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*Tilføjelse 01.12.2009: Jeg har helt mistet kontakten med Massarik og kan efter grundig søgning heller ikke konstatere, om den planlagte antologi nogen sinde blev publiceret – skønt det blev meddelt mig i en mail i foråret 2009, at det var nært forestående. Derfor må den refereres som et **arbejdsblad**, Psykologisk Institut, Aarhus Universitet.*

January 2012: I lost any contact with Massarik and have not been able to substantiate whether the planned book was ever published. Hence, my texts must be considered an unpublished working paper.

Low-tension strategies in conflict resolution

Kurt Lewin's perspective

By Benedicte Madsen

One of the books by Kurt Lewin is called *Resolving social conflicts*. Although the title was probably chosen by Gertrud Weiss Lewin who edited the anthology after her husband's death in 1947, it reflects his interest in conflict and conflict resolution. Two of the chapters deal explicitly with this topic, namely "The background of conflict in marriage" (Lewin 1940) and "The solution of a chronic conflict in industry" (Lewin 1944). Below, I will give an account of the latter case, interpreting the events in the light of Lewin's theoretical system.

Conflict resolution is receiving increasing attention. A great many publications crop up, written by scholars and practitioners in sociology, psychology, communication, law, etc. Only few of these refer to Lewin, and if they do, usually only by making general remarks of reverence rather than offering specific details. The aim of the present paper is to revitalize Lewin's line of thought in relation to conflict. Furthermore, I will introduce a notion of low-tension change strategy that fits Lewin's idea of conflict resolution and, more generally, his views on change, thus supplementing his concept of resistance to change and his renowned change model: Unfreeze-Move-Refreeze.

The case story depicts how a mediator helps an organization manage a long-lasting conflict that has been patched up again and again and now threatens to explode. The mediator facilitates mental and social change and helps resolve, or should I say dissolve, strong antagonisms. Using Lewin's

terminology, the mental change occurs in the individual member's *life space*, whereas the social change takes place in the shared *social space*. Before telling the story, brief accounts of these crucial constructs and of Lewin's interrelated theoretical contributions: field theory and group dynamics, are provided.¹

Field theory and life space

Lewin dedicated himself to the study of complex change processes, trying to understand any kind of movement or locomotion as a result of the dynamic interplay between disparate forces. Until his flight from Nazi Germany to the USA in 1933, his main concern was individual dynamics, cf. the title of his 1935-work: *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*. Throughout his career he developed his field theory which is mostly understood as a psychological theory on an individual level, the key concept being *the psychological field alias life space*.

This field is defined as a gestalt: an organized unity consisting of the person and his psychological (i.e. sensed, felt, perceived, experienced, be it even so vaguely) environment, comparable to a phenomenal field in which the physical and social environment and the person himself are mentally represented. It is criss-crossed by multifarious and highly interdependent dimensions, parts, structures and regions. The elements constantly change but at the same time they seek states of balance, always temporary, by Lewin called quasi-stationary equilibria.

To Lewin, movement/locomotion is the general equivalent of all kinds of conduct, action and behavior, overt as well as covert. In field theory, he first and foremost focuses on *mental* movements, i.e. changes "inside" life space. Often, such movements go prior to overt behavior but they are also, and in turn, influenced by the actions of the person.

The cognitive structure of the field relates to the content of life space and to the meanings attached to its myriads of elements. *The motivational structure* is made up of valences and forces - life space is "charged". At any given point in time, elements in the field consist of positive or negative values. These valences are fastened to mentally represented objects, acts, events etcetera that the person perceives to enhance or hinder need gratification, broadly speaking. Corresponding to each valence is a force, or vector.

A goal exists when a number of forces point in the same direction, an aversion is present where forces point away from an area in the field. 'Conflict' refers to a specific state of tension, namely when two (sets of) forces of approximately the same strength will pull in opposite directions. Three types of conflict situations can be derived. The person may be suspended between two positive or two negative (sets of) valences, or a region of life space may be both positively and negatively charged so that the person is attracted and repulsed simultaneously: an ambi-valence. Textbooks

¹ Minor parts of the two section paraphrase equivalent sections in Madsen 2006a. Others parts elaborate on my Danish publications on Lewin and the Lewinian tradition, unpublished and published; two published papers are Madsen 2001, 2006b.

refer to these situations as approach-approach, avoidance-avoidance and approach-avoidance conflicts, but this is not Lewin's own terminology.

Mind you: Here we talk about *mental conflicts* in life space, i.e. conflicts on an intra-personal level. They may or may not be part of *social conflicts*.

The level of tensions has implications for mental as well as behavioral movement. In conflict situations where the person finds himself in a deadlock as a consequence of opposing forces, the high level of tension may block any movement. Otherwise, it is barriers that inhibit locomotion. Lewin defines a barrier as a zone in life space that constrains the person's movement. Some of the barriers are physical, others are related to the personal limitations with regard to traits, abilities and resources, yet others are due to prescriptions and proscriptions of the social environment - that which Lewin called *induced* forces and barriers. In the so-called spaces of free movement, volition rules.

Variable states characterize a life space. Apart from the degree of equilibrium, mentioned above, three states seem to be of special relevance to Lewinian conflict resolution style: the degree of tension, the degree of clearness and the degree of fluidity.

The degree of tension is related to the strength and constellation of forces. Strong states of tension occur when many and/or strong conflicting forces contain each other, cf. mental conflicts. Such tensions are accompanied by strong emotionality, i.e. irrational emotions. "If the opposed vectors controlling the conflict situation are very strong, the tension may result in diffuse discharge, that is, in an *emotional outburst*" (Lewin 1935:151).²

States of tension are connected to the motivational structure. As far as the cognitive structure goes, *the degree of clearness* is crucial.

"The degree of clearness is an essential determinant of the cognitive structure of the life space. It is closely related to the degree to which one can differentiate the life space into different regions and is therefore of great importance for learning and insight" (Lewin 1936:39).

Vaguely structured and undifferentiated regions as well as unclear barriers with extensive grey-zones implicate tension and conflict in the person's life space, illustrating that cognitive and motivational aspects are intertwined. The point is evident in the following quotation, relating to the child's situation:

"Pedagogically it is of great importance whether the regions of play, eating, sleeping, and working in the life space of a child are clearly and sharply separated or whether there exist broad regions of unclear transitions. The same is true of the regions of the

² Lewin seems to overlook that emotions are signals of importance and in this sense may be considered sensible, "rational". When he used the terms emotion(al)ity and affect, it designates that some kind of disorganization, disturbance and lack of (what Freud called) reality testing are at play.

permitted and the forbidden, of freedom and coercion. Unclear zones of unsharp transitions lead more often to tension and conflicts" (Lewin 1936:122).

A third state in a life space is *the degree of fluidity*. "A situation is the more fluid the smaller the forces which are necessary, other conditions being equal, to produce a given change in the situation" (Lewin 1936:159; he often uses the term 'situation' as synonymous for life space). Change in mental patterns and structures come about easier if the relevant region of the field is transformed, more or less temporarily, into a fluid state. We shall see that the notion of fluidity lies behind Lewin's change model.

Lewin is concerned with states in which the fluidity is particularly high, for instance: fatigue, play, experimenting, transitional states, crises, early stages of decision-making processes, and initial phases as such: "In general, situations are most fluid *in statu nascendi*" (1936:160). As I understand him, the spaces of free movement represent the utmost degree of fluidity. Lewin points to yet another situation of increased probability for fluidity and reduced resistance to change, namely when the person or the group are in a newly established context under conditions that are comparable to a 'cultural island'.

"The effectiveness of camps or workshops in changing ideology or conduct depends in part on the possibility of creating such 'cultural islands' during change. The stronger the accepted subculture of the workshop and the more isolated it is the more will it minimize that type of resistance to change which is based on the relation between the individual and the standards of the larger group" (Lewin 1947a:232f).

In such a context the influence of socially sustained habits and norms are partly suspended. A good example is the Lewin-inspired training laboratory (Bradford et al. 1964). Similar methods may be used in conflict mediation; this, however, was not the chosen way in the case story below.

Group dynamics and social space

From the moment he set foot on American soil, Lewin's research interests became focused on groups, organizations and society. He was yearning for the world to become a better place to live in and wanted social science to serve this purpose while at the same time he envisioned scientists' efforts in grappling with practical problems as an important challenge and incentive to theory development. His work became a unique source of inspiration for American social psychology, not least indirectly in that his pupils and close collaborators became pioneers and trend-setters for decades to come.

Around 1935, together with Ronald Lippitt and later on Ralph White, he started a series of experiments based on club activities for young boys. This research examined how group climate/group atmosphere and tension building would depend on autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire leadership style (Lewin 1939; Lewin, Lippitt & White 1939). It was at the completion of this

programme that he originally coined the term group dynamics (Cartwright & Zander 1953; Marrow 1969).

Lewin was initiator of another seminal series of experiments, this one on the importance of group discussion in relation to change of food habits. It came about as part of a war-dictated effort to economize on the use of scarce resources, and gave rise to important theoretical developments, most notably through the coining of concepts such as change agent, gatekeeper, resistance to change and the said change model (Lewin 1947a, b).

What will happen if a group discussion is established as a phase of the individual decision-making process? And why is it that the group is seemingly so efficient as promoter for change? According to Lewin personal commitment is a decisive factor for many kinds of change, and in relation to the food habit research he notes that the degree of participant involvement was definitely greater in those experimental groups that had the chance to engage in mutual exchange of views. Here we have one explanation of how group discussion is instrumental to change.

Another factor is the interplay between individual and group-related norms. If individuals are to change food habits, there will be a need for changing their conceptions of what 'true', attractive, healthy respectively 'wrong', objectionable, harmful human food is. Consequently, given the fact that such norms are social phenomena that may be influenced and sustained by group processes, the strategy for change must also carry a social element, Lewin argues.

A third factor might be called cognitive enrichment. By means of a well-managed group discussion it is possible to differentiate and qualify the shared theme. Lewin mentions this aspect in connection with the conflict case that is the focus of the present paper:

"As a rule, group discussion brings out a richer, better balanced, and more detailed picture of the situation. The atmosphere of openness which is possible in group discussion as opposed to the secrecy so characteristic of individual information giving is very important for the readiness to co-operate" (Lewin 1944:132).

In the last year of his life Lewin worked out a theoretical manifesto: "Frontiers in group dynamics" that was published in the first issue of *Human Relations*³. As pointed out by Deutch (1954:214), he actually wrote very little on the *theory* of group dynamics. He was too busy documenting his empirical research and relating to societal problems during WW II. Neither did he come up with any strict delimitation of the discipline, but my own definition goes like this: Group dynamics is research on, interventions in and planning of processes of interaction and change at both group and

³ The journal *Human Relations* was founded in 1946 through the joint efforts of Kurt Lewin and Eric Trist (Marrow 1969; Trist & Murray 1990). Trist was one of the prominent figures at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. In 1948-52 another prominent Tavistock figure, Wilfred Bion, published seven plus one essays on group processes, the last one called *Group Dynamics: a Re-View*. The essays were later collected in Bion 1961. Bion's psycho-dynamically oriented group dynamics bears no resemblance to Lewin's group dynamics.

organization level, guided by the general assumption that such processes result from the interplay between complex forces on intrapersonal as well as interpersonal levels.

The discipline Group Dynamics expands and incorporates the original field theory. Obviously, Individual and Group are interrelated phenomena. As I read Lewin's work, he has a particularly keen eye for the relation between these two entities and levels of analysis, something that becomes evident in the case story.

As part of the development of group dynamics, Lewin introduced the concept of *social space*, a counterpart to life space.

"I am persuaded that there exists a social space which has all the essential properties of a real empirical space ... The perception of social space and the experimental and conceptual investigation of the dynamics and laws of the processes in social space are of fundamental theoretical and practical importance" (Lewin 1939:71).

In the manifesto, he shifts to *social field*, a counterpart to psychological field, and defines it as follows:

"A basic tool for the analysis of group life is the representation of the group and its setting as a 'social field'. This means that the social happening is viewed as occurring in, and being the result of, a totality of coexisting social entities, such as groups, subgroups, members, barriers, channels of communication, etc. One of the fundamental characteristics of this field is the relative position of the entities, which are part of the field. This relative position represents the structure of the group and its ecological setting. It expresses also the basic possibilities of locomotion within the field. What happens within such a field depends upon the distribution of forces throughout the field" (Lewin 1947a:200-1).

'Social space' and 'social field' are of course synonymous terms. Just as the psychological field is defined as a totality of the person and his perceived environment, the social field must be considered more than 'the group', consisting of – well, what exactly? The above quotation does not suffice. Twenty years after the death of his mentor, Ron Lippitt sums up that "Lewin was beginning to grapple with the challenging problems of defining social space and social field-theory" (1968:269), implicitly saying that Lewin never got past attempts at doing so, the project did not get that far before he died. Nevertheless, I use the term 'social field/space' in the following, though in a loose manner.

As in individual life space, tensions are more or less present in social space. Here-and-now tension will easily grow into a conflict if a high level of tension already exists. According to Lewin, his experiments demonstrated that the general level of tension plays an important role in creating social conflict. For instance, the level of tension is higher in groups with autocratic than in groups with democratic leadership and altogether the degree of tension in the social field is one of the defining dimensions of group atmosphere. This goes for any type of group, including the dyad consisting of

a married couple. "The frequency and seriousness of conflicts in marriage depend mainly on the general atmosphere of the marriage. For the solution of conflicts the atmosphere again seems to be the most important factor" (Lewin 1940:101).

According to Lewin, a group will experience tensions if the respective goals of the parties seem to contradict each other, that is, cannot be realized simultaneously and to the same degree. In such a situation, A will put up barriers to B's goal-directed behavior and constrict B's space of free movement. Whether or not the contrast will result in a social conflict very much depends on how B feels about the constraint. If he understands and accepts A's perspective, the constriction will not result in a conflict. "Within the group life conflicts depend upon the degree to which the goals of the members contradict each other, and *upon the readiness to consider the other person's point of view*", says Lewin in the abovementioned article on conflict in marriage (1940:89-90, italics mine). Social conflict is a reality only to the extent that the parties experience their mental or behavioral freedom of movement inhibited *in an unreasonable manner* by the other party.

It is commonly known that the more a conflict escalates, the less the parties are able and willing to see things from each other's perspective. In an escalation process, the statements and actions of the other party will appear increasingly unreasonable, which will result in a self-increasing process. If, on the other hand, a mediator helps the parties to consider each other's perspective, the conflict is likely to dissolve or transform into a more constructive relationship (see Bush & Folger 2004; Galtung 2004).

Case story: The solution of a chronic conflict

We will return to the years around 1940. The man who managed the conflict was Alex Bavelas and he wrote down the course of events. Later Lewin reproduced the story and added his own reflections, noting that the case would illustrate "certain aspects of group dynamic" (1944:125). He refers to Bavelas as the psychologist, but let us call him the mediator; one could also have used the Lewinian term 'change agent'.

In the late 1930s, Bavelas became Lewin's research assistant in the food habit experiments and, standing on the side line, he also witnessed the research on group atmosphere and leadership style. He then asked himself whether it would be possible to transfer these results to business life. He got a chance to test the question when he via Lewin was employed as action researcher at the textile factory Harwood. In collaboration with staff and workers, Bavelas experimented with self-governing groups and democracy on the work place. (Marrow 1969).

At the factory there had for long been a clash of interest between a female supervisor and a male mechanic. The supervisor was responsible for a couple of hundred female machine operators, and the mechanic was to service the large number of machines single-handedly. The conflict culminated when the supervisor felt that the mechanic accused her of lying. She was hurt and angry and decided that the cup was full; she would pack her things and leave.

Consequently she went to see the boss at his office to give notice. The boss succeeded in persuading her to at least discuss the matter in the presence of the mechanic. When the mechanic arrived, he was just as agitated. He felt that the accusation of lying was a threat to his honor, and he too warned that he would give notice. The argument continued while the boss in vain tried to figure out what was head or tail of the matter. Moreover, it appeared that some of the employees spoke ill of one behind the back of the other, so what had caused the actual conflict?

At that very moment, Bavelas was passing in the hallway. "You're just the man we've been waiting for", said the boss visibly relieved. After a few introductory remarks, Bavelas tried to tone down the drama and made sure that both parties would co-operate. Then he immediately set the conflict management process going, thus entering the role as mediator.

He started by interviewing the supervisor and the mechanic individually, concentrating on facts and figures and carefully avoiding any focus on who was right and who was wrong with regard to the accusations. He put no pressure on the parties to alter evaluation, perception or behavior, and therefore they never felt any need to mobilize their resistance. Although the stories of the supervisor and the mechanic, as a starting point, differed quite a lot, Bavelas managed to make the two narratives converge.

He kept the converged story to himself, but it ran as follows: One of the machine operators had contacted the supervisor and complained that her machine was out of order. Perhaps/perhaps not the girl had murmured that the mechanic refused to repair the machine. The supervisor was of the opinion that similar situations had previously occurred on many occasions. She approached the mechanic at once to tell him what the operator had (perhaps) said. The mechanic turned furious for he had never denied repairing her machine, only told her that he would do it later. He felt a threat to his honour and to his position of authority. When the supervisor left the workshop, he sent for the operator in question. She protested, she had never said what the supervisor accused her of saying. Together they went to see the supervisor in order to confront her with what was supposedly a lie. The supervisor felt betrayed; above all she had intended to help the operator so that she would not lose time and money. At this point, the supervisor decided to go to the boss.

Up till then, the mediator has just inquired into the matter, not intervened in the usual sense of the word. And then again, Lewin notes that Bavelas by factual questions brings about a cognitive restructuring of the parties' view on the matter. Not by presenting new facts but by encouraging them to show an interest in "the objective situation". Thereby, the attention of the individual is re-oriented, it is moved away from the area of life space that implies personal and strongly emotional relations, towards established facts represented in the cognitive structures. Consequently, the parties gain greater personal distance to the events and are able to see the situation in its entirety. From this helicopter perspective the situation looks much more alike than it does from the "charged" perspectives of each individual party.

"The life-spaces which guide the action of these persons have become more similar although the persons themselves are not yet aware of this similarity", Lewin says (1944:129). The convergence is

brought about not only by taking the helicopter perspective but also by an exchange of individual perspectives. We saw earlier that tension and conflict in a group arise when the goals of the parties are perceived to be incompatible. In such a situation, A restricts B's free movement, and vice versa. Obviously, this was the case between the supervisor and the mechanic, at least as long as they were not ready to take each other's perspective on the matter. Somewhat indirectly, the mediator helped one to take the point of view of the other, and vice versa. I repeat an earlier quotation: "Within the group life conflicts depend upon the degree to which the goals of the members contradict each other, and *upon the readiness to consider the other person's point of view*" (Lewin 1940:89-90, italics mine).

The next task for the mediator was to obtain the two main characters' consent to interview some of the operators. They both agreed and both wanted to know the employees' opinion of the matter. When the mediator had interviewed the employees individually, he asked the most malcontent ones to participate in a group discussion of which he was in charge. The theme of the discussion was whether or not it would be possible to find a fair and just solution to the problem. Everyone agreed on the nature of the problem, being that the mechanic would be under a lot of stress if several machines were to break down at the same time. The shared premise was that, due to war mobilization, there was no extra mechanic to hire; there had been difficulties of deferring even this one from military service. Based on the group discussion a very simple plan emerged for a repair order when several machines broke down at the same time. If the machines were equally important for the production, the rule 'first come, first served' would be valid, otherwise the most important machine would be serviced first.

Hence, a group discussion with no noticeable external pressure, that is, the participants did not necessarily *have* to find a solution nor was there any suggestion with regard to the nature of a solution. "All individuals involved have freely and without pressure expressed their agreement to some future steps" (Lewin 1944:131). Lewin points out that engaging themselves in a group discussion implied co-operativeness that would contribute to the further events. In addition, the group discussion gave rise to cognitive enrichment.

The employees' suggestion could not yet be called a solution since the consent of the two main characters had yet to be obtained. Likewise, it remained to decide which machine would in a given situation be the 'most important'. The mediator first approached the mechanic. He declared that he agreed to the operators' suggestion. Besides, it turned out that he preferred not having to decide which machine he would have to repair first. That decision would be the supervisor's responsibility, he felt and added that it might be difficult for her to accept the proposal for a solution.

Lewin visualizes the life space of the mechanic: The machine shop is his safe territory. As soon as he steps onto the shop floor he is on foreign soil, for here "the girls" rule under the female supervisor's leadership. If three machines are out of order at the same time, he will find himself in a conflict where three forces point in different directions; the strength of these forces will depend on how much noise the operators make. Furthermore, he will have to guess what the supervisor wants him to do, he has no criteria for balancing his priorities, that is, his field is cognitively unstructured. Due to the fact that the forces point in different directions, and because the barriers around his space

of free movement are unclear, his life space is characterized by a considerable accumulation of tension and conflict. However, according to his experience the risk of taking a wrong decision is greater than taking no decision at all. This means that the very decision-making has negative valence and postponing a decision has positive valence. The proposed procedure will free the mechanic of making a decision, hence giving it positive valence. To Lewin this is the most important reason for the mechanic to accept the employees' proposal so wholeheartedly.

The mediator's next step was to contact the supervisor. She exclaimed that the plan represented exactly what should be done, but she could hardly believe that the mechanic would consent. In short, neither the supervisor nor the mechanic experienced having to give up power or status by accepting the proposal from the operators. A few more steps in the mediator's pendling between the parties sufficed for the new procedure to be ready for implementation.

What happened then at the factory? Everyone noticed a change to the better in the relation between the supervisor and the mechanic. The lying-issue had evaporated. There was no more "trouble" among the operators. And the mechanic could work under less time pressure. In an independent interview three months later, he estimated that on average he were called ten times on a daily basis, it used to be fifteen times; in particular, the trivial calls for assistance had been reduced. Incidentally, he had on his own initiative installed, and out of his own pocket paid for, a loud speaker system in the machine shop and put on music several times a day, a source of great pleasure to all.

When the mechanic was asked what might have caused the positive changes in his work situation, he felt that the music had to be credited. Why did he not recognize the efforts of the mediator? Probably because the changes resulting from his conflict management were subtle. And because the mechanic and the other parties perceived the changes as something they were responsible for themselves. Which in fact they were, to some extent. The story confirms Lewin's credo that humans must move freely if there is to be sustainable change. And when they move as a consequence of a sensible third-party intervention, they spontaneously perceive it as a result of their own doing.

Lewin concludes that the conflict rose out of an aspect of production where overlapping authorities existed in a cognitively unclear situation. He adds that the procedure of Bavelas was based on the hypothesis that the conflict was at least partly the result of some faulty organization of production. And furthermore:

"On the whole, it seems that the brief treatment has actually solved a chronic conflict. It has established good relations in a previously fighting triangle, the mechanic, the supervisor, and the operators. Finally, it has led to an unexpected diminishing of repairs in the factory. It seems that the basic principles which guided the action of the psychologist might be summed up as follows: *The realistic demands of production have to be satisfied in a way which conforms with the nature of group dynamics*" (Lewin 1944:137-8).

The principles corresponded to the nature of group dynamics, yes. But they also corresponded to the nature of individual dynamics, the way this phenomenon is treated in field theory.

The mediator's general strategy was that of reducing the pressure on the supervisor and the mechanic, for instance by concentrating on the purely cognitive aspects and by guaranteeing that change would only be made by voluntary means. Hereby, a heightened degree of fluidity in crucial regions of the life spaces was promoted. Lewin stresses that fact-finding was a cornerstone in the change process and emphasizes that this method is more than just a distancing, non-intervention method. The person who sets about to inquire into facts will imperceptibly restructure his psychological field so that it becomes more realistic, more in touch with reality. Hereby, motivational structures as well as overt behavior are influenced. The focus on facts and cognitive contents of individual life spaces - as opposed to a focus on the tense relationships between the parties in social space - transformed the original conflict in a de-personalized, less emotional and less "relational" direction.

As is seen, working in accordance with Lewinian group dynamics does not necessarily imply direct intervention on the social level. On the other hand, the mediator continuously considered social relations. He took precautions with regard to the trust of all parties, he actively involved the parties in finding a solution and he was sensitive to power relations, as Lewin notes. Another decisive factor was that he obtained permission from the supervisor to contact the operators so that her authority would not be undermined. This ensured her final identification with the solution. Due to the fact that the employees at the lowest level of the hierarchy had been actively engaged in the solution, the operators were more strongly motivated than if they had had a new procedure thrust down their throats. According to Lewin this was one of the preconditions for achieving 'full co-operation'. In recent years we would tend to say 'full ownership'.

All of these elements enter into the intervention philosophy I designate low-tension change strategy.

Low-tension strategies

The interplay of a few, weak field forces may result in the very same state of equilibrium as many strong forces that pull in different directions. The difference will not show in the potential for movement, but in the fact that the level of tension is higher, the stronger the forces are that hold each other in check. That a physical system may also be balanced and yet vary with regard to level of tension, I can illustrate by the grocer's scale that will have the same state of balance, be there 10 gram or 10 kilo on each side of the scale - the difference being that two times 10 kilo strain the entire system much more than two times 10 gram.

According to Lewin, high levels of tension in life space or in social space indicate strong and irrational emotions and inhibit constructive action. Change agents must take this into account. Furthermore they must bear in mind that there are at least two ways of obtaining the change wished for: either by *increasing* the forces that create a movement *towards* the goal or by *reducing* the

forces that *hold off* the person from achieving the goal. In the instance mentioned first, the tension will increase, in the latter the tension will be reduced. "Social changes may or may not be preceded by an increase in the opposing forces. Under some conditions, however, social change can be achieved much easier if the tension is previously decreased" (Lewin 1947a:204). There is a red thread in his writings indicating that change agents should prefer strategies that reduce tension.⁴

Let us assume that a change agent insists on achieving a certain development in another party and that this influence attempt is met with resistance. In the words of folk psychology: action begets reaction. If the two sets of pressure from (a) the change agent's inductive attempt and (b) the field forces of the other party, are of equal strength, then the change agent will, by means of his high-tension strategy, *only* have achieved an increase in the level of tension, the intended change fails to appear.

The food habit research demonstrated that group discussion may serve as a means in a low-tension strategy. Participants were asked to discuss what kind of obstacles "housewives like themselves" might experience with regard to changing their shopping and food habits. The approach was cognitive, de-personalized and general and there was no incitement to decide on action. Furthermore, the conductor of the experiment made sure that the participants accepted the theme of discussion. From a field theoretical perspective this means that the participants' spaces of free movement would become activated. According to Lewin, these procedures served the purpose of minimizing the resistance to change, for instance by making it easier for the participants to relate in an open-minded way to facts (Lewin 1947b).

The same strategy was employed in the conflict case.

'Resistance to change' is one of the well-known concepts from the pen of our main character. His point of departure is the assumption that human beings tend to feel that sustaining existing mental and social structures represents a value in itself. Should anyone attempt to change their habits (without being asked), the typical reaction would be to stick to the present structures. Lewin refers to this as "an additional force field" (1947a:225). Resistance to change is simply defined as the *extra* set of forces that will typically be mobilized when external events or pressure affect existing convictions, ideas, ways, habits, etcetera. Or, when we oppose the very fact that the other party interferes in our affairs. Action begets reaction. As a consequence, one will witness a rise of tension in the field.

A certain degree of fluidity is a prerequisite for change to come about. This line of thought lies behind Lewin's three-phased change model. As mentioned, freely willed changes of quasi-stable patterns are most likely to take place if the relevant region of the field is fluid, or is brought to a

⁴ One may object that some kinds of development need to go through strong tension and conflict in order to be achieved. This principle is systematized in the psycho-dynamically inspired Tavistock conference that is directed at learning and insight of the participants (Miller 1990; Trist & Murray 1990). No doubt deep insight is acquired the Tavistock way, however, being a high-tension strategy it is time and energy consuming. Besides, learning is not the prime aim of conflict resolution.

state of fluidity by intervention from a change agent. Structured habits are thawed (Unfreeze), and during the thawed phase the person or the group will – perhaps – engage in movement (Move). However, such changes are transient, human beings tend to return to old habits. If we are to optimize the probability for longer lasting and sustainable change, the newly formed structures of the field must be refrozen at the new level (Refreeze). Obviously, this re-structuring of the field is but quasi-stationary.⁵

The higher the level of tension, the lower the level of fluidity. Tension reduction seems to be of crucial importance if freely willed change is to come about. Tension is first and foremost connected to the motivational parts of the field - life space as well as social space. Almost per definition, external pressure will be directed at the motivational structure of the person: you *should* prefer this, you *ought* to do that. An appeal to relate to facts in a disinterested, inquiring manner downgrades the irrational emotionality and activates the cognitive part and at the same time allows a helicopter perspective. Normally this will be perceived far less pushy and will hence not, to the same extent, give rise to resistance.

I do not maintain that a low-tension strategy is the best choice in all instances. However, in the area of conflict resolution, it seems to be a good bid. This goes for conflict on micro as well as macro level.

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⁵ The change model has become of great importance to posterity, not least to areas in which change agents work with organizations. It was generated during a late period in Lewin's life, at the time when he developed his group dynamic manifesto and had an interest in change of *social* habits in *social space* (Lewin 1947a). It can, however, easily be applied in relation to change of *mental* habits in individual *life space*.

⁶ If an original Lewin-paper is reproduced in an anthology, the year in my text refers to the original publication whereas the page indication refers to the anthology.

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