

Kurt Lewin's wide-ranging influence on the history of qualitative research. Response to Helmut Lück and Clemens Knobloch

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Helmut Lück 2021 [this volume] and Clemens Knobloch 2021 [this volume] show that Kurt Lewin was a traveler between continents and disciplines. His work was received in numerous contexts – in and outside of academia – and had a long-lasting impact in a number of fields. Knobloch and Lück point out the impact of Lewin's early work on the development of sequence analysis and the early use of audio-visual data in the social sciences. Both methodological elements play a decisive role in contemporary qualitative research, and it is fair to say that Lewin's role in this development has been underestimated so far. But a closer look reveals that Lewin also influenced several other central elements of contemporary qualitative research, especially in the German-speaking countries. This observation is not new (see e.g. Lück 1996a: 128–132), but it deserves to be recalled in a book about the history of research methodologies. In the following, I want to highlight Lewin's influence on group discussion, participatory research, and qualitative case studies, and suggest adding him to the list of key figures in the history of qualitative research.

In his later work, Lewin had a keen interest in groups, and his work on group dynamics is probably the most widely received part of his oeuvre. It was also an important foundation for the methodology of “group discussion”, which emerged after World War II and has been further developed ever since. In 1950, shortly after their return to Germany, Friedrich Pollock, Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer started the famous *Gruppenexperiment* at the Institut für Sozialforschung (IfS) in Frankfurt am Main (Pollock 1955; Perrin & Olick 2011). Starting off with only a small research team, by the end the project involved at least 37

researchers. In different parts of Germany, they brought research participants together in groups and confronted them with a stimulus which triggered a discussion that was chaired by one of the researchers. The discussions were recorded on audio tapes, which were transcribed and interpreted by members of the research team, under the guidance of Hertha Herzog and Helmuth Plessner (Adorno & Horkheimer 1955: VI). The members of the IfS had a clear idea of their aims: continuing their work on “prejudice” (Adorno et al. 1950), they wanted to understand the political climate in post-World War II Germany. Methodologically, on the other hand, they did not walk well-worn paths. The group experiment was a typical “pilot study”, and the development of a novel research method was one of the declared goals of the project (Pollock 1955: 3).

The authors of the *Gruppenexperiment* claimed that they did not build on any existing studies and that the team in Frankfurt had developed the approach mostly on their own (Pollock 1955: 4). Even Werner Mangold, a former student of Adorno who wrote a dissertation on the methodology of the *Gruppenexperiment*, dedicates only one footnote to Lewin (Mangold 1959: 63, regarding the normative character of informal group opinions). Lück (1996b: 130), Fleck (2007: 390) and others have argued that the members of the IfS owe a lot to Lewin’s ideas, but that they conceal this connection because they saw Lewin as a competitor. This view is supported by correspondence between Adorno and Horkheimer (see e.g. Wiggershaus 1986: 412, 415), but the story is probably more complicated. In his 1953 preface to Lewin’s collected papers (published after Lewin’s death), Horkheimer claims an “intimate relationship” between Lewin’s work and his own and calls Lewin’s work “indispensable” for German academic research. Either way, it is striking that Lewin, whose work on group dynamics was well known among the members of the IfS, was not quoted in any of their major publications on the *Gruppenexperiment*.

Throughout the 1950s, the members of the IfS conducted several studies based on the group discussion method (see e.g. Braunstein & Link 2019). In the 1970s, the approach was taken up by Ralf Bohnsack, who used it in a project on police work (Schütze & Bohnsack 1973: 278). In 1977, Bohnsack embarked on a collaboration with Mangold and – over the course of ten years – developed a new methodological foundation for group discussion based on Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge (Mangold & Bohnsack 1988; Bohnsack 1989). Further variants of the group discussion, also based on Mangold’s work, were developed by Thomas Leithäuser and Birgit Volmerg (1979), Manfred Nießen (1977) and others. In these reinterpretations of the method, group discussion became one of the central approaches to data production in German-speaking qualitative research.

Another line of Lewin's late work, which was more openly credited in the literature on social research methodology, is action research. The German movement of *Aktionsforschung* started in the late 1960s and used social research to foster "democratic values" and social emancipation of underprivileged groups. Drawing explicitly on Lewin (1946), its proponents argued that action research could help to find solutions to social problems and support social engineering (Lewin 1946: 202; Lück 1996a: 128–130; Unger et al. 2007: 10). During the students' movements of the 1960s, this idea became very popular in Germany. Through the active involvement of research participants in the research process and systematic reflection of the relationship between researchers and research subjects, action research promised to be an answer to both political and methodological questions (e.g. the question if social research can ever be free of value judgements, Adorno et al. 1969). The first German action research projects were initiated by young scholars in the fields of social work and education. Pioneer studies were conducted in Hamburg in 1969, Berlin in 1970, and in Wiesbaden and Marburg in 1971 (see Altrichter 2008: 33). In these projects, each local group developed their own distinctive approach and later published methodological as well as empirical reports on their work (e.g. Fuchs 1970; Haag et al. 1972; Heinze et al. 1975). After a few years of high visibility (about 400 publications in ten years), action research lost popularity in the early 1980s. According to Hella von Unger et al. (2007: 19), it disappeared quickly and thoroughly from the methodological landscape in the mid-1980s. In the last fifteen years, it was rediscovered and substantially revised under the label *Partizipative Forschung* ("participatory research"; Unger 2014) and is widely used in German-speaking qualitative research today.

One more line of influence is worth mentioning: Lewin's methodological argument for an in-depth analysis of individual cases. Valuable scientific generalizations or laws, Lewin (1930/31) argues, are not the result of abstraction and quantification from a large number of cases. On the contrary, only the detailed and context-sensitive analysis of concrete, individual cases and situations brings about valuable generalizations (Lewin 1930/31: 455–456). This idea, which Lewin framed as a transition from an *Aristotelian* to a *Galilean* way of thinking (Lewin 1930/31, see Lück 2021 [this volume]: 5), left deep traces in contemporary qualitative research. It was particularly important in psychology, where quantitative approaches are dominant up to the present day (Schulze 2020: 605; Tateo 2013). But we find it also in textbooks for readers from all disciplines, such as the widely read introduction to sociology by Gabriele Rosenthal (2008). Rosenthal refers to Lewin (1927; 1930/31) for an epistemological justification of biographical case studies (1995: 210) and – more generally – for social research with small case numbers (Rosenthal 2008: 75–76).

Sequence analysis, audio-visual data, group discussion, action research, and case studies: these are five (relatively independent) lines of reception of Lewin's work in qualitative research, and there might be more to find. It must be assumed that reconstructing the impact of Lewin on research methodologies in a more detailed and systematic way will add an important dimension to the history of the social sciences.

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