The Iowa to which the Lewin family had moved in 1935 was located in the most typically American region on the continent, the Midwest. Its residents felt secure in the belief that the Atlantic and Pacific oceans constituted a broad and watery barrier against any possible attack on the United States. Midwesterners saw no reason to look outward at all.

Lewin chafed at this isolationist attitude toward events abroad during this period. On both the East and West coasts of the United States, thinking Americans received with grave foreboding the news of Mussolini’s attack on Ethiopia in October 1935 and of renewed Japanese attacks on Manchuria two years later. But in Amer-
ica's great heartland these tidings were either disregarded or used to buttress arguments in opposition to any further American involvement in foreign wars.

By contrast, Lewin was devoting more and more time to social issues. The direction of his thinking was changing. His emphasis was now on social psychological problems. And though many Americans refused to look at the outside world, their own country became the target for increasing anti-Jewish propaganda—particularly from the Nazi regime in Germany. The field was a fertile one. As early as 1933 John J. Smertenko wrote in Harper's Magazine, "Today it is no secret that Jews have great difficulty in gaining admission to the institutions of higher learning and that their opportunities for legal and medical training are limited to a minimum. It is equally well known that the professions of banking, engineering and teaching are closed to all but a few, and the quasi-public service corporations vigorously exclude them."

This growing anti-Semitism, Lewin realized, was part of the American reaction to World War I and the Russian Communist Revolution. After the Depression hit, this prejudice became more pronounced as the less-informed among the millions of unemployed sought an answer to, and a scapegoat for, their miseries. In the Midwest, with its relatively small Jewish population, it was easy to accept the notion that unseen hordes of East Coast Jews were selfishly holding on to all the money that should be spread throughout the country. In Detroit, Father Charles E. Coughlin, the "radio priest" who had converted his children's catechism hour to a weekly tirade aimed at their parents, provided further identification of the profiteers: they had been Jewish.

Busy as he was with his work, Lewin nevertheless paid sharp heed to the expression of these ominous political and social sentiments. It did not make him critical of his new homeland—indeed, Lewin's whole approach was so exuberant and democratic as to suggest that spiritually he was born an American—but the evils that grew out of Midwestern isolationism disturbed him. During the period from 1936 to 1940, he wrote several articles dealing with his reaction to this situation.
One of the first articles, considered by Gordon Allport to be one of the most brilliant of Lewin's papers, appeared in 1936. It was concerned with the problem of comparative national psychology. In it he demonstrated how psychological differences between Germany and the United States had developed and how these differences could be measured in terms of his concepts of life space and field theory. Though he admitted that to some extent human nature was the same everywhere, and that certain social characteristics were alike in all the so-called "Western" cultures, he found major distinctions between the cultures of Germany and the United States.

Having worked with German children in Berlin, and then with American youngsters in the nursery schools at both Cornell and Iowa, Lewin was first struck by the differences between the two cultures at the child's level. The contrasting social background, reflected in the two educational systems, was a mirror of the true cleavage between the two societies. He measured this fundamental difference in terms of what he called the "space of free movement" available to the members of a society.

Indeed, for Lewin—chronically late all his life—the American emphasis on punctuality for meals was a source of amazement, as well as the most striking evidence of how the two cultures were unlike. "That a dozen guests who have been invited to an informal dinner party at seven should all arrive between 7:00 and 7:08 is as unheard of in Germany as it is common in the United States."

The degree of independence among children in the United States, especially the "lack of servility of the young child toward adults or of the student toward his professor," was pointed up as another dissimilarity between the two countries. He found it remarkable that American adults tended to deal with children more as equals than as superiors dealing with their inferiors, as was true in Germany. This too was a reflection of a national political philosophy which, in America, stressed independence of opinion. He recalled an instance in Germany, soon after the inception of the Nazi regime, when the staff of a leading training school for nursery-school teach-

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ers was instructed to advise its students never to explain an order to a child, who should acquire the habit of blind obedience. Though he conceded that this was an extreme example, Lewin felt that it expressed the philosophy underlying the relationship between persons in Germany.

Just as American education was characterized by rather well-delineated areas of activity with varying degrees of freedom, so, too, it seemed to him, the various realms of social activity in the United States were more sharply separated than in Germany. In America, two scientists or two political candidates might engage in a furious theoretical or political fight and yet be on cordial terms with each other; this was in sharp contrast to how it would be in Germany. There, he said, political or even scientific disagreement implied moral disapproval.

Lewin had been in the United States in 1932 when Franklin D. Roosevelt had been elected to the presidency, and he could not imagine a German candidate congratulating his successful opponent as Herbert Hoover did. It would be “inconceivable” in Germany, he said. That it happened all the time over here was another aspect of the same separation of areas of activity which permitted certain groups to regard one another as equals in politics and business, though they had almost no connection in social life.

He observed, too, that the democratic idea of equal rights sometimes seemed to be extended so far as to “ascribe even the same abilities to every person and to consider lack of success as a proof of moral inferiority.”

Theoretically, Lewin felt that the examples he used pointed up the dissimilarity of Germans and Americans as groups when it came to measuring the “social distance” between persons in the group. Citing the measurements used on the Bogardus test for social distance (in which A is asked whether or not he would share certain situations with B—such as traveling in the same car, playing games, dancing, or marrying), Lewin concluded that the central core of the American personality is surrounded by more easily penetrable peripheral layers than is the German, as shown graphically in Figure 10–1.
This would also account, he felt, for a difference in the American and German responses to what might be termed annoying situations. The American tends to ask first what should be done to remedy the situation, whereas the German first asks who is to blame for it. All this meant that it would be possible to have relatively close relationships with Americans on a number of levels without deep personal friendship, but, consequently, there also was less danger of friction in these relationships because so little of the central core of each person was involved.

Though Lewin cautioned at the conclusion that his analysis dealt "only with the present situation without statement as to its duration or history," and that he intended his definition of the different characteristics to be regarded only as tentative, he nevertheless was persuaded of a fundamental opposition in the German and the American attitude toward rights and duties.

Though he found Americans so unlike Germans in most of their social attitudes because of a basic difference in the American personality structure, Lewin was sadly surprised to find that, on the question of anti-Semitism, Americans displayed many of the prejudices directed against him while he was growing up in Germany. That it was a matter of concern for him is reflected in the number of pieces he wrote during the late 1930's on aspects of Jewish life.

When Lewin was at Cornell, and when he came to Iowa, he
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found himself in a situation repeated on campuses throughout the United States at that period. In every institution there were a few Jewish students, but their percentage in proportion to the total number of the student body was small—and was kept so deliberately. The concept of the “Jewish quota” was so common in American higher education as to be taken for granted. It was simply another expression of the attitude conveyed by the insulting sign one occasionally saw outside resort hotels, “Restricted.” These hostile attitudes had a long history and had produced the Immigration Act of 1924, which had sharply reduced immigration from East European countries and thus cut off the major escape route for European Jews facing the horrors of mounting anti-Semitism. Lewin was keenly aware of the discrimination practiced against racial and religious minority groups which characterized much of American life.

It was President Abbott Lawrence Lowell of Harvard who, in his graduation address in June 1922, had first publicly proposed a quota system to limit the number of Jewish university students. The trustees of Harvard rejected Lowell’s proposal, but there could be no doubt that during the next ten years the idea took root in American higher education. Nor was there any doubt that anti-Semitism was growing in other spheres as well. Though a comparative newcomer to this country, Lewin reacted with unusual vigor and wrote a number of theoretical articles on group prejudice and tension and on the psychological problems confronting minority groups whose space of free movement was restricted by discrimination.

His zeal for research never flagged, and he prodded his helpers ceaselessly. Often after a heated discussion on method, the group would adjourn to his office with the idea of working out specific plans for an experiment. Tamara Dembo, Herbert Wright, and Roger Barker would be there, and sometimes others. Lewin would discuss the research and make notes. Then he would say, “I’d better dictate this” (because nobody could read his handwriting), and dictate rapidly, while those present furiously wrote it down for their own notes.

Barker recalls “being so tired I ached. Lewin would go on and on.
After two hours I would be bleary-eyed, but he apparently was just getting warmed up. I can remember going until six or six-thirty, hoping that someone would phone in and break it up. If I hadn’t had the excuse of a wife waiting at home, he would really have worn me out. He never had any idea of when to stop.” Working with Lewin might have been physically draining, but Barker also felt himself grow. Lacking Lewin’s extensive background in philosophy and biology, he kept getting new insights in psychology, the subject he thought he knew.

“Lewin was so strongly involved in what he was doing that he couldn’t help being evangelical,” says Barker. “He was not always objective, except that he was determined to search for truth. He would have vigorous discussions with a man like Clark Hull. I am sure Lewin knew what Hull was trying to do—and disagreed with him; but to the students and people around him, Lewin could not present an objective picture when stating what he thought of Hull’s beliefs, or what everyone else thought. He believed he himself had the truth and was following the path. One was not educated under him in the sense that education gives a broad view. He did not give a nonpartisan view of the scientific world; he gave the ‘true’ view, the one he believed in. He did recognize that others disagreed. He could talk to a man like Hull. Once or twice he wrote an article in which he specifically disagreed with Hull, but he would not enter into controversy. In Germany, a lot of science involved hot public disputation, and he said, ‘I didn’t do it in Germany and I won’t do it here. That does not help science go ahead; science progresses through research, not through defending your viewpoint.’”

Yet to some extent the academic disputations of Germany followed him even to the cornfields of Iowa. Wolfgang Köhler had taught at the University of Iowa during the summer preceding Lewin’s arrival. Apparently he spoke fairly often of Lewin and his ideas, in conversations with Herbert Feigl, who had been a member of the Philosophy Department there since 1931. Feigl notes that Köhler expressed appreciation of the “fruitfulness” of Lewin’s topological-dynamic theories, though he disagreed with some aspects. The conversations were sufficiently detailed for Feigl to feel that he
was “well prepared for Kurt Lewin’s arrival on the Iowa campus a month or two later.”

To Barker it seemed that Feigl’s orientation had put him in an argumentative mood. Feigl himself, as a member of the “Vienna Circle” of philosophers, held views Lewin opposed. Today Feigl recalls very little of the controversy and feels that “there was practically complete agreement between us in matters of the general philosophy of science.” Lewin’s outlook helped Feigl to overcome “some remnants of an all too narrow logical positivism”; and in Feigl’s view the leading members of the Vienna Circle who had come to America were moving in the same direction. Lewin, on the other hand, was quite willing, Feigl felt, to continue to place a high value on the role of postulates (implicit definitions) when specifying the meaning of theoretical concepts.

The “only sharp disagreement” between himself and Lewin which Feigl now recalls concerned Lewin’s active espousal of Zionism. Feigl was convinced that creating “a homeland for the Jews in the midst of radically hostile Arab countries” was not a good idea. Lewin was impatient with this attitude and, during a vacation of several weeks at a lake in northern Minnesota in the summer of 1938, convincingly expounded his own point of view. Lewin’s “more penetrating socio-psychological insight” convinced me, says Feigl, “that Israel was the only practical solution.”

If Lewin’s relations with his colleagues were subject to different interpretations, so were his relations with his students. Inevitably some students felt that Lewin had favorites. At times a big push would be on in certain areas, and then one inquiry received preferred attention and help. Also there were students who had worked with Lewin longer and on problems in which he was more deeply involved. Still others were working on problems Lewin had just begun thinking about. So the notion that he had favorites may have conveyed an “inner circle, outer circle” feeling. “Yet,” says Erik Wright, “the circle was a flexible one with varying levels within a congenial frame of reference. If there were inner-outer rings, they were very subtly distinguished. A group such as the Quaselsstrippe would be unusual today; but if Lewin were alive
now he would probably function that way. He had enough drive
and vision to encourage people to work with him after they
received their doctorate."

Other colleagues felt that Lewin allowed, or ignored, or could
not handle, strained relations among his subordinates. He was not
always tactful in concealing that he had favorites. There often
swirled around him a certain amount of competition for his atten-
tion, if only because a student’s work was immensely brightened
and heightened by his interest. He added to this dissension, perhaps
unwittingly, when he lectured, for then the audience usually heard
about the work of his young colleagues. He would outline the
research of some student, speak enthusiastically, even extravagantly,
about that person’s performance. Naturally everyone wanted to
win this distinction.

Bavelas states that Lewin reacted mildly to controversy. “If one
disagreed with him, even emotionally or violently, he treated it as
another interesting point of view rather than a personal attack.
Lewin probably felt fundamentally secure. I was convinced that
most of his students by the time they got their degrees felt they
were much brighter than he, because he was so generally unassum-
ing. If he had an idea and a student had a different one, Lewin
would talk about his and the student could talk about his own. We
felt that we were operating as equals.”

Bavelas remarks, “Kurt did not really try to make disciples. No
one ever felt committed to work topologically because he worked
with Kurt. Everyone got different ideas, and there was no feeling
that out of loyalty one had to use his system. For example, Ron
Lippitt and Leon Festinger both were Lewin’s students; but they
worked downstairs with Spence’s rats, and it made no difference to
Kurt. It might have bothered Spence, though, if some of his stu-
dents had done topological work with Lewin.”

Lewin was always soaking up stimuli from his environment, in-
cluding the verbalized ideas of others, but he was also almost simul-
taneously acting on those ideas with his own creative imagination.
Therefore, he often did not really hear everything the other person
said; yet he had been greatly influenced by his exchanges with the
other person. When involved in clarifying a theoretical point, as in a
dialogue with Clark Hull, or in conceptualization with Barker or
Leeper or Adams or White, he certainly did listen carefully and had
a large share in the creative process of modifying old ideas and
forging new ones.

“One of his tremendous skills,” Lippitt comments, “was to derive
or generate high-level abstractions about the most concrete situa-
tions. He would spend many seminar sessions or personal work
periods on very abstract issues of hodological space or issues of
historical causality, but one always felt that the empirical world was
just around the corner providing internal feedback and guidance.
He might be immersed in the most minute concrete details of a
child’s feeding behavior or behavior with toys, but one always
knew that high-level abstractions were in the back of his mind,
guiding his perception of the concrete realities.”

To Erik Wright, Lewin had a kind of personal style which made
it possible to begin working even though one did not have all the
exact operations to translate into. He frequently brought forth the
idea that it was good to begin with first approximations. This was
not new or original, but if one were not satisfied with the first
results, one could consider them a first approximation. Lewin would
advise not trying to go beyond what you were able to do until you
had done that much and had seen what happened.

Barker points out that Lewin was always getting ideas from com-
mon observations. He recalls that Herbert Wright did his thesis
with Adams on the effect of a barrier upon a valence—that is, grass
on the other side of the fence is greener. Lewin had proposed this
idea, which he had derived from observing people in the cafeteria as
they reached over the pies that were near for the ones in back.
Herbert Wright used this for one of the sources of data. He had the
staff in the cafeteria at Duke place the pies in order. Wright kept
track of which ones the customers chose. And it’s true, says Barker
—people tend to choose the ones which are more distant. Lewin
could observe an ordinary situation and see it as a problem in a
context which makes it significant.

To Kallen, Lewin had a kind of objectivity about himself, a lack
of self-consciousness, which enabled him, for instance, to telephone prominent people whom he had never met and discuss his problem with them. It was not himself he was concerned with, but rather the problem and how to solve it. He was like an inventor trying to sell an invention, no matter what the cost to himself; or like a poet trying to get a hearing, not for himself, but for his poetry. "Lewin had what is known today as great cool. I remember Wertheimer at some of our New School seminars—a man of passionate convictions, who was extremely intolerant of all differences and who would shout against anyone who took issue with him. Kurt, on the other hand, I never heard to shout against opposition. He reasoned and demonstrated, and if he did not convince you, he would not go away angry. He had the rare ability to get along with people with whom he disagreed, because he respected the opinions of others, because he was no fanatic, and because he was sure of his own views."

When Cartwright worked with Lewin at M.I.T., they would meet regularly to discuss topology and hodology while Lewin was having his afternoon tea. Cartwright remembers that Lewin was eager to get the help of the mathematicians, and Cartwright believes "it is a major tragedy that he was never able to find one able to tolerate the ambiguities and imprecision of the psychological data with which he was concerned." Lewin's faith in the "mathematics of space" was somehow transmitted to Cartwright. When the opportunity came, a decade later, Cartwright established a program for mathematical work in the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the University of Michigan.

But Lewin had little use for statistics, according to Festinger, who "never saw him do mathematics" and never knew if he was "much of a mathematician." "But," says Festinger, "we started very early to argue about statistics. I think his dislike for them was a misconception on his part about what statistics could do for him. He seemed to identify statistics with data that could be collected without systematic theories, and to feel that an individual case would get lost in statistical analysis. Things that don't belong together would be put together, and their meaning obscured. A technique I learned
from Kurt is that it is good to put together things that belong dynamically together, and very bad to put things together that do not dynamically belong together. He frequently used this with great cleverness and insight.”

Bavelas suggests that Lewin was wisely practical in his approach to a complex problem. Lewin would say that his slogan was “Start strong, and the trick is to go through the doors you can open—not to kill yourself trying to go through where you can’t open the doors.”

Lippitt recalls, “When I went to Iowa as a graduate student, I was not aware of Kurt Lewin and did not go to Iowa in order to study with him. I had planned to go to the graduate school at Columbia University, but Professor Harold Seashore, with whom I studied, met George Stoddard of Iowa at a meeting of the American Psychological Association and persuaded him to offer me an assistantship which had opened up at the last minute because of a change in plans of another student. Professor Seashore urged me to accept the offer, so I found myself leaving New Jersey on a Greyhound bus headed for the University of Iowa. When I arrived at Iowa, I met Dr. Beth Wellman, who was assigner of graduate assistant jobs. The first assignment she gave me was to help Barker and Dembo code the material of the frustration-regression experiments. I met Lewin while on this assignment. At first he struck me as a funny, interesting, relatively inarticulate man whose ideas always seemed to be changing the coding categories. I soon discovered that Lewin was influenced by reflective collaborative dialogue and by the organized presentation of ideas and units of material for reaction by colleagues and students. I was greatly influenced in daily interaction with Kurt for the next four years as a graduate student, another two years as a colleague in the war effort (designing training activities), and a final two years as a staff member at the Research Center for Group Dynamics at M.I.T. During all this period, I felt I was the object of his interest, respect, and, during the later years, affection. These were certainly the bases of his influence.”

French remembers Kurt saying that many scientists waste years struggling with difficult problems on the assumption that they are
soluble when in fact these problems really are insoluble! So one should more readily reformulate the whole problem—if a problem can't be solved, maybe it is wrongly stated. "This policy of his prevents getting in a rut and forces new ideas." French remembers several discussions with Kurt that illustrate one aspect of his thinking. It was early in World War II, during the German attack on France. At that time, everyone in America was saying that the Maginot Line was impregnable, that Germany would be stopped. I argued in the same way with Kurt, but he was absolutely certain that Germany would crack the Maginot Line. I presented some of the tactical arguments about how impossible it would be and asked Kurt how he thought the German army would do it. He replied that he had no idea how, but that that was not the way to think about it. One should forget about the tactics of how and make a correct prediction just on the basis of the relative power of the two countries. There might be hundreds of ways to defend the line, but eventually the Germans would break through because they had overwhelmingly superior power."

Lewin's interest in the psychological study of social issues resulted in his writing a number of significant articles that aimed to build a bridge between social theory and social action. The problems they treated are of undiminished importance today. In the face of the vigorous action demanded by black militants and the complex social problems created by these demands, we have something to learn from Lewin's system of thought. In the first of this series of important papers, Lewin describes the challenge confronting minority groups everywhere, and then specifically analyzes the Jewish minority and the nature of the dilemmas it faced.

Every individual, Lewin pointed out in this article, has a base for his life—a "life space"—and one of its most important components is the group to which he belongs. Though he may eventually belong to many groups, the family group usually presents the first and most lasting part of the ground on which he will stand as an individual. It

is rare, Lewin suggested, for a child to be uncertain about his belonging or not belonging to the family group. In those cases where such uncertainty exists, it is almost always both the result of conflict (between parents) and the source of further conflict for the child.

During most of his life, the adult, too, acts not simply as an individual, but as a member of a social group or groups. The various groups to which he belongs may not all be equally important at a given time—sometimes his membership in one will be dominant, sometimes another—but at each stage he seems to know to which he belongs at that moment and to which he does not. This knowledge of his proper place and allegiance determines his behavior.

Nevertheless, there may be transitional periods when belonging to a group may be doubtful or unclear to him. As a newcomer to a club, for instance, he may feel uncertain for a while as to whether or not he has been accepted. Such doubt generally leads to uncertainty in behavior. Hence the person who does not feel at home is apt to exhibit certain marked personality traits: he may be more or less self-conscious, inhibited, or inclined to overact.

There are, Lewin further observed, persons whose whole life is obsessed by doubt about their “belonging” as a result of being near the margins of groups. The nouveaux riches, for example, or others who cross the borders of social classes, as well as members of religious or ethnic minorities, may all exhibit these symptoms of uncertainty as they try to enter the dominant culture. Individuals who cross the border of social groups are not only uncertain about their belonging to the group they are ready to enter, but also uneasy about their membership in one they are leaving. It is, for example, “a principal facet of the Jewish problem,” Lewin states, “that Jews are often—and to a high degree—confused about their relation to others who call themselves Jews.” They are uncertain about whether they are actually in the Jewish community, in what sense they belong to it, and to what extent.

Basic to the problem, of course, is the question: What does it mean to a man to belong to a group and how does that affect his behavior? Lewin held that the group to which a man belongs is all-important—the source of his social status and of his feeling of secu-
rit. His reliance on the firmness of this ground might not be con-
sciously perceived—just as one tends to take for granted the physical
ground on which one walks—but dynamically the assurance pro-
vided by the firmness of this ground determines what a person
wants to do, what he can do, and how he will do it. A person and his
psychological environment, Lewin insisted, are dynamically one
field and should never be treated as separate entities. From early
childhood, social facts—especially the sense of belonging to particu-
lar groups—are among the most fundamental determinants of the
child’s growing world, for they shape his wishes and goals and what
he considers right and wrong.

All this being so, should the minority-group child—or, particu-
larly, the Jewish child—be made more or less conscious of his mem-
bership in a despised group? Would there be any danger that in
stressing his membership in it he might be made to feel so isolated
from his non-Jewish fellows that this would impair all his relation-
ships with them? Lewin felt it would not. Indeed, he argued to the
contrary. To attempt to dissociate the child from his group might
plunge him into unnecessarily grave conflicts, weaken his ability to
cope with them, and develop in him behavior patterns more likely
to increase than to decrease antagonism toward him on the part of
the majority group.