

Lewin, K. (1997). Resolution

Social Conflicts

VII

## Problems of Research in Social Psychology (1943-44)

The first task of science is to register objectively and describe reliably the material one wishes to study. We have learned to register fairly accurately the *physical* aspects of behavior. But in regard to the *social* aspects of behavior, the task of objective scientific description seemed for a long time insoluble. Not many years ago, a methodological study of this problem in one of our leading universities came to the following pessimistic conclusion: Observing the interrelation of a group of individuals, it was possible to collect reliable data about such items as who moved his arm, turned his head, or moved from one place to another. However, no reliable data could be obtained about friendliness or unfriendliness or many other social characteristics of behavior. The study seemed to lead to the unfortunate conclusion that what can be observed reliably is socially meaningless and what is socially meaningful cannot be observed reliably.

Fortunately, during recent years a number of studies have shown that, after all, the social aspect of interpersonal behavior can be observed with high accuracy and with a degree of reliability which satisfies fully the scientific requirements. It may be worthwhile to examine how this methodological step forward has been accomplished.

### Social Perception and Interpretation

One of the fundamental difficulties is related to the distinction between "observation" and "interpretation." In all sciences, it is important to keep observation as free as possible from theories and subjective interpretation. In psychology, too, the observer has to learn to use his eyes and ears and to report what happened rather than what he thinks should have happened according to his preconceived ideas. That is not an easy task. Can it be accomplished at all in social psychology? Can a friendly or an aggressive act be observed without interpretation in the same sense as the movement of an arm can be observed?

Editor's note: The material in the first part of this chapter (up to the section, Experimentation in "Real Life" Settings) is taken from Kurt Lewin: Psychology and the process of group living, *J. Social Psychol.*, 1943, 17, 119-129. The remainder of the chapter comes from Kurt Lewin: Constructs in psychology and psychological ecology, *Univ. Iowa Stud. Child Welf.*, 1944, 20, 23-27.

Until recently the majority of psychologists were inclined to answer with an emphatic "no" and even today they may give that answer. Actually such an answer implies the impossibility of a scientific social psychology. If we ask the same psychologist, not as a "psychologist" but as an ordinary human being, how he gets along with his wife, he will probably be eager to tell us that—with few exceptions—he and his wife are well able to understand the social meaning of each other's behavior. If we were unable to perceive adequately and objectively the majority of social interactions with our colleagues and students, we would hardly be permitted to remain on the campus for long. Child psychology has established beyond doubt that within the first year of life social perception is well under way. Within three or four years, the child can perceive rather complicated social actions. He is not likely to be fooled by the superficial friendliness of a hostile or uninterested aunt. He is able to "see through" such a surface. Frequently he seems to perceive more clearly than an adult the character of certain social interrelations in his surroundings. This social perception has to be adequate in most of the essential cases if the child is to survive socially. Therefore, objective social observation *must* be possible and the psychologist should find a way to do in science what any normal three-year-old child does in life.

I think we would have sooner found our way if we had not been blinded by philosophical considerations. For more than fifty years psychology has grown up in an atmosphere which recognizes only physical facts as "existent" in the scientific meaning of that term. The effect of this atmosphere can be observed in every psychological school, in the classical form of Gestalt theory as well as in behaviorism. As usual, the conservative power of philosophy—this time in the form of physicalistic positivism—did its part to keep alive an attitude which once had a function for the progress of science, but which now has outlived its usefulness.

What is needed in social psychology today is to free its methodology from speculative limitations. We do well to start again with the simple facts of everyday life for which the possibility of an adequate social observation never could be in doubt because community life is unthinkable without it. Such an empirical basis should be one basis of the methodology of social psychology. The other should be a progressively deeper understanding of the laws of "social perception."

I would like to mention a few aspects of the problems of social perception. How is it possible today to get reliable observations of social action which could not be recorded reliably yesterday?

If a biologist is to observe the growth of a leaf during a fortnight, he will never finish his job if he tries to follow the movement of the ions contained in that leaf; nor will he succeed if he watches only the tree as a whole on which this leaf grows. The first prerequisite of a successful observation in any science is a definite understanding about *what size of unit* one is going to observe at a given occasion.

This problem is of fundamental importance for social psychology. For a long time we have misinterpreted the scientific requirements of analysis and have tried to observe under all circumstances as *small* units as possible. It is true that sometimes a twinkle of the eye means the difference between acceptance or refusal of marriage. But that meaning is the result of a defined and specific setting. An observation which approaches the movement of the arm or head in isolation is missing the social meaning of the events. In other words, social observation should look toward units of sufficient size.



In addition, the observer should perceive the units in their particular setting. This again is by no means a problem specific for psychology. A physician who would cut up the X-ray picture of the broken bone into small pieces and classify these pieces according to their shades of gray would have destroyed all that he wanted to observe. To give another example, if two persons are running one behind the other, it may mean that the first is leading and the second following, or it may mean that the first is being chased by the second. There is frequently no way to distinguish between these possibilities if the observation lasts only a few seconds. One has to observe a sufficiently extended period before the meaning of an act becomes definitely clear. One does not need to be a Gestalt psychologist or be interested in field theory to recognize these facts which are well established in the psychology of perception. All that is necessary is to acknowledge that the same laws which rule the perception of physical entities also rule social perception.

Like the physician who has to read an X-ray picture, the social psychologist has to be *educated* to know what he can report as an *observation* and what he might add as a more or less valuable *interpretation*. A transition exists between observation and interpretation in the case of the X-ray picture as well as in regard to social data. But that does not weaken the importance of this distinction. Observers have to be trained; then they are able to give reliable observations where the untrained person has to resort to guesswork or interpretation. This holds for the flyer who has to learn to recognize enemy planes even under adverse conditions, for the physician studying the X-ray picture, and also for the social psychologist.

All observation, finally, means classifying certain events under certain categories. Scientific reliability depends upon correct perception *and* correct classification. Here again the observers have to be trained and trained correctly.

There has to be agreement among observers as to what is to be called a "question" and what a "suggestion," where the boundary lies between "suggestion" and a "command." Exactly where the boundary is drawn between two such categories is to a certain degree a matter of convention. However, there are certain basic facts to be learned that are not a matter of arbitrary conventions. If the teacher says to the child in a harsh, commanding voice, "*Would you close the door?*" this should not be classified under the category "question" but under the category "command." The statement of one of our native Nazis that the President's neck is well fitted for a rope is definitely not to be classified under the category "statement of facts" nor under the category "expression of opinion," in spite of its grammatical form. In the attempt to be objective, the psychologist too frequently has made the grammatical form of a sentence, or the physical form of behavior rather than its social meaning, the criterion for classification. We can no longer permit ourselves to be fooled by such superficialities, and will have to recognize that the social meaning of an act is no less objective than its grammatical meaning. There are, of course, also in psychology boundary cases which are difficult to classify; however, experience shows that the observer who is well trained to look for the social meaning of the action is able to perceive correctly and to classify reliably his data.

We should be aware that the problems of social perception have very broad theoretical and practical implications. To name but a few examples: The development of better methods for psychologically correct classifications of social actions and expressions could be of great value for the legal and political aspects of free speech. Recent experiments have shown that the training of leaders is to a high degree

dependent upon the sensitizing of their social perception. The good leader is able and ready to perceive more subtle changes in social atmosphere and is more correct in observing social meaning. The good scout master knows that a joking remark or a scuffle during the ceremony of the raising of the flag is something different from the same scuffle during a teaching period or during a period of games; that it has a different meaning if the group is full of pep or all tired out; if it occurs between intimate friends or between two individuals who are enemies.

### Social Units of Different Size

Observation of social behavior is usually of little value if it doesn't include an adequate description of the character of the social atmosphere or the *larger unit of activity* within which the specific social act occurs. A running account of such larger units of activity should record whether the situation as a whole has the meaning of "discussing plans" or of "working," of "playing around," or of a "free-for-all fight." It has been shown that a reliable description of the larger units of social events is possible and that the beginning and end of such periods can be determined with an astonishing degree of accuracy. The statistical treatment of the data and their evaluation must carefully take into account the position of a social action within that unit to which it actually belongs. This is as important theoretically as practically. For instance, on the average, the democratic leader will give less direct commands and will more frequently place the responsibility for decision on the members of the group. This does not mean, however, that whenever a leader gives a command he turns autocrat. In matters of routine, even an extremely democratic group might gladly accept a leader or a parliamentary whip who has to see to it that certain objectives are reached efficiently and with a minimum of bother for the members. The democratic leader who may have to be careful to avoid commands in his first contacts might be much freer in the form of his behavior after the social character of the group and his position within it are clearly established. The social meaning and the effect of a command depend upon whether this command deals with an unessential question of "execution" or an essential problem of "policy determination"; whether it is an isolated event, which as Fritz Redl says is "antiseptically" imbedded in the general social atmosphere, or whether it is one of the normal elements of this social setting. It is not the *amount* of power which distinguishes the democratic and the autocratic leader. The President of the United States always had more political power than the Kaiser in Germany. What counts is *how* this power is imbedded in the larger social unit and particularly whether in the long run the leader is responsible to the people below him. In Hitlerism, the leader on any level of the organizational hierarchy had no responsibility whatever to the people below. The leader above him was his only judge and his only source of power.

Of course, much is a question of degree. However, two points should be clear; first, that a democratic leader is neither a man without power nor a traffic policeman nor an expert who does not affect group goals and group decisions; second, that the evaluation of any social atmosphere or organization has to take into account the full spatial and temporal size of the social unit which is actually determining the social events in that group.