures to conform. Consequently, the focus of change must be at the group level and should concentrate on factors such as group norms, roles, inter-actions and socialization processes to create 'disequilibrium' and change (Schein, 1988).

Lewin's pioneering work on Group Dynamics not only laid the foundations for our understanding of groups (Cooke, 1999; Dent and Goldberg, 1999; French and Bell, 1984; Marrow, 1969; Schein, 1988) but has also been linked to complexity theories by researchers examining self-organizing theory and non-linear systems (Tschacher and Brunner, 1995). However, understanding the internal dynamics of a group is not sufficient by itself to bring about change. Lewin also recognized the need to provide a process whereby the members could be engaged in and com-mitted to changing their behaviour. This led Lewin to develop Action Research and the 3-Step model of change.

Action Research

This term was coined by Lewin (1946) in an article entitled 'Action research and minority problems'. Lewin stated in the article:

> In the last year and a half I have had occasion to have contact with a great variety of organizations, institutions, and individuals who came for help in the field of group relations. (Lewin, 1946, p. 201)

However, though these people exhibited . . .

> . . . a great amount of good-will, of readiness to face the problem squarely and really do something about it . . . These eager people feel themselves to be in a fog. They feel in a fog on three counts: 1. What is the present situation? 2. What are the dangers? 3. And most importantly of all, what shall we do? (Lewin, 1946, p. 201)

Lewin conceived of Action Research as a two-pronged process which would allow groups to address these three questions. Firstly, it emphasizes that change requires action, and is directed at achieving this. Secondly, it recognizes that successful action is based on analysing the situation correctly, identifying all the possible alter-native solutions and choosing the one most appropriate to the situation at hand (Bennett, 1983). To be successful, though, there has also to be a 'felt-need'. Felt-

need is an individual's inner realization that change is necessary. If felt-need is low in the group or organization, introducing change becomes problematic. The theoretical foundations of Action Research lie in Gestalt psychology, which stresses that change can only successfully be achieved by helping individuals to reflect on and gain new insights into the totality of their situation. Lewin (1946, p. 206) stated that Action Research '. . . proceeds in a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the results of the action.' It is an iterative process whereby research leads to action and action leads to evaluation and further research. As Schein (1996, p. 64) comments, it was Lewin's view that '. . . one cannot understand an organization without trying to change it . . .' Indeed, Lewin's view was very much that the understanding and learning which this process produces for the individuals and groups concerned, which then feeds into changed behaviour, is more important than any resulting change as such (Lewin, 1946).

To this end, Action Research draws on Lewin's work on Field Theory to identify the forces that focus on the group to which the individual belongs. It also draws on Group Dynamics to understand why group members behave in the way they do when subjected to these forces. Lewin stressed that the routines and patterns of behaviour in a group are more than just the outcome of opposing forces in a forcefield. They have a value in themselves and have a positive role to play in enforcing group norms (Lewin, 1947a). Action Research stresses that for change to be effective, it must take place at the group level, and must be a participative and collaborative process which involves all of those concerned (Allport, 1948; Bargal et al., 1992; French and Bell, 1984; Lewin, 1947b).

Lewin's first Action Research project was to investigate and reduce violence between Catholic and Jewish teenage gangs. This was quickly followed by a project to integrate black and white sales staff in New York department stores (Marrow, 1969). However, Action Research was also adopted by the Tavistock Institute in Britain, and used to improve managerial competence and efficiency in the newly-nationalized coal industry. Since then it has acquired strong adherents throughout the world (Dickens and Watkins, 1999; Eden and Huxham, 1996; Elden and Chisholm, 1993). However, Lewin (1947a, p. 228) was concerned that:

> A change towards a higher level of group performance is frequently short lived; after a 'shot in the arm,' group life soon returns to the previous level. This indicates that it does not suffice to define the objective of a planned change in group performance as the reaching of a different level. Permanency at the new level, or permanency for a desired period, should be included in the objective.

It was for this reason that he developed his 3-Step model of change.

3-Step Model

This is often cited as Lewin's key contribution to organizational change. However, it needs to be recognized that when he developed his 3-Step model Lewin was not thinking only of organizational issues. Nor did he intend it to be seen separately from the other three elements which comprise his Planned approach to change (i.e. Field Theory, Group Dynamics and Action Research). Rather Lewin saw the four concepts as forming an integrated approach to analysing, understanding and bringing about change at the group, organizational and societal levels.

A successful change project, Lewin (1947a) argued, involved three steps:

- *Step 1: Unfreezing*. Lewin believed that the stability of human behaviour was based on a quasi-stationary equilibrium supported by a complex field of driving and restraining forces. He argued that the equilibrium needs to be destabilized (unfrozen) before old behaviour can be discarded (unlearnt) and new behaviour successfully adopted. Given the type of issues that Lewin was addressing, as one would expect, he did not believe that change would be easy or that the same approach could be applied in all situations:

    The 'unfreezing of the present level may involve quite different problems in different cases. Allport . . . has described the 'catharsis' which seems necessary before prejudice can be removed. To break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness it is sometimes necessary to bring about an emotional stir up. (Lewin, 1947a, p. 229)

    Enlarging on Lewin's ideas, Schein (1996, p. 27) comments that the key to unfreezing '. . . was to recognise that change, whether at the individual or group level, was a profound psychological dynamic process'. Schein (1996) identifies three processes necessary to achieve unfreezing: disconfirmation of the validity of the status quo, the induction of guilt or survival anxiety, and creating psychological safety. He argued that: '. . . unless sufficient psychological safety is created, the disconfirming information will be denied or in other ways defended against, no survival anxiety will be felt. and consequently, no change will take place' (Schein, 1996, p. 61). In other words, those concerned have to feel safe from loss and humiliation before they can accept the new information and reject old behaviours.

- *Step 2: Moving*. As Schein (1996, p. 62) notes, unfreezing is not an end in itself; it '. . . creates motivation to learn but does not necessarily control or predict the direction'. This echoes Lewin's view that any attempt to predict or identify a specific outcome from Planned change is very difficult because of the complexity of the forces concerned. Instead, one should seek to take into account all the forces at work and identify and evaluate, on a trial and error

basis, all the available options (Lewin, 1947a). This is, of course, the learning approach promoted by Action Research. It is this iterative approach of research, action and more research which enables groups and individuals to move from a less acceptable to a more acceptable set of behaviours. However, as noted above, Lewin (1947a) recognized that, without reinforcement, change could be short-lived.

- *Step 3: Refreezing.* This is the final step in the 3-Step model. Refreezing seeks to stabilize the group at a new quasi-stationary equilibrium in order to ensure that the new behaviours are relatively safe from regression. The main point about refreezing is that new behaviour must be, to some degree, congruent with the rest of the behaviour, personality and environment of the learner or it will simply lead to a new round of disconfirmation (Schein, 1996). This is why Lewin saw successful change as a group activity, because unless group norms and routines are also transformed, changes to individual behaviour will not be sustained. In organizational terms, refreezing often requires changes to organizational culture, norms, policies and practices (Cummings and Huse, 1989).

Like other aspects of Lewin's work, his 3-Step model of change has become unfashionable in the last two decades (Dawson, 1994; Hatch, 1997; Kanter et al., 1992). Nevertheless, such is its continuing influence that, as Hendry (1996, p. 624) commented:

> Scratch any account of creating and managing change and the idea that change is a three-stage process which necessarily begins with a process of unfreezing will not be far below the surface.

LEWIN AND CHANGE: A SUMMARY

Lewin was primarily interested in resolving social conflict through behavioural change, whether this be within organizations or in the wider society. He identified two requirements for success:

(1) To analyse and understand how social groupings were formed, motivated and maintained. To do this, he developed both Field Theory and Group Dynamics.
(2) To change the behaviour of social groups. The primary methods he developed for achieving this were Action Research and the 3-Step model of change.

Underpinning Lewin's work was a strong moral and ethical belief in the importance of democratic institutions and democratic values in society. Lewin believed

that only by strengthening democratic participation in all aspects of life and being able to resolve social conflicts could the scourge of despotism, authoritarianism and racism be effectively countered. Since his death, Lewin's wider social agenda has been mainly pursued under the umbrella of Action Research (Dickens and Watkins, 1999). This is also the area where Lewin's Planned approach has been most closely followed. For example, Bargal and Bar (1992) described how, over a number of years, they used Lewin's approach to address the conflict between Arab-Palestinian and Jewish youths in Israel through the development of inter-group workshops. The workshops were developed around six principles based on Lewin's work:

> (a) a recursive process of data collection to determine goals, action to implement goals and assessment of the action; (b) feedback of research results to trainers; (c) cooperation between researchers and practitioners; (d) research based on the laws of the group's social life, on three stages of change – 'unfreezing,' 'moving,' and 'refreezing' – and on the principles of group decision making; (e) consideration of the values, goals and power structures of change agents and clients; and (f) use of research to create knowledge and/or solve problems. (Bargal and Bar, 1992, p. 146)

In terms of organizational change, Lewin and his associates had a long and fruitful relationship with the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation, where his approach to change was developed, applied and refined (Marrow, 1969). Coch and French (1948, p. 512) observed that, at Harwood: 'From the point of view of factory management, there were two purposes to the research: (1) Why do people resist change so strongly? and (2) What can be done to overcome this resistance?' Therefore, in both his wider social agenda and his narrower organizational agenda, Lewin sought to address similar issues and apply similar concepts. Since his death, it is the organizational side of his work which has been given greater prominence by his followers and successors, mainly through the creation of the Organization Development (OD) movement (Cummings and Worley, 1997; French and Bell, 1995).

OD has become the standard-bearer for Kurt Lewin's pioneering work on behavioural science in general, and approach to Planned change in particular (Cummings and Worley, 1997). Up to the 1970s, OD tended to focus on group issues in organizations, and sought to promote Lewin's humanistic and democratic approach to change in the values it espoused (Conner, 1977; Gellerman et al., 1990; Warwick and Thompson, 1980). However, as French and Bell (1995) noted, since the late 1970s, in order to keep pace with the perceived needs of organizations, there has been a major broadening of scope within the OD field. It has moved away from its focus on groups and towards more organization-wide issues, such as Socio-Technical Systems, organizational culture, organizational

learning and radical transformational change. Nevertheless, despite OD's attempts to modernize itself, in the last 20 years Lewin's legacy has met with increasing competition.

NEWER PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGE

By the early 1980s, with the oil shocks of the 1970s, the rise of corporate Japan and severe economic downturn in the West, it was clear that many organizations needed to transform themselves rapidly and often brutally if they were to survive (Burnes, 2000). Given its group-based, consensual and relatively slow nature, Lewin's Planned approach began to attract criticism as to its appropriateness and efficacy, especially from the Culture-Excellence school, the postmodernists and the processualists.

The Culture-Excellence approach to organizations, as promoted by Peters and Waterman (1982) and Kanter (1989), has had an unprecedented impact on the management of organizations by equating organizational success with the possession of a strong, appropriate organizational culture (Collins, 1998; Watson, 1997; Wilson, 1992). Peters and Waterman (1982) argued that Western organizations were losing their competitive edge because they were too bureaucratic, inflexible, and slow to change. Instead of the traditional top-down, command-and-control style of management which tended to segment organizations into small rule-driven units, proponents of Culture-Excellence stressed the integrated nature of organizations, both internally and within their environments (Kanter, 1983; Watson, 1997). To survive, it was argued, organizations needed to reconfigure themselves to build internal and external synergies, and managers needed to encourage a spirit of innovation, experimentation and entrepreneurship through the creation of strong, appropriate organizational cultures (Collins, 1998; Kanter, 1983; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Wilson, 1992).

For proponents of Culture-Excellence, the world is essentially an ambiguous place where detailed plans are not possible and flexibility is essential. Instead of close supervision and strict rules, organizational objectives need to be promoted by loose controls, based on shared values and culture, and pursued through empowered employees using their own initiative (Watson, 1997). They argue that change cannot be driven from the top but must emerge in an organic, bottom-up fashion from the day-to-day actions of all in the organization (Collins, 1998; Hatch, 1997). Proponents of Culture-Excellence reject as antithetical the Planned approach to change, sometimes quite scathingly, as the following quotation from Kanter et al.'s (1992, p. 10) shows:

Lewin's model was a simple one, with organizational change involving three stages; unfreezing, changing and refreezing . . . This quaintly linear and static

conception – the organization as an ice cube – is so wildly inappropriate that it is difficult to see why it has not only survived but prospered . . . Suffice it to say here, first, that organizations are never frozen, much less refrozen, but are fluid entities with many 'personalities'. Second, to the extent that there are stages, they overlap and interpenetrate one another in important ways.

At the same time that the Culture-Excellence school were criticizing Planned change, others, notably Pfeffer (1981, 1992), were claiming that the objectives, and outcomes, of change programmes were more likely to be determined by power struggles than by any process of consensus-building or rational decision-making. For the postmodernists, power is also a central feature of organizational change, but it arises from the socially-constructed nature of organizational life:

> In a socially-constructed world, responsibility for environmental conditions lies with those who do the constructing . . . This suggests at least two competing scenarios for organizational change. First, organization change can be a vehicle of domination for those who conspire to enact the world for others . . . An alternative use of social constructionism is to create a democracy of enactment in which the process is made open and available to all . . . such that we create opportunities for freedom and innovation rather than simply for further domination. (Hatch, 1997, pp. 367–8)

The other important perspective on organizational change which emerged in the 1980s was the processual approach, which derives from the work of Andrew Pettigrew (1973, 1979, 1985, 1990a, 1990b, 1997). Processualists reject prescriptive, recipe-driven approaches to change and are suspicious of single causes or simple explanations of events. Instead, when studying change, they focus on the inter-relatedness of individuals, groups, organizations and society (Dawson, 1994; Pettigrew and Whipp, 1993; Wilson, 1992). In particular, they claim that the process of change is a complex and untidy cocktail of rational decision processes, individual perceptions, political struggles and coalition-building (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2001). Pettigrew (1990a, 1990b) maintains that the Planned approach is too prescriptive and does not pay enough attention to the need to analyse and conceptualize organizational change. He argues that change needs to be studied across different levels of analysis and different time periods, and that it cuts across functions, spans hierarchical divisions, and has no neat starting or finishing point; instead it is a 'complex analytical, political, and cultural process of challenging and changing the core beliefs, structure and strategy of the firm' (Pettigrew, 1987, p. 650).

Looking at Planned change versus a processual approach, Dawson (1994, pp. 3–4) comments that:

> Although this [Lewin's] theory has proved useful in understanding planned
> change under relatively stable conditions, with the continuing and dynamic
> nature of change in today's business world, it no longer makes sense to imple-
> ment a planned process for 'freezing' changed behaviours . . . The processual
> framework . . . adopts the view that change is a complex and dynamic process
> which should not be solidified or treated as a series of linear events . . . central
> to the development of a processual approach is the need to incorporate an
> analysis of the politics of managing change.

Also taking a processualist perspective, Buchanan and Storey's (1997, p. 127) main
criticism of those who advocate Planned change is:

> . . . their attempt to impose an order and a linear sequence to processes that are
> in reality messy and untidy, and which unfold in an iterative fashion with much
> backtracking and omission.

Though there are distinct differences between these newer approaches to change,
not least the prescriptive focus of the Culture-Excellence approach versus the ana-
lytical orientation of the processualists, there are also some striking similarities
which they claim strongly challenge the validity of the Planned approach to
change. The newer approaches tend to take a holistic/contextual view of organi-
zations and their environments; they challenge the notion of change as an ordered,
rational and linear process; and there is an emphasis on change as a continuous
process which is heavily influenced by culture, power and politics (Buchanan and
Storey, 1997; Burnes, 2000; Dawson, 1994; Kanter et al., 1992; Pettigrew, 1997).
Accompanying and offering support to these new approaches to change were new
perspectives on the nature of change in organizations. Up to the late 1970s, the
incremental model of change dominated. Advocates of this view see change as
being a process whereby individual parts of an organization deal incrementally
and separately with one problem and one goal at a time. By managers respond-
ing to pressures in their local internal and external environments in this way, over
time, their organizations become transformed (Cyert and March, 1963; Hedberg
et al., 1976; Lindblom, 1959; Quinn, 1980, 1982).

In the 1980s, two new perspectives on change emerged: the punctuated equi-
librium model and the continuous transformation model. The former approach
to change:

> . . . depicts organizations as evolving through relatively long periods of stability
> (equilibrium periods) in their basic patterns of activity that are punctuated by
> relatively short bursts of fundamental change (revolutionary periods). Revolu-
> tionary periods substantively disrupt established activity patterns and install the
> basis for new equilibrium periods. (Romanelli and Tushman, 1994, p. 1141)

The inspiration for this model arises from two sources: firstly, from the challenge to Darwin's gradualist model of evolution in the natural sciences (Gould, 1989); secondly, from research showing that whilst organizations do appear to fit the incrementalist model of change for a period of time, there does come a point when they go through a period of rapid and fundamental change (Gersick, 1991).

Proponents of the continuous transformation model reject both the incrementalist and punctuated equilibrium models. They argue that, in order to survive, organizations must develop the ability to change themselves continuously in a fundamental manner. This is particularly the case in fast-moving sectors such as retail (Greenwald, 1996). Brown and Eisenhardt (1997, p. 29) draw on the work of complexity theorists to support their claim for continuous change:

> Like organizations, complex systems have large numbers of independent yet interacting actors. Rather than ever reaching a stable equilibrium, the most adaptive of these complex systems (e.g., intertidal zones) keep changing continuously by remaining at the poetically termed 'edge of chaos' that exists between order and disorder. By staying in this intermediate zone, these systems never quite settle into a stable equilibrium but never quite fall apart. Rather, these systems, which stay constantly poised between order and disorder, exhibit the most prolific, complex and continuous change . . .

Complexity theories are increasingly being used by organization theorists and practitioners as a way of understanding and changing organizations (Bechtold, 1997; Black, 2000; Boje, 2000; Choi et al., 2001; Gilchrist, 2000; Lewis, 1994; Macbeth, 2002; Shelton and Darling, 2001; Stacey et al., 2002; Tetenbaum, 1998). Complexity theories come from the natural sciences, where they have shown that disequilibrium is a necessary condition for the growth of dynamic systems (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). Under this view, organizations, like complex systems in nature, are seen as dynamic non-linear systems. The outcome of their actions is unpredictable but, like turbulence in gases and liquids, it is governed by a set of simple order-generating rules (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Lewis, 1994; Lorenz, 1993; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Stacey et al., 2002; Tetenbaum, 1998; Wheatley, 1992). For organizations, as for natural systems, the key to survival is to develop rules which are capable of keeping an organization operating 'on the edge of chaos' (Stacey et al., 2002). If organizations are too stable, nothing changes and the system dies; if too chaotic, the system will be overwhelmed by change. In both situations, radical change is necessary in order to create a new set of order-generating rules which allow the organization to prosper and survive (MacIntosh and MacLean, 2001).

As can be seen, the newer approaches to change and the newer perspectives on the nature of change have much in common. One of the problems with all three perspectives on change – incrementalism, punctuated equilibrium and continuous

change – is that all three are present in organizational life and none appear domi-
nant. Indeed, Burnes (2000) even questions whether these are separate and com-
peting theories, or merely different ways of looking at the same phenomenon:
change. He points out that sectoral, temporal and organizational life cycle differ-
ences can account for whether organizations experience incremental, punctuated
equilibrium or continuous change (Kimberley and Miles, 1980). He also draws on
the natural sciences, in the form of population ecology, to argue that in any given
population of organizations one would expect to see all three types of change
(Hannan and Freeman, 1988). Therefore, rather like the Jungian concept of the
light and dark, these various perspectives on change may be shadow images of
each other, none of which by themselves capable of portraying the whole
(Matthews, 2002).

LEWIN'S WORK: CRITICISMS AND RESPONSES

From the 1980s onwards, as newer perspectives on organizational life and change
have emerged, Lewin's Planned approach has faced increasing levels of criticisms.
This section summarizes the main criticisms and responds to them.

Criticism 1

Many have is argued that Lewin's Planned approach is too simplistic and mecha-
nistic for a world where organizational change is a continuous and open-ended
process (Dawson, 1994; Garvin, 1993; Kanter et al., 1992; Nonaka, 1988; Petti-
grew, 1990a, 1990b; Pettigrew et al., 1989; Stacey, 1993; Wilson, 1992).

Response 1. These criticisms appear to stem from a misreading of how Lewin per-
ceived stability and change. He stated:

> One should view the present situation – the *status quo* – as being maintained by
> certain conditions or forces. A culture – for instance, the food habits of a certain
> group at a given time – is not a static affair but a live process like a river which
> moves but still keeps to a recognizable form . . . Food habits do not occur in
> empty space. They are part and parcel of the daily rhythm of being awake and
> asleep; of being alone and in a group; of earning a living and playing; of being
> a member of a town, a family, a social class, a religious group . . . in a district
> with good groceries and restaurants or in an area of poor and irregular food
> supply. Somehow all these factors affect food habits at any given time. They
> determine the food habits of a group every day anew just as the amount of
> water supply and the nature of the river bed determine the flow of the river, its
> constancy or change. (Lewin, 1943a, pp. 172–3)

Far from viewing social or organizational groups as fixed and stable, or viewing change as linear and uni-dimensional, it is clear that he understood the limits of stability at least as well as his critics. He argued that social settings are in a state of constant change but that, just like a river, the rate varies depending on the environment. He viewed change not as a predictable and planned move from one stable state to another, but as a complex and iterative learning process where the journey was more important than the destination, where stability was at best quasi-stationary and always fluid, and where, given the complex forces involved, outcomes cannot be predicted but emerge on a trial and error basis (Kippenberger, 1998a; Lewin, 1947a). Therefore, rather than being prescriptive, Lewin recognized the unpredictable (non-linear) nature of change and, as Hendry (1996) notes, he adopted the same 'contextualist' and learning approach favoured by many of his critics. Indeed, as outlined earlier, some argue that Lewin's conception of stability and change is very similar to that of many complexity theorists (Back, 1992; Elrod and Tippett, 2002; Kippenberger, 1998a; MacIntosh and MacLean, 2001; Tschacher and Brunner, 1995).

We should also note that when Lewin wrote of 'refreezing', he referred to preventing individuals and groups from regressing to their old behaviours. In this respect, Lewin's view seems to be similar to that of his critics. For example, the last stage in Kanter et al.'s (1992, p. 384) model of change is to 'Reinforce and institutionalize the change'. More telling, though, is that when Elrod and Tippett (2002) compared a wide range of change models, they found that most approaches to organizational change were strikingly similar to Lewin's 3-Step model. When they extended their research to other forms of human and organizational change, they also found that 'Models of the change process, as perceived by diverse and seemingly unrelated disciplines [such as bereavement theory, personal transition theory, creative processes, cultural revolutions and scientific revolutions] . . . follow Lewin's . . . three-phase model of change . . .' (Elrod and Tippett, 2002, p. 273).

Criticism 2

Lewin's work is only relevant to incremental and isolated change projects and is not able to incorporate radical, transformational change (Dawson, 1994; Dunphy and Stace, 1992, 1993; Harris, 1985; Miller and Friesen, 1984; Pettigrew, 1990a, 1990b).

Response 2. This criticism appears to relate to the speed rather than the magnitude of change because, as Quinn (1980, 1982) pointed out, over time, incremental change can lead to radical transformations. It is also necessary to recognize that Lewin was concerned with behavioural change at the individual, group, organizational and societal levels (Dickens and Watkins, 1999), whereas rapid transformational change is seen as only being applicable to situations requiring major

structural change (Allaire and Firsirotu, 1984; Beer and Nohria, 2000; Burnes, 2000; Cummings and Worley, 1997). Even in such situations, as Kanter et al. (1992) maintain, these 'Bold Strokes' often need to be followed by a whole series of incremental changes (a 'Long March') in order to align an organization's culture and behaviours with the new structure. Lewin did recognize that radical behavioural or cultural change could take place rapidly in times of crisis (Kippenberger, 1998a; Lewin, 1947a). Such crises may require directive change; again, this may be successful in terms of structural change but research by Lewin and others has shown that it rarely works in cases where behavioural change is required (Lewin, 1947b; Kanter et al., 1992; Schein, 1996; Stace and Dunphy, 2001).

Criticism 3

Lewin's stands accused of ignoring the role of power and politics in organizations and the conflictual nature of much of organizational life (Dawson, 1994; Hatch, 1997; Pettigrew, 1980; Pfeffer, 1992; Wilson, 1992).

Response 3. Given the issues that Lewin was addressing, this seems a strange criticism. Anyone seriously addressing racism and religious intolerance, as Lewin was, could not ignore these issues. As Bargal et al. (1992, p. 8) note, Lewin's approach to change required '. . . the taking into account differences in value systems and power structures of all the parties involved . . .' This is clear from the following quotation (Lewin, 1946, p. 203):

> An attempt to improve inter-group relations has to face a wide variety of tasks. It deals with problems of attitude and stereotypes in regard to other groups and one's own group, with problems of development of attitudes and conduct during childhood and adolescence, with problems of housing, and the change of the legal structure of the community; it deals with problems of status and caste, with problems of economic discrimination, with political leadership, and with leadership in many aspects of community life. It deals with the small social body of the family, a club or a friendship group, with the larger social body of a school or school system, with neighborhoods and with social bodies of the size of a community, of the state and with international problems.
>
> We are beginning to see that it is hopeless to attack any one of these aspects of inter-group relations without considering the others.

One also needs to be aware that French and Raven's Power/Interaction Model (French and Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965), on which much of the literature on power and politics is based, owes much to Lewin's work (Raven, 1993). French was a long-time collaborator of Lewin and Raven studied at the Research Center for Group

Dynamics in the 1950s. Both have acknowledged the importance and influence of his work on their perspective on power (House, 1993; Raven, 1993, 1999).

Criticism 4

Lewin is seen as advocating a top-down, management-driven approach to change and ignoring situations requiring bottom-up change (Dawson, 1994; Kanter et al., 1992; Wilson, 1992).

Response 4. Lewin was approached for help by a wide range of groups and organizations:

> They included representatives of communities, school systems, single schools, minority organizations of a variety of backgrounds and objectives; they included labor and management representatives, departments of the national and state governments, and so on. (Lewin, 1946, p. 201)

He clearly recognized that the pressure for change comes from many quarters, not just managers and leaders, and sought to provide an approach which could accommodate this. However, regardless of who identified the need to change, Lewin argued that effective change could not take place unless there was a 'felt need' by all those concerned; he did not see one group or individual as driving or dominating the change process but saw everyone as playing a full and equal part (Lewin, 1947b). He believed that only by gaining the commitment of all those concerned, through their full involvement in the change process, would change be successful (Bargal et al., 1992; Dickens and Watkins, 1999; French and Bell, 1984). Consequently, rather than arguing that Lewin saw behavioural change as a top-down process, it would be more accurate to say that Lewin recognized that it could be initiated from the top, bottom or middle but that it could not be successful without the active, willing and equal participation of all.

CONCLUSION

Lewin undoubtedly had an enormous impact on the field of change. In re-appraising Lewin's Planned approach to change, this article seeks to address three issues: the nature of his contribution; the validity of the criticisms levelled against him; and the relevance of his work for contemporary social and organizational change.

Looking at Lewin's contribution to change theory and practice, there are three key points to note. The first is that Lewin's work stemmed from his concern to find an effective approach to resolving social conflict through changing group behaviour (whether these conflicts be at the group, organizational or societal level). The

second point is to recognize that Lewin promoted an ethical and humanist approach to change, that saw learning and involvement as being the key processes for achieving behavioural change. This was for two reasons: (a) he saw this approach as helping to develop and strengthen democratic values in society as whole and thus acting as a buffer against the racism and totalitarianism which so dominated events in his lifetime; (b) based on his background in Gestalt psychology and his own research, he saw this approach as being the most effective in bringing about sustained behavioural change. The last point concerns the nature of Lewin's work. Lewin's Planned approach to change is based on four mutually-reinforcing concepts, namely Field Theory, Group Dynamics, Action Research and the 3-Step model, which are used in combination to bring about effective change. His critics, though, tend to treat these as separate and independent elements of Lewin's work and, in the main, concentrate on his 3-Step model of change. When seen in isolation, the 3-Step model can be portrayed as simplistic. When seen alongside the other elements of Lewin's Planned approach, it becomes a much more robust approach to change.

We can now examine the criticisms made of Lewin's Planned approach to change. The main criticisms levelled at Lewin are that: (1) his view of stability and change in organizations was at best no longer applicable and at worst 'wildly inappropriate' (Kanter et al., 1992, p. 10); (2) his approach to change is only suitable for isolated and incremental change situations; (3) he ignored power and politics; and (4) he adopted a top-down, management-driven approach to change. These criticisms were addressed above, but to recap:

(1) There is substantial evidence that Lewin (1947a, p. 199) recognized that: 'Change and constancy are relative concepts; group life is never without change, merely differences in the amount and type of change exist'. There is also a substantial body of evidence in the social, and even physical sciences, to support Lewin's 3-Step perspective on to change (Elrod and Tippett, 2002; Hendry, 1996).

(2) As Dickens and Watkins (1999, p. 127) observed: Lewin's approach is '. . . intended to foster change on the group, organizational and even societal levels'. In the main, he saw change as a slow process of working with and through groups to achieve behavioural and cultural change. However, writers as diverse as Quinn (1980, 1982) and Kanter et al. (1992) have recognized that an incremental approach can achieve organizational transformation. Lewin also recognized that, under certain crisis conditions, organizational transformations can be achieved rapidly (Kippenberger, 1998a; Lewin, 1947a). Nevertheless, in the main, even amongst Lewin's critics, the general view is that only structural and technical change can be achieved relatively speedily (Dawson, 1994; Kanter et al., 1992; Pettigrew et al., 1989, 1992; Wilson, 1992).

(3) Given Lewin's concern with issues such as racial and religious conflict, the accusation that he ignored the role of power and politics is difficult to sustain. One of the main strengths of Field Theory and Group Dynamics is that they identify the forces within and between groups and show how individuals behave in response to these. In addition, the iterative, investigative and learning approaches which lie at the heart of Action Research and the 3-Step model are also designed to reveal and address such issues (Bargal and Bar, 1992).

(4) The issues Lewin sought to tackle were many and varied (Cartwright, 1952; Lewin, 1948a). Lewin's sympathies were clearly with the underdog, the disadvantaged and the discriminated against (Cooke, 1999; Marrow, 1969). His assistance was sought by a wide range of parties including national and local government, religious and racial groups, and employers and unions; his response emphasized learning and participation by all concerned (Lewin, 1946). In the face of this, the charge that he saw change as only being top-down or management-driven is difficult to sustain.

Lewin's critics have sought to show that his Planned approach to change was simplistic and outmoded. By rejecting these criticisms, and by revealing the nature of his approach, this article has also shown the continuing relevance of Lewin's work, whether in organizations or society at large. The need to resolve social conflict has certainly not diminished since Lewin's day. Nor can one say that Lewin's approach seems dated, based as it is on building understanding, generating learning, gaining new insights, and identifying and testing (and retesting) solutions (Bargal and Bar, 1992; Darwin et al., 2002). Certainly, there seems little evidence that one can achieve peace, reconciliation, co-operation or trust by force (Olsen, 2002). Likewise, in organizations, issues of group effectiveness, behaviour and change have not diminished in the half century since Lewin's death, though they may often now be labelled differently. However, as in Lewin's day, there are no quick or easy ways of achieving such changes, and Lewin's approach is clearly still valuable and influential in these areas (Cummings and Worley, 1997). This can be seen from the enormous emphasis that continues to be placed on the importance of group behaviour, involvement, empowerment (Argyris, 1992; Handy, 1994; Hannagan, 2002; Huczynski and Buchanan, 2001; Kanter, 1989; Mullins, 2002; Peters, 1993; Schein, 1988; Senge, 1990; Wilson, 1992). Indeed, the advent of the complexity perspective appears to be leading to a renewed interest in Lewin's work (Back, 1992; Kippenberger, 1998a; MacIntosh and MacLean, 2001; Tschacher and Brunner, 1995).

In conclusion, therefore, though Lewin's contribution to organizational change has come under increasing criticism since the 1980s, much of this appears to be unfounded and/or based on a narrow interpretation of his work. In contrast, the last decade has also seen a renewed interest in understanding and applying

his approach to change (Bargal and Bar, 1992; Elrod and Tippett, 2002; Hendry, 1996; Kippenberger, 1998a; MacIntosh and MacLean, 2001; Wooten and White, 1999). In many respects, this should not come as a surprise given the tributes and acknowledgments paid to him by major figures such as Chris Argyris (Argyris et al., 1985) and Edgar Schein (1988). Above all, though, it is a recognition of the rigour of Lewin's work, based as it was on a virtuous circle of theory, experimentation and practice, and which is best expressed by his famous dictum that '. . . there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1943–44, p. 169).

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