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Field Theory

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Introduction

Field theory in psychology belongs to a wide range of holistic theories that were created and proliferated in the early twentieth century and interwar continental psychology and were transferred from Europe to mostly North America after the Nazi ascent to power in the 1930s.

Definition

“Field theory” in its contemporary use in psychology is an umbrella term for a number of psychological theories that generally acknowledge their origin in Kurt Lewin’s (1890–1947) scientific legacy.

Keywords

Field; psychical field; psychological field; life space; topology; topological and vector psychology; ecology; environment

Traditional Debates

Field theory can hardly be understood outside holistic movement in German psychology of the first half of the twentieth century, more specifically, Gestalt psychology that proliferated mainly in the universities of Frankfurt, Berlin, and Giessen. Originally it was created as an alternative to atomistic, associationist psychology that advocated for the study of elements and elementary functions of psyche and behavior. This view is generally supported by the mainstream psychology of our days. In contrast, Gestalt psychologists proposed research that would focus on the study of the wholes, rather than atoms and elements, and considered human being as an organism, as indivisible biosocial unity, rather than a mechanism that can be reduced to a sum of its components, functions, and processes. At the same time, the Gestaltist holists opposed the holism of scholars who postulated the prime principles of life (the vitalists) or the spirit (the spiritualists) that ultimately limit our abilities of empirical investigation of human psychology. Yet another opposition was between Gestaltism and North American behaviorism that shared many views and equally opposed atomism, vitalism, and spiritualism in psychology, but radically diverged in their attitude toward consciousness as an object of psychological research. Unlike behaviorists, who generally rejected the idea of investigating consciousness, the Gestaltists considered consciousness as one of the most essential objects of study in psychology. Thus, in certain sense the revolutionary contribution of Gestalt psychologists can be regarded as one of the first manifestations of critical psychology – before critical psychology.

Initially, at the earliest stage of its development, this school of thought was solidly grounded

in research on perception of structured wholes (*Gestalten*), but pretty soon outgrew the narrow confines of psychology of visual perception and expanded to such diverse domains as problem-solving and thinking, animal, comparative, and child psychology, and the methodological issues of psychological research. The notion of “field” first occurs as early as in the earliest publications of the research on visual perception conducted by the proponents and the leaders of Gestalt theory in the sense of “perceptual” or “visual field” (see, e.g., Wertheimer & Spillmann, 2012) and was quite likely borrowed from contemporary fashionable theories in physics via personal contacts, collaboration, and even friendship between German psychologists-Gestaltists and prominent physicists (e.g., Wolfgang Köhler and Max Planck, and, on the other hand, Max Wertheimer and Albert Einstein). However, it was Kurt Lewin who extended the use of the word “field” to the entire “psychical,” or “psychological field,” made it the object of his studies on will, emotions, and actions that his students in Berlin Institute of Psychology conducted under his supervision in 1920s–early 1930s (De Rivera, 1976) and raised it to the status of one of the central notions of his theoretical framework (Lewin, 1935, 1936). Lewin never invested all his intellectual effort into promoting just one single brand in science, and “field theory” is not an exception to this rule. In addition, the fact is that no single book of Lewin came out with the phrase “field theory” on its cover during his lifetime: the first mention of “field theory” as Lewin book’s title appeared only in 1951 when a posthumous collection of Lewin’s works was published under the editorship of his former postdoctoral student Dorwin Cartwright (Lewin, 1951). However, more or less same or similar notions occur in Lewin’s texts under various names such as “psychological field,” “psychological environment,” “psychological world,” “life space,” “psychological ecology,” and “total situation.” On the other hand, the rich repertoire of field-related terminology can be found in the works of other Gestalt theorists (see, e.g., Koffka, 1935). Sharing his colleagues’ fascination with physics as a model for psychology

as scientific discipline, Lewin employed various idiosyncratic formalisms and extensively used conceptual apparatus and the means of analysis that he borrowed from mathematics, more specifically, geometrical topology. In order to discuss human behavior as inseparable from the persons’ “psychological field,” Lewin operated such notions as “space,” “topology,” “barriers,” “forces,” “vectors,” and “valence” (positive or negative). In order to illustrate and, even more importantly, analyze human behavior in context, Lewin extensively used characteristic means of visualization in the form of funny-looking ovals reminding “eggs” (for psychological life space of an individual) with objects inside or outside of them, divided into subsections and marked with signs of plus or minus and arrows of varying lengths (for denoting the objects’ attractiveness and the force of this attraction). These visualizations of “psychological fields” in certain sense constitute a “trade mark” of Lewinian psychology. All these theoretical notions and graphical models were intended for explaining human behavior, desires, and the laws of attraction (or repulsion), available opportunities (“affordances”) and tensions between these sometimes conflicting opportunities and resulting psychological states of joy, satisfaction, anxiety, anger, frustration, and the like that individuals experience in the course of acting in their psychological environments, or “fields.”

After Lewin’s emigration to the United States in 1933, this line of research was continued, and formal theoretical generalizations were formulated in several books (Lewin, 1935, 1936, 1938). At the same time, however, in accordance with the “affordances” of his own psychological field, Lewin’s activities in North America notably shifted toward applied research on autocracy and democracy, psychology of groups, and “group dynamics,” minority issues (most notably, social issues of Jewish life and survival in Europe and America), practice of training, and, more generally, social psychology. This tread of theoretical and applied research is now known as “action research,” the term that Lewin coined and introduced in the first

half of 1940s. A number of Lewin's published articles of his American period of late 1930s and 1940s came out in two posthumous collections of his works under the editorship of his students and collaborators (Lewin, 1948, 1951).

Critical Debates

All in all, it can be said that Lewin's field theory in all its richness and promise to psychological theory was either forgotten or dramatically simplified and fell victim to the neglect of the general psychological theory in positivistic North American psychology, "scientific Taylorism," that is, overspecialization and utter fragmentation of knowledge in contemporary psychological science, and, partially, to the tensions between some of the leaders of the Gestalt movement who started diverging in their views on psychology in late 1930s. The revolutionary potential and the richness of the holistic approach of the Gestalt theory in its North American interpretation were reduced to highly fragmented and specialized niches of psychology of perception or, less notably, animal intelligence or productive thinking, whereas Lewin's topological thinking and field theory remained largely misunderstood, "naturalized," and "domesticated" in a series of subsequent interpretations in agreement with the dominant theoretical strands in social psychology. Subsequently, Lewin's field theory inspired a few later developments under the banners of "environmental," "ecological" psychology or "ecological systems theory" such as the theories of Roger Garlock Barker, James Jerome Gibson, or Urie Bronfenbrenner, respectively. However, the losses are numerous and really fatal.

First, quite often there is no clear understanding of the extent to which Lewin's theorizing was embedded in Gestalt movement and, generally, German holistic psychology. Thus, Gestalt psychology is normally associated exclusively with the studies of perception, whereas Lewin's legacy is typically interpreted as the major contribution to North American social psychology, Lewin being presented as one of its "founding fathers." Alternatively, there is a tendency to underplay the

North American period of Lewin's work that often, on the other hand, is mostly understood in terms of Kurt Lewin's research on actions, affects, and will in the Berlin group of his students and associates (see De Rivera, 1976).

Second, it is often ignored that Lewin's theory is not only a strictly social science but also a personality theory and its applications in clinical and pathological psychology are of considerable promise as is evidenced in the career paths and scientific contributions of a number of Lewin's former students such as Tamara Dembo, Maria Rickers-Ovsiankina, Bluma Zeigarnik, or Gita Birenbaum.

Third, what is largely missed in a wide range of interpretations of Gestalt psychology and, by extension, Lewin's "field theory" is the Gestalt theory's original emphasis on meaning and consciousness as most fundamental ideas of this intellectual movement. This emphasis on meaning was somewhat deliberately downplayed in the "export version" of Gestalt theory as it was presented before the 1930s to the English-speaking readers that were predominantly trained within behaviorist tradition (Ellis, 1930; Koffka, 1935). Most promising synthesis of holistic field-theoretical framework with research on meaning and sensemaking was initiated by several groups of Soviet Marxist psychologists, most notably the scholars associated with the Vygotsky Circle and their emergent theory of cultural development, who productively augmented the discourse of visual fields and field forces with such theoretical constructs as "semantic field," "semantic barriers," and the like and critically applied these in clinical settings and in the context of developmental and educational research (see, e.g., Birenbaum & Zeigarnik, 1935, Zeigarnik & Birenbaum, 1935). This project, however, was only partially fulfilled in prewar period and for various reasons was considerably transformed by some or abandoned altogether by other former members of this Circle in the period after WWII. The failure to acknowledge consciousness as an integral and inseparable part of psychological environment or the inability to conceptualize and operationalize meaning as the goal of empirical post-WWII research resulted in

behaviorist and cognitivist reductionism both in North American psychological research and in quasi-Marxist “activity theory” psychology in the Soviet Union (Yasnitsky, 2012).

Finally, Lewin’s famous saying that “nothing is more practical than a good theory” is often misunderstood in its implied political message, social activism, and transformative stance. Lewinian activism is represented by a number of ideas and practices ranging from fairly pragmatic to utterly utopian. The former are well known and are normally presented as the essence of Lewin’s social psychology in North American context. However, the latter are typically ignored, most likely for their explicit Marxist connotation and leftist radicalism. An example of such Marxist development of Lewinian “field theory” can be found in the work of Kurt Lewin’s student Junius Flagg Brown, who was the first to introduce Lewin’s psychological theory in North America (Brown, 1929). His major oeuvre representing a “dynamic study of social fields” (Brown, 1936), is a very interesting and quite characteristic example of Lewinian thinking in its value-laden, Marxist applications in political psychology that appears quite of relevance in psychological thinking of our days (Minton, 1988).

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Online Resources

- The Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA). <http://www.gestalttheory.net/> and, specifically, The Gestalt Archive <http://gestalttheory.net/archive/>
- Gestalt Theory. An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Official Journal of the Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA). <http://gth.krammerbuch.at/>
- PsyAnima, Dubna Psychological Journal. <http://www.psyanima.ru/>

First-Person Perspective

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Introduction

The first-person perspective is a central concept of critical psychology trying to make psychological processes and the subjective dimension of human life understandable. The concept refers to the point of view of the “I” as the way in which a human subject has access to herself/himself and the world and to her/his experiences, emotions, thoughts, and actions. The concept