

Ines Langemeyer

Beyond the concept of “Gestalten” – Kurt Lewin and Lev Semënovic Vygotsky as methodologically related

1 Moments of the total situation and the life space

In Kurt Lewin’s approach, to grasp the “total situation” means to understand a person not just in general, but precisely in one particular moment, in the “*Momentsituation*” of the “*here-and-now*” of the environment (cf. Bogner, 2017; Lück/Rechtien, 1988). Psychologically it is thus acknowledged that responses can be very different depending on how the situation is experienced by the individual. The “total situation” as a holistic concept, corresponding with his phenomenological idea of the “field” (Lewin, 1917), was developed further to the topological psychology in the 1930s. The theoretical advancements were undertaken when Lewin’s research team used drawings and sketches of different situations and spaces (cf. Binder, 2023) and worked with films (cf. Locatelli, 2023).

Similarly, Lev Vygotsky conveyed that it is not evident if a broken home, for example, harms and influences children in the same way. He noticed that there is always a psychologically different “refraction” when the so-called influences take place: “it is not in itself this moment or that moment, taken without regard to the child, but that moment, refracted through the *perezhivanie* [i.e. emotional experience, I.L.] of the child, which is able to define how that moment will affect the course of future development.” (Vygotsky, 2019, p. 70) What makes up this ‘refraction’ is the use of ‘psychological tools’ – the cultural means that render us in different contexts into a “thinking or perceiving or memorizing being” (Friedrich, 2016, p. 60).

The arguments and stances of the two psychologists are obviously akin, so that we may ask how they correlate and what their exchange was historically about.¹ The methodology that plays a role in here is summarized like this:

¹ “Looking back, we may speculate as to what would have been the fruits if Vygotsky, as the insightful founder of the Soviet cultural-historical approach, had had a chance to interact with Lewin’s refined conceptualization on ‘life space’ or ‘total situation’ (defined as person plus psychological environment)” Wan-Chi Wong (2001, p. 368) asked more than twenty years ago. But what was the relationship between the Soviet illuminate Lev S. Vygotsky (1896-1934) and the German illuminate Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) like and what were Lewin’s refined conceptualizations on the psychological environment? It can be hypothesized, in contradistinction to Wong’s question, that the two colleagues indeed inspired each other, more than it has been known before. The possibility and the plausibility of this thesis shall be explored in this paper.

Like with the symptoms, often too unspecific for a diagnosis, and the pathogens of a disease, a scientific psychological explanation of situational reactions needs to go beyond the visible and the obvious facts. In “Law and Experiment in Psychology”, a paper published in 1927, Lewin drew attention to “event-types” that they should not be categorized either as different or similar just by their surface appearance; thus, events of psychological significance should not be subsumed to similar explanatory principles unless the real functional aspects are detected. The crucial question was for Lewin to identify the causal and thus conditional-genetic aspects of concrete events, which means, to explain scientifically why they occurred. Thus, Lewin was interested in seeing the phenotype of psychological events (according to their appearances) connected to their conditional-genetic relations, the genotype, which means to know their lawful dimensions. The distinction of pheno- and genotypes was motivated by Charles Darwin’s evolution theory (which overcomes the categorization of species according to similarities) and was introduced in biology by the Danish geneticist W. Johannsen (1909) (cf. Toepfer, 2011).

Similar to his concept of the psychological “field”, outlined already in his phenomenological essay on the “landscape of war” (Lewin, 1917; cf. Langemeyer, 2017; which he further developed in socio-psychological experiments on groups as well as in their organizational contexts, cf. Lewin, 1969), the “total situation” and the concept of “life space” underscored not only a holistic point of view but also illuminated the “lawful” in contrast to merely “accidental” events. Accidental and lawful event-types should be distinguished properly from each other, although they occur simultaneously.

But what are accidental and lawful event-types? What needs to be distinguished analytically to find a proper definition?

To ensure the analytical distinction and clarity, research methods as Lewin and Vygotsky designed them in the 1920s and 30s did not divide up, for example, the “factors” of the person and “factors” of the environment. The “totality” of a situation, and similarly, the wholeness of the “life space”, is according to Lewin comparable to “Gestalten”, i.e. the perception and conception of something as an entity or unity. To interpret the situation like a gestalt holistically implies the insight that the situational response of an organism is not merely a reaction to objective influences (like with reflex-theory), but rather a systemically interrelated experience of affects, emotions and cognitions. Furthermore, to acknowledge the moment of experiencing brings about a very different object of research and different challenges to achieve the goal of knowledge and insight:

„The conceptualization of such conditional-genetic event-types or state-types — and thus the formulation of laws — is closely bound up with the adequate delimitation of events as wholes.“ (Lewin, 1927, p. 311)

In empirical research like in psychological experiments,

„[t]his entails a very serious difficulty, in particular when it comes to determining conditional-genetic types of events (or states), i.e., for the positing of laws. If one wishes to investigate the law of a specific event experimentally, [...], then there should be sufficient assurance that the examples involved are really of the same conditional-genetic event-type.” (Lewin, 1927, p. 314)

Lewin warned that the same event-type cannot be determined just by replicating experiments. Because replication means to control the external conditions and to modify only one variable at a time. Instead, one should acknowledge that

“[...] it is not enough to have [created; I.L.] the same external conditions in the various cases [of psychological experiments, I.L.]. The differences between experimental subjects, and the differences in the internal state of the same person in a set of different experiments, still allow for the possibility of different total situations — i.e., one and the same external situation can mean different things to the various subjects.” (Lewin, 1927, p. 314)

The holistic concept of the “Gestalt” in this methodological discussion inspired Vygotsky who started his research program in the 1920s in the Soviet Union. In addition, Vygotsky was concerned with Lewin’s distinction of pheno- and genotypes, particularly because

“two phenotypically similar processes can be absolutely heterogeneous from the genetical–conditional side (Lewin)” (Vygotsky, 2018, p. 141).

As Wan-Chi Wong (2001, p. 374) points out, in the middle of the 1930s until the 1940s, Lewin worked on the *here-and-now*, the “total situation” by integrating the concept of a *space-time-totality* with reference to dimensions of irreality as well as the time perspective:

“With reference to these subjectively defined moments, the subject can try to construct the Lewinian life space diagrams that comprise the reality-irreality dimension, time perspective, and self-supplied regions of life (see Lewin 1946/1997, p. 342). Particular attention can be given to construction of a detailed life space diagram at the time of the research dialogue. Relevant key concepts of Lewin (1936/1997, 1940/1997, 1944/1977, 1946/1977) such as “psychological past, present and future”, “various levels of reality”, “the space of free movement”, “sharpness of boundaries”, “dynamic rigidity of boundaries”, and the fundamental “constructs in field theory” can be dealt with in the subsequent interview(s).” (Wong, 2001, p. 374)

Vygotsky, as can be shown, also reinterpreted the reality-irreality dimension and the time perspective when Lewin was a guest in Moscow in 1933 for a longer period of time. It is therefore possible that Lewin’s new concepts on the life-space were inspired by Vygotsky. It is worth looking closer at their exchange.

2 Connections

Lewin and Vygotsky probably met only twice in their lives. This leaves it open to speculations, like in Wong's paper, as to how this could have created new paths for further research.

An essay by Bluma Zeigarnik, "Lewin and Soviet Psychology" (1984) underscores that there were close ties between the two. However, in "Behavior and Development as a Function of the Total Situation" (Lewin, 1946b/1997, p. 365), Lewin refers relatively generally to Vygotsky's research, according to which "'situational' thinking" comes before "'abstract, conceptual' thinking" (which he could have demonstrated with other author names); and in "Field Theory and Learning" (Lewin, 1942/1997, p. 228), it says only somewhat more specifically: „For instance, three developmental types of cognition are distinguished by Vygotsky: situational thinking, classification, and thinking in theoretical terms”.

The first encounter between them was in 1925, when Vygotsky was traveling as a largely unknown scientist to an international conference on the education of the deaf in London, stopping in Berlin on the way. Together with his close colleague Alexander R. Luria, who was in Berlin at the same time as his father (Homskaya, 2001, p. 23f), he visited the Berlin school of Gestalt psychology. At that time, Tamara Dembo, Lewin's student, conducted research on the emergence of emotions such as anger (van der Veer 2000, fn. 4; *ibid.* 2011). Her experiments investigated reactions on unsolvable tasks. Another experiment made test subjects wait for a long time without instructions or information. Helmut Lück (2021, p. 5) mentions that Luria was a voluntary test subject in this context.

Further encounters between Vygotsky and Lewin are documented in the notebooks of Vygotsky for 1933 (Vygotsky 1933/2018, chapter 25: "The semantic field: Sparring with Lewin"). Lewin visited Moscow for an extended period of time, and Vygotsky was presumably his host. It is reported that he translated for him in various contexts (Zavershneva/van der Veer, 2018, p. 404). Several conversations between the two psychologists are mentioned, which were probably conducted in German (*ibid.*). On this Moscow trip, Lewin decided to escape Nazi Germany and to emigrate to the USA (p. 403). The circumstances for a closer collaboration were difficult until the end. Vygotsky died in 1934 at the age of 37 because of tuberculosis. In 1925 (he met Luria in 1924), his approach (the "height psychology" as he called it) was still premature. Until 1932 the consciousness-concept was changed and refined (cf. Zavershneva, 2014). It is necessary to examine more closely the extent to which Lewin and the work from the Lewin circle had a significant influence on Vygotsky and his collaborators and vice versa. In the light of Vygotsky's notebooks, published for the first time in 2018, in an English translation, it is necessary to reconsider what were accomplishments of their research on the level of scientific theory and methodology.

The intellectual exchange became possible mainly because Lewin's doctoral students Bluma Zeigarnik and Gita Birenbaum continued their research in the Vygotsky circle after their doctorates in Berlin. Luria met Lewin on the trip to Yale for the IX International Congress of Psychology in 1929 (Homskaya, 2001, p. 23f), where the latter presented his film of a scene with the infant Hannah.²

Vygotsky was aware of the studies on the psychological reaction of satiation by Anitra Karsten (1927), on resumption tendencies of interrupted actions by Maria Ovsiankina (1928; cf. Lewin 1926), and others (Zavershneva, 2014, p. 88).

During Lewin's stay in Moscow in 1933, several lectures and conversations with Lewin followed, also the screening of films. Inspired by Sergey Eisenstein among others (Homskaya, 2001, p. 39), Lewin recorded situations with children, when they managed to solve a problem, for example. Vygotsky notes, in addition to some conceptual-theoretical thoughts, impressions of the film about "Hannah and the Stone," which he presumably saw for the first time at this time (Zavershneva/van der Veer, 2018, p. 403f.). His notes, as the editors' of the *Notebooks* (2018) comment, were often made directly in the action, for example, during a lecture.

Various experiments of the Lewin school have been replicated in the Vygotsky circle (Zavershneva, 2010a) like Anitra Karsten's experiments on saturation by Solov'ev (Zavershneva/van der Veer, 2018, p. 243) In particular, in the paper "Tool and symbol in child development," which Vygotsky and Luria presumably co-authored (1930/1994; cf. van der Veer/Yasnitsky, 2011, p. 486), borrowing from Lewin's "conditional-genetic" method, they refer to the "experimental-genetic method" (cf. Friedrich, 2017; 2021). With this, the construction of volitional actions (especially on the example of conscious remembering) by means of sign or language use was studied in the process of its development.

3 Developing holistic concepts

At the end of the 1920s, Vygotsky is familiar with Lewin's methodology in detail. He largely evaluated and included it for his own approach, whereby it undergoes quite a few transformations and reinterpretations. A difference shows up in a passage dealing with the problem of "self mastery" that it "is not constructed on obedience and intention, but, conversely, obedience and intention develop from self mastery" (Lewin as quoted by Vygotsky, 1931, ch. 4).

Despite of a consensus here, Vygotsky (1931) began to criticize Lewin:

"[...] regardless of ascribing such a central significance to the mastery of behavior, we do not find in Lewin any kind of clear determination or even a study of this process. Not once does Lewin return to it, and, as a result of

² The girl could not turn away from the stone while trying to sit on it. The conflict lay in the fact that she could not take her eyes off the stone during the motor movement of turning around.

research, arrives at distinguishing two basic forms of behavior. Since this distinction coincides closely with the distinction between the primitive and the higher structure which is where we begin, we will consider Lewin's remarks in somewhat greater detail. With him, in the interests of a purer scientific formation of concepts, we agree to give up the term "will," and in its place to introduce the term "dependent actions and independent actions," or actions arising directly from forces within the situation itself. The latter seem to us to be especially important." (ch. 4)

For the 'mechanism' of becoming conscious of one's own behavior Vygotsky assumed that it goes along with mastering an activity. Around 1932, Vygotsky's design of psychological experiments, as presented, for example, in chapter 6 in *Thinking and Speech*, orientates towards Lewin's approach, but then deviates from it. In a critique on Jean Piaget, Vygotsky outlined a theory about the development of thinking in everyday concepts to thinking in scientific concepts. In this context, he invoked Lewin's formula "experiment and theory are poles of a dynamic whole" (Lewin, 1926a, p. 297). The methodological task of experiments was thus explained in terms of Gestalt psychology, i.e. to find the "dynamic whole" or the "unit of analysis". However, it would not suffice to declare the functioning of a new type of behavior. It must be explained also, which development in the whole, the personality takes place. One key issue was therefore:

"The relation between functions. Can one function explain all others? (the system problem)." (Vygotsky, 1934)

Zavershneva summarizes Vygotsky's new focus on this problem of having a system of functions:

"The dominant function is either the most developed or the most appropriate for a specific task. The higher the level of psychological development of the person, the more flexible and differentiated his or her consciousness is." (Zavershneva 2014, p. 71)

The systemic connections between thinking, speaking, and emotional experience was under investigation and Vygotsky adhered to modelling them not just as a totality of a structure with a hierarchical subordination of one to the other. Instead, he interpreted systemic connections as interactive and inter-functional units which "are established with the help of the use of the sign-mediator" (Zavershneva, 2014, p. 71).

The lawful relation is for Vygotsky thus not of this kind that there is a cause (e.g. the sign or the meaning itself) *behind* a phenomenon (like speech or thinking). Instead:

"Meaning is not the sum of all the psychological operations which stand behind the word. Meaning is something more specific—it is the internal

structure of the sign operation. It is what is lying between the thought and the word. Meaning is not equal to the word, not equal to the thought.” (Vygotsky, 1934)

This insight conveys that “the gradual, internal development of its meaning [...] also leads to the maturation of the word itself” (Vygotsky, *Thinking and Speech*, ch. 6). The used method must therefore be apt to detect the qualitative change of when and how a word is used and, at the same time, to understand its function in the coordination of one’s world-related behavior with other people or in the coordination of thinking in different contexts of thought. This is the “meaningful aspect of speech” and not just “speech”, because: “[t]he word is not simply the substitute for the thing.” (Vygotsky, 1934) The method must be adequate to this “basic and decisive process in the development of the child’s thinking and speech” (Vygotsky, *Thinking and speech*, ch. 6).

In Vygotsky’s eyes, this is how the meaningful aspect of speech must be explained: The mature form of speaking is a “socio-Gestalt”, a system of interactive relations, not an innate structure. Vygotsky’s holistic understanding of experiencing and meaningful speech can thus be compared to Lewin’s approach. Initially, Lewin proposed to interpret the “total situation” as a whole. But what are the parts if the whole becomes something larger than a concrete situation, i.e. when it becomes the “life space”, as Lewin later reflects. ‘Larger’ means, that the situation refers to a life space context which encompasses not only immediate events but also experiences of the past as well as hopes for the future which become virulent for a person in one moment. But Vygotsky’s idea of socio-Gestalten is different.

4 Socio-Gestalten

In the same manner as Lewin insists on the concrete relationship between person and situation, Vygotsky envisions “Sozio-Gestalten” as dramatic figures (Vygotsky 2018, p. 405) and proposes the drama and the personified division of functions to be the units of analysis (Vygotsky, 1929):

“**Hence** the principal method of *personification* in the study of cultural functions, i.e., voluntary attention: the one side controls, the *other is controlled*. **Renewed division into two of what had been fused in one** (Cf. modern labor), the experimental unfolding of a higher process (voluntary attention) into a *small drama*.”

However, as we can learn from his notebooks (cf. Zavershneva/van der Veer, 2018), Vygotsky had a fundamental critique of “Gestalten”: “Even *Gestalttheorie*,” he remarked, “ignores the concrete person.” (2018, p. 141)

What is missing in Gestalttheory in Vygotsky concerns the difference between the “Sinn” (sense, meaning) and the “Gestalt”:

„We must overcome Gestalttheorie step by step and create in its place a psychology of man with the contrast between Sinn and Gestalt as the constant leitmotiv.“ (Vygotsky 2018, p. 408)

The becoming conscious of the functions of self-regulation when they become a system are to be explained when also the concept of voluntary action is underscored (Vygotsky, 1930). A knot in a handkerchief as a sign to be able to remember something is the key example in Vygotsky when the “instrumental method” served as his framework (Friedrich, 2016). The process first describes an associative connection (reflex-connection), which should explain: The mnemonic tool (the knot) is a stimulus (like the bell for Pavlov’s dog) at the moment when one ties the knot, so that feeling this knot leads back to remembering the tying and thus also something of importance (an appointment for example). Non-voluntary behavior becomes deliberate action because of a recursive event-type (or systemic event-type). In terms of reflex theory, not only can a stimulus trigger a reaction, but also an experienced reaction or action can recursively become the stimulus of a further process of consciousness. Vygotsky’s explanation takes the product of the knotted handkerchief, which one feels when involuntarily reaching into one’s pocket, at first only as a mnemonic device (another stimulation besides the issue to be remembered or, to use a bon mot of Hegel’s, as a “ruse of reason”; Vygotsky 1931), so that two initially involuntary stimulations (groping the knot and remembering the thing) combined become something arbitrary (deliberate remembering of the issue). At the same time, the knot, which is at first material action, explains the symbolic event-type derived from it. For its meaning no longer lies in its material properties of the knot, but in its symbolic and thus mnemonic function; the material is thereby only the trace of the later absent own doing (tying the knot), so that it stands first for the conscious intending while tying the knot (“I want to remember something”) and secondly also for another content of consciousness (“I want to remember this...”). The mediation or the scaffolding lies in mnemonic actions like tying and groping the knot, while it stops being noticeable when the act of voluntary remembrance is achieved. The content of the recalling is in the focus while the mediation which was used for scaffolding is out of focus. This explanation is derived from Gestalt theory. However, the recursive structure of the trace of one’s doing when the knot becomes a sign and the sign becomes a means to voluntary action, a new model for the use of language and for the development of linguistic thinking emerges in Vygotsky’s thought.

The principle, starting from a level of the involuntary (a mere associative connection of two stimuli and a reaction) to one of the voluntary and arbitrary action (by means of the word also hierarchically organized: from command to execution), is according to Vygotsky a qualitative leap: The logos or the logical

thinking can increasingly function independently of impulses of concrete action and can be used for an activity such as remembering and speaking. Intentionality (which includes becoming conscious of one’s own behavior) can then be joined by understanding (the purpose or the logic of one’s action) and both can work recursively in a flexible and fluid way.

For Vygotsky (2018), the word as a tool for self-regulation consequently has meaning, but meaning is nothing stable like a “Gestalt”. He therefore finds the notion of the “Gestalt” biologicistic (cf. Maidansky, 2021) and notes that “Gestaltpsychologie” does not know the “relationships between functions” (Vygotsky, 2018, p. 422).

Instead of finding a structure like the coupling of two or more stimuli, Vygotsky describes “meaning” as to how experiencing becomes “a dynamic, fluid, complex structure with different zones of varying stability,” so that “meaning [marks] only one zone of that sense which the word assumes in the context of speech” (448f). Therefore, sense and meaning are ultimately distinguished in Vygotsky’s theory.

The way to the new quality of a ‘fluid’ rather than a ‘congealed’ (*German: starr*) structure or a compulsive forms can be traced back to his exchange with Lewin. How, Vygotsky wonders in an entry of his notebooks, can one show that even in speech and verbal thought certain meanings do not merely ‘evoke’ action but make it ‘fluid’ and free? He places this question in the context of the broader question of what constitutes, in Lewin’s terms, a ‘real’ field and what constitutes an ‘unreal’ field.

These notes date back to the time when there was a prolonged meeting with Kurt Lewin in Moscow in 1933; remarkably, Vygotsky writes his notes as if he were in a dialogue with Lewin (which could have been the case!) that one can go beyond the field forces in a moment or in an overall situation and also free oneself from them (see below). He picks up ideas from Lewin, noting them in German, as if to motivate him with his own terms to a field theory extended in linguistic psychology.

Three types of activities are distinguished as Vygotsky remarks in his notebook, some time before he died: There is “automatic action” which indicates the “absence of thinking”; “absolutely meaningless action” which can occur because of pathological restrictions of verbal thinking; and “absolutely unreal thinking” which is disturbed like with schizophrenia (p. 496). The note refers to Lewin:

“To say that thinking of the irreality type is disturbed means to say that the dynamics of the real field are destroyed (the things lost their characteristic affect—in schizophrenia) secondarily (for in Z., the external Feldmäßigkeit is preserved with momentary flashes).

Encircled: [Cf. Lewin: The dynamics of the mentally retarded are dynamics without thinking; ergo, we return to the intellect (+ its dynamic aspect) as the center and primary disorder of the mentally retarded.]

We must explain their capacity and incapacity from one principle: a radical change of word meaning as a semantic–dynamic system. Ergo, in K., the dynamics (starr) of the field are preserved; in Z., the fluid dynamics of thinking are preserved also in thinking.“ (Vygotsky, 2018, p. 496)

This gives rise to two problems:

Firstly, how thought can switch back and forth between fields of meaning and how the verbal fields of meaning can be interpreted (ibid., 404f). Unlike Lewin, Vygotsky equates the field of the unreal not only with dreams and fantasies, but also with the possible, the reality that encompasses possibilities to be realized in the future.

Vygotsky thus takes up Lewin’s field theory in a progression perspective towards the possible. At the same time, the question of self-mastery becomes decisive: How can the possible become real and can be mastered? And why is the mode of realizing the possible so special? Vygotsky’s notes testify, not least through the German adjective “flüssig,” that the reflections are inspired by Lewin (Zavershneva 2010, p. 58f). He specifically credits the psychological development of conceptual thinking with its multilayered meanings with making behavior flexible.

Secondly, what has to be clarified is not *that*, but *how* the word relates to the semantic field in a situation. In the “change of meaning”, the (perceived) situation does not *contain* any meaning. Instead, experiencing *is* meaning. Experiencing a word, the meaning, there is a possibility to transform the spontaneous affect with another affect, one that relates to deliberate thinking. The word works not only as a symbol or as a representation for something else but also as a catalyst for an emotional or motivational change. These dynamics – sketched between affect and intellect following Spinoza’s terms – are possible because of the interfunctional relations between emotional and cognitive functions. Within the system of the whole personality, the intellectualization of thinking becomes more fluid and more flexible than with the immediate layer of affect and action.

Vygotsky thus transforms Lewin’s concept of the field. He modifies it by drawing on the linguistic psychological approaches of Karl Bühler and Lev Yakubinsky and others (cf. van der Veer/Zavershneva, 2018; Bertau 2021).

Seen only as a structural relation, the perceptual field of *Gestalttheorie* is directly related to the spontaneous affects (such as attraction or aversion); thus, as with Lewin, it can be described as a situation in a field of forces. But by multiplying

the fields as several semantic fields or as fields of different logics, a new situation emerges with interfunctional relations that constitute the personality: Affects can be multiple, causing a drama, or, one affect can be modified by another. Given the possibility of making reference to different fields, a play with affects can be evoked by recontextualizing meaning. Since affects arise spontaneously in the context of different semantics, the voluntary action of creating fields becomes empowering. Affectual responses can be flexibly modified and emotional and motivational states can be linked to deliberate decision making and action.

5 The refinement of the total situation and the life space

Lewin was not less interested in psychological dynamics that contribute to their independence and to a mature personality. He was convinced that

“the dynamics of the processes is always to be derived from the relationship of the concrete individual to the concrete situation,” and, so far as internal forces are concerned, from the mutual relations of the various functional systems that make up the individual.

Methodologically speaking, this implies:

“the providing of a workable representation of a concrete psychological situation according to its individual characteristics and its associated functional properties, and of the concrete structure of the psychological person and its ‘internal’ dynamic facts.” (Lewin, 1931, S. 174)

In the “life space”, the forces of affects (of attraction or distraction or aversion) can be illustrated as located in regions of this space as well as forces merging into a conflict. However, there are limits to present the fluidity of the affects in a spatial model. A shift towards a semantic model is relevant and necessary.

A comparison and an evaluation of a spatial and a semantic model can be found in Zavershneva’s (2014, p. 93) analysis of Vygotsky’s concepts of consciousness:

“Methodological analysis of the theory of consciousness and personality that could have emerged as a result of the theoretical synthesis of Vygotsky’s and Lewin’s ideas has not yet been achieved. However, the contours of the new theory of consciousness can already be discerned.

This new theory is the theory of consciousness as a non-spatial phenomenon, in which it is studied not as an entity or activity, but as a special verbal format of psychological activity that creates a meaningful interrelation with the world.”

The spatial model of consciousness is not exclusive to Lewin’s framework of the total situation or the life space regarding the “stage” in a theatre which often

served, in philosophy, as a metaphor for consciousness. For Vygotsky, this metaphor is not totally misleading because it can refer to the

“genre of an “interactive” theatrical performance, whose main participant is personality – and, by extension, the multitude of people that stand behind it.” (Zavershneva, 2014, p. 93)

However, the semantic model of consciousness is still superior because of its dialogical character. The dynamics of a fluid type of behavior is rooted in the systemic functional relations, the idea of scientific concepts as socio-cultural and socio-historical achievements and the dialogical nature of speech. The concept of personality is not detached from this. In an autoethnographic essay, Enno von Fircks recently highlighted how human development can be conceived as an enrichment of experiences that feeds into a person’s stance, ready to make new experiences, striving for more and better understanding:

“It is this scientific exploration (analytical, intentional, and multi-perspectivity) that transforms the interpretation of a given object at stake. A certain concept gets re-structured, expanded, or even restricted—in the case of ideology. This transformation within the given initial interpretation of a concept then affects again the everyday structure of a specific person within a specific culture (see Fig. 1). A person starts to relate differently to himself, to his material environment as well as to his social environment than before. Especially, the differences within the relationship to the individual’s social environment can unfold severe consequences. Yet, the differences or the alternatives of relating to a certain kind of object appeal the person to choose a meaningful stance towards the issue at stake, in short to develop a personal sense in regard to a specific cultural life-pattern (von Fircks, 2022).” (2023, p. 12)

The figure that the author presents looks much like the Jordan curve that Lewin and his circle used to describe as the life space, yet, it does not depict regions but rather semantic patterns. A shift from a spatial to a semantic model can be discovered in this.

If the refinement of the “total situation” and the “life space” was still something to accomplish and if it had not taken place in the dialogues of Lewin and Vygotsky in 1933 – which we do not know exactly – then it would have been in the creation of better models of it.

Abstract

The relationship between Kurt Lewin and Lev S. Vygotsky is important for many methodological questions raised by the two psychologists such as distinguishing a genetic and an accidental event type. The concept of „Gestalt“ is another important issue. The present article analyzes and contextualizes the significance of this concept in their discussions since they met in Berlin in 1925. It can be shown that a difference between Lewin’s and

Vygotsky's approach becomes salient in the ways they refer to Gestalt theory as a holistic approach. While Lewin understands the here-and-now of situation in which an event occurs as depending on the present field forces as a whole, Vygotsky agrees largely with Lewin's postulate to consider all field forces, but then moves on from the field as an originally spatial model to introduce a semantic model. According to Vygotsky this is necessary to theorize fluidity and flexibility in behavior and thus to understand the necessary psychologically preconditions for free will and independency.

Keywords: Field theory, socio-Gestalten, methodology, psychological models.

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Ines Langemeyer is a full professor for the research on learning and teaching, philosophy of education and vocational education at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology.

Email: ines.langemeyer@kit.edu

Orcid: 0000-0001-7385-5200