

From Life Space to Cyberspace: Reimagining Lewin's and Bourdieu's Field Theories for the Digital Era

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Abstract. *This paper extends Kurt Lewin's and Pierre Bourdieu's field theories in the modern context of the digital society and highlights their contemporary relevance. Lewin's field theory emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their socio-psychological environment (life space) and suggests that human behavior is widely influenced by external forces. Bourdieu's concept of social fields rests upon structured spaces within society (cultural, educational, economic etc.) and their power dynamics on social hierarchies. The article starts from the intersection of these theories to explain contemporary digital phenomena. The paper shows that virtual spaces and online interaction impact human identity and behavior, following the same principles used by Lewin for his topological psychology made famous with the concept of „Kriegslandschaft”, as well as by Bourdieu for his social capital theory. This research emphasizes that field theory offers a critical framework to understand how digital environments influence socialization and hierarchy.*

Keywords: topological psychology, phenomenology, life space, digital landscape, algorithms.

Introduction

Although popularized by Pierre Bourdieu, the foundations of the field theory were laid by Kurt Lewin. Both Lewin and Bourdieu believed that the actions and lives of individuals are not solely determined by their personal characteristics, but are rather influenced by external forces that shape their behaviour. Lewin's field theory emphasizes the dynamic interaction between a person's internal psychological states and the external social and physical environment in which they operate. On the other hand, Bourdieu's theory of social fields highlights how individuals are situated within various fields – such as educational, cultural, or economic – and how the power dynamics and social structures within these fields shape their behavior and opportunities for social mobility. Both theories argue for how the lives of individuals are influenced by the contexts around them.

These ideas still are highly relevant in today's digital economy (or, it might be argued, these ideas regain importance in the modern, overly digital landscape of our societies). The field theory puts forward the idea of a digital life space that shapes identities and decision making. Following the path of several important concepts theorized by Lewin and Bourdieu (life space, topological psychology, spatial perception etc.), this article aims to discuss why and how these concepts are of utmost relevance for the digital society.

Lewin's Field Theory and Life Space

A key concept in Lewin's work, field theory was used to describe how the behaviour of individuals is shaped by the „field” in which they live their existence. These surrounding, socio-psychological factors, or the „field”, include physical, social, and psychological aspects, all interacting and shaping individuals' actions and choices. By considering the broader context in which individuals exist, field theory shows how changes in the environment can lead to changes in behaviour.

Lewin's field theory suggests that human behaviour is not inherently individual, but it has to be as well attributed to the external factors that shape people's lives. Behaviour is thus a result of individual traits plus the social, physical, or cultural surroundings. These latter ones would generally be described as „environment”, or what was coined by Lewin as the „life space”: a socio-psychological space (not merely geographical) where the individual and the environment are intersected (Chakraborty and De, 2022; Kostormina and Grishina, 2023). In the current digital age, we can argue that this environment is not only physical and psychological, but also virtual (or, even, “psycho-digital”?).

In an analytical review of the different perspectives of the field existing in sociology, Martin (2003) identifies three important field theories: Lewin's, Bourdieu's, and DiMaggio and Powell's (1983). In his early work, Bourdieu uses Lewin's social-psychological field perspective to explain that fields designate structured spaces which are organized around various forms of capital and which lead to competition between actors.

For Bourdieu (1985, 1989), social fields are structured spaces within a society where individuals and groups compete for resources and status. Such structured spaces can be those of culture, education, politics, arts etc. Each field has its importance in the structure and functionality of a society: economic capital is important for determining access to resources and opportunities, cultural capital plays a role in shaping individuals' perspectives and social interactions, while social capital is instrumental in creating networks and support systems.

Although Bourdieu emphasizes the stratification of social actors in various fields among which and within which competition between those actors can arise, hence applying a sociologically-oriented perspective, the roots of this line of thought are to be found in phenomenology and in the Gestalt theory, specific to Lewin and to the research directions established at the Institute of Psychology of the University of Berlin in the early 20th century (Langemeyer, 2023; Roşca, 2020a).

Lewin's field perspective serves as a framework to understand social interactions and the impact of power struggles in different fields (Roşca, 2020b). Bourdieu used this perspective to analyze social fields, identify struggles for power and resources within those fields, and examine how individuals' positions in these fields are shaped by their possession of different forms of capital (Bottero and Crossley, 2011). Through this analysis, Bourdieu aimed to shed light on the dynamics of social hierarchies and inequalities.

It has to be noted that, while Bourdieu started from Lewin's field theory, later on he developed a distinguishing theoretical framework, based on concepts less or not at all used by Lewin. Delving more into pure sociological theory than Lewin, Bourdieu's work emphasizes the interplay between structures and agency, by using concepts such as habitus, symbolic violence, or social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1994; Bourdieu and Chartier, 1989). To Bourdieu (2003), socialization adds layer after layer of habitus: internalized human practices that shape one's thoughts, perceptions and actions.

Bourdieu's social capital finds its relevance in today's digital world, in which social media, influencer culture and e-commerce impact upon, education, politics, trade etc. (Oancea, 2024). In

the digital landscape, individual status is highly determined by likes, followers, comments or shares (De Vries, 2019; Farivar et al., 2022). We can even discuss about digital social hierarchies, in which online influence is built upon the aforementioned metrics. Moreover, research studies discuss the impact of AI agency or robotic agency over human behavior (Ciofu et al., 2024).

Socio-Psychological Field Theory

For Lewin, the socio-psychological field was an area that exerted influence over the individual (Skea, 2021). Lewin's socio-psychological field theory suggests that an individual's behaviour is influenced by both his personal characteristics and the external environment he is in (Kariel, 1956; Rosch, 2002). This theory emphasizes the dynamic relationship between individuals and their surrounding context, suggesting that behaviour is not solely determined by individual factors, but also by the social and physical environment they are situated in. Rather than isolating internal (personal) and external (environmental) factors, Lewin understands human behaviour from a holistic point of view (Barker, 1963).

These social and psychological influences can shape a person's perception, attitudes, and behaviours, impacting their overall well-being (Lewin, 1997). The psychological field encompasses various factors such as social interactions, cultural norms, personal experiences, and cognitive processes, all of which intertwine to create a web that defines the unique personality of an individual (Lewin, 1977). Today, social media platforms, feeds or digital landscapes should be regarded as such psychological fields.

Lewin's field is understood as a relational construct, in which various social institutions, such as the family, the school, the workplace etc. influence the becoming of the individual (Burnes and Cooke, 2013). The individual, thus, develops as a result of the changes he undergoes as part of socialization. The identity that sets the individual apart and makes him to be unlike others is a result of that socialization (Adams, 1985; Armet, 2009). Peer pressure coming from the field leads to group socialization, which allows to make the claim that fields socialize their members, ascribing them particular roles that they have to play within that particular field (Teschendorf and Nemshick, 2001; Chandler, 1974). Once the roles are played within the field, they also shape the individual's traits and behaviour outside of that field. Much of the socialization today happens digitally, with digital platforms strongly influencing not only how people relate to another within, but also their individual beings and outer projections (French et al., 2013; Irgaliyev, 2024).

To Lewin, the complex set of characteristics that distinguish an individual is a product of the interaction between biology and the fields (Lewin, 1936). The human has a biological root more or less common to most of the people, on top of which a distinctive personality is established as a result of the interaction of the person with the environment (i.e., the fields). The sum of environmental fields brought together is described by Lewin as „life space”: the totality of interactions between a person and its environment. The life space, thus, is constituted of the co-existing fields (concurrent interacting forces) which contain every possible psychological touchpoint (fact, or influence) that can shape the characteristics and behaviour of the individual.

Else told, Lewin understands that a space has its own life (Qi, 2021). Life, in this case, is the totality of experiences that define: (i.) the existence of the individuals populating the space; (ii.) the identity of the space, by interaction with the individuals. Thus, a space can be defined by more than its geographical boundaries. Namely, the space is not merely geographical, but it also acquires identity roots and becomes a space of memory that establishes collectiveness and distinctiveness.

The field as *genius loci* or as space of memory is a sequence of the physical, mental and emotional experiences that define the existences of the individuals populating that space.

Therefore, through „life space” Lewin understands the person plus the geographical territory, hence the psychology plus the geography, which form the geographical psychology. For Lewin, the life space is the totality of possible events that can occur within a geographical space at a given time, as well as the totality of factors that come from the space and can shape the behaviour of an individual at a given time. Events, factors or facts are for Lewin the touchpoints between the individual and field. These touchpoints can be perceived (imagined), felt or thought (Wong, 2001). Lewin’s „life space” is dynamic, not static. Therefore, the life space needs to be understood as a process, and not as a particular condition that a person or an object is in at a specific time. Hence, this is about the process of change, as opposed to a static state.

Topological Psychology and Spatial Perception

The aforementioned ideas allow us to bring the concept of topological psychology into discussion: the sum of shared awarenesses and experiences of the people inhabiting a field (space). Through collective perception and engagement within a particular environment (geographical space) or context, topological psychology seeks to understand the interconnectedness between individuals and how their shared experiences (lived within that space) shape their psychological states. It emphasizes the importance of considering the social and spatial dimensions in studying human behaviour and mental processes.

Geographically, an area is circumscribed (defined) by the boundaries which restrain its limits, its territory, but which also restrain the human imagination of the area. Consider, for example, a fictional country that wouldn’t have any boundaries, so its territory would be unlimited: how and where would you place this country on the global map? It would be impossible, since, not having boundaries, it would actually cover the entire world map. What about the other, bounded countries then? They would be absorbed by this country without limits, which would stretch over the entire map and, therefore, over the rest of the countries, without being clear where it stops. An important point that results from here is that, what is observable has to have boundaries which define its finitude. A field without boundaries would lack any defined limits or boundaries, making it impossible to observe or measure. Without the ability to observe or define its limits, the field cannot be considered a valid entity. In essence, a field without boundaries is non-existent in practice.

In physics, any field must have some sort of boundary or shape that allows it to be observed and analyzed. Boundaries allow the measurement and analysis of a field’s properties (such as, for instance, its dimensions). Boundaries are a convention of the International Court of Justice and confer sovereignty over a certain territorial area, allowing states to exercise their power and sovereignty (Alvarez-Jimenez, 2012; Kelly, 1987). In terms of geography, a field is an identifiable and observable area that has distinct boundaries which define its extent. These boundaries determine the specific characteristics and features present within the field, giving it a unique identity separate from its surroundings. Clearly defined boundaries restrict the field from being more (or less) than it is and, thus, confer (territorial) identity to it (it is therefore why we know how a country looks like on a map, how many square kilometers its surface has etc.). Therefore, in physics, a field that does not have boundaries is usually considered a non-existent or theoretical concept that cannot be observed or quantified.

A field is geographically defined by its territorial boundaries, by the physical and/or administrative features that encompass the area in which it is situated. This includes natural boundaries such as mountains, rivers, or coastlines, or man-made boundaries such as fences, walls, or roads. Territorial boundaries can also be defined by administrative units such as governmental

jurisdictions or land survey systems. The specific boundary lines of a field may also be delineated by legal or cultural norms that dictate the extent of individual or collective use or ownership of the land.

Just as it is geographically defined by its territorial boundaries, a field also receives an identarian definition through the imaginations, experiences or perceptions of the people inhabiting it, which, altogether, create ideological boundaries that shape the field in a distinctive way, unlike others. The identity of fields and the meanings associated with this can be defined, among others, by history (a field which is a site of historical importance, such as a battlefield), cultural practices and traditions, physical and natural features (i.e., a field surrounded by mountains or water bodies may have a unique identity), or social interactions and relationships (i.e., a field used as a gathering place for a community and a field used for agriculture or livestock grazing will have two different meanings).

The fact that mentalities can change over time made Lewin believe that fields also change, depending on how the observer looks at them at various moments in time. Thus, although it is rather confined to a certain, ascribed geographical shape (geographical identity), a space can undergo changes in its cultural identity during time. This idea is important in understanding Lewin's Field Theory and his phenomenological interpretation of the battlefield, described in his programmatic study „Kriegslandschaft” (1917).

The „Kriegslandschaft” (The Battlefield)

Whilst serving as artillery foot soldier in the First World War, Lewin realized that he perceived the battlefield in various ways depending on the existing state of combat (Lewin and Blower, 2009). When no fighting was going on, the battlefield seemed brighter and wider than during battle. Although the geographical boundaries were the same (and, hence, the topographical configuration didn't differ), what made the difference was the psychology of the individual: if the soldier experienced a relative calmness when no fighting was going on, then he looked at the field with more inner peace, which made the field appear larger. On the contrary, when the soldier was stressed due to combat, the understanding and the perception of the battlefield were reduced (as Lewin thinks, reduced to the focal point where the fighting was going on; what was beyond that point was not observable to the soldier; thus, a perceptual narrowing). In the state of calmness, the psychological borders ascribed by the soldier are further away (maybe even so far away that they are unobservable) than during unrest. The imaginative elasticity of the field and the psychological imagination of the soldier allow the boundaries to be extended, i.e. the field receives new boundaries, hence boundaries are fluid and fluctuating (Fischer-Kattner, 2018).

Lewin's phenomenological interpretation of the battlefield backs up the cultural formation of an identarian territory within a geographically defined space and, second, it explains how the identity of a space can change over time although its geography not. In addition, when looking at „life space” and at „battlefield”, it has to be mentioned that societal factors cannot be ignored. While the field is singular, the person cannot be. If there is only one field and only one person inhabiting that field, then the human perception of the field wouldn't change because the field's geography does not change either (we ignore climatic and meteorological changes that can influence perception and we will summarize the strictly geographical ones). For the cultural perception of the field to be changed, the societal (sociological) factor is needed.

In „Kriegslandschaft”, Lewin mentioned that the soldier changes his perceptions of the battlefield depending on whether fighting goes on or not (Lewin and Blower, 2009). For fighting to exist, other soldiers need to exist as well, hence the sociological factor. Without the existence of

(and interaction with) other people whose community makes up the society of that field, it wouldn't be possible to have identical perceptions of the space, less so that these perceptions change over time. Thus, a field is made of a natural typology and an imaginative topology, the latter only resulting when human social relationships exist.

In „Kriegslandschaft“, Lewin used the metaphor of the soldier to explain the significance that the *tópos* (gr., *τόπος*) took over from the people who inhabited it and what common message it delivered back. As such, we might argue the existence of a symbolic interactionism between the space and the individual, by which people attach meanings to the elements of space (just as the soldier attached various meanings to the battlefield) depending on the moment in which they experience that space; different moments can create different contexts (i.e., the space might be perceived as quiet or as agitated). Not only the variety of moments can create different instances of the same space, but also different people can imagine the space differently. Such variety of socio-psychological imaginations justify Lewin's metatheoretical analyses and his choice to emphasize so much the concept of „topological psychology“ (see, for example, Lewin, 1937).

In precise sciences, topology describes the quality of an object to be exposed to continuous deformations but, at the same time, to preserve its properties (Ayob et al., 2005). In other words, topology characterizes the inherent properties and relationships of an object that are preserved under continuous transformations such as stretching, bending, or twisting. It focuses on the global properties of an object rather than its specific geometric features, allowing for the study of shapes that may differ in size or detail but still possess similar topological properties. Or, otherwise told, the shape of the object can change, but its properties remain the same. The properties are then those which confer identity to the object and make it recognizable, since the shape cannot longer achieve this. This elasticity made Lewin believe that topology might be a great concept to investigate and explain psychological problems (Henle, 1978).

According to Lewin, one and the same soldier can perceive the same battlefield differently, depending on the context (Lewin and Blower, 2009). An individual's perception of a battlefield is subject to their interpretation based on the surrounding circumstances. This implies that perceptions are not fixed or objective, but rather influenced by the specific context and situational factors, highlighting the subjective nature of human perception. Although, geographically, there are no alterations to the space, topologically, the space receives other meanings through the distinct perspectives of the soldier. This lets us assume that the interpretation and understanding of a space can differ greatly among individuals based on their unique perspectives and experiences. While the physical geography of a space remains unchanged, the meaning attached to it can vary based on factors such as cultural background, personal memories, and emotional associations. Thus, even though the space itself may not undergo any physical alterations, its significance or interpretation can be transformed through the lens of each individual.

Extending the idea to any kind of other places, Lewin asserted that the dynamism of social interaction is what confers context and identity to topological structures (Davis, 2013). The dynamic nature of social interactions adds depth and meaning to the topological structure, allowing it to develop and transform over time. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the social dynamics within a given context to fully comprehend the structure's identity.

However, regardless of the different perspectives that individuals can have of a space, the space will continue to have its fundamental properties and geographical constitution that define its overall identity and characteristics. During the war, the battlefield never ceased to be the piece of ground on which the war was fought, so the identity was maintained; nevertheless, it received

different imaginations from the soldier, as being more opened or more compact depending on the situation of war. When no fighting was going on, the limits of the field were stretched in the imagination of the soldier so he could see towards the horizon, while during fight, the limits were condensed to the focal point of battle.

Taking the phenomenological concepts of the „Kriegslandschaft” and returning to the field theory, Lewin’s opinion should be noted that the socialization in itself needs a space in order to happen (Edelman, 1978; Gans, 2002). The „Kriegslandschaft” highlights the impact of the physical space on individuals and their interactions, because socialization requires a conducive space where individuals can engage with others and develop social relationships. For Lewin, socialization is not imaginable without a space being attached to it because, *sine qua non*, socialization occurs in various spaces (contexts), namely the fields: the socialization in the space at home, the socialization at school, at work, in the group of friends, during a trip etc. (Szafranec, 2017). Thus, we often claim that one has been socialized within (a certain group/field).

Just as in geography, boundaries play a crucial psychological role in establishing limits and defining the parameters within which individuals or groups can operate. They provide clarity and structure, helping to set expectations and prevent misunderstandings. By setting boundaries, people can determine what is acceptable and what is not, enabling them to protect their physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Boundaries also aid in promoting healthy relationships and maintaining respect for oneself and others. Boundaries have the role to set terminations: they have to end the field, to determine what can be observed within them and what cannot be seen beyond them, thus imposing restraints on what can occur within the delimitations of the field (Weiss, 1992). In a sociopsychological sense, boundaries determine what are the do’s and don’ts: what one is allowed to do and what not. At the same time, boundaries are potentially extensive: they can change, enlarging or restricting what one can do. Thus, as Morehouse (1995) observes, boundaries can be dynamic in time and space, allowing for growth and adaptation. As individuals develop and circumstances evolve, boundaries can expand or contract, offering opportunities for exploration and learning, or setting necessary limitations for one’s well-being and personal growth.

The idea of topological psychology is also reflected in how people perceive and experience digital space. Human behaviour today is strongly impacted by algorithmic calculus, digital platform user design, or social media interactions (Bilberg and Malik, 2019; Deighton-Smith and Bell, 2018). It is often argued that people live in digital (tech) bubbles, which influence their perceptions of reality. Such a digital “bubble-space” is aligned with Lewin’s findings that a field is a subjective construct, influenced today by digital perceptions. Also, Lewin’s idea that psychological fields are dynamic maintains relevance in today’s digital world, in which digital spaces are constantly reshaped by how users interact and also by the constant and digital advancements. This can be easily argued with the help of world wide web’s evolution over the past four decades, from a static website space, to interactive digital platforms.

Conclusions

This article looked at how a psychologist (Lewin) and a sociologist (Bourdieu) – both of them, to be said, with socio-psychological interests – regarded field theory. Both obviously introduce their personal touches, yet both also agree that there are environmental force fields which shape individuals. For Lewin, life space is a dynamic concept. Similarly, to Bourdieu, a sociological space with social fields exerts influence on individuals.

As this paper has shown, both scientists understand that there is a connection between individual and environment. Lewin’s idea is that human behavior, although individualistic, is

shaped by outer influences (so, it might be said, not fully individualistic?). For Bourdieu mainly, outer influences determine social hierarchies, which, further on, exert their influence on individuals.

Additionally, the article also explored the notion of topological psychology. As Lewin demonstrated through the analysis of the battlefield, the perception of space depends on context, thus emphasizing that space is not only a geographical construct, but also a socio-psychological phenomenon.

Understanding field theory remains relevant even today (or, it is even more so important today), when fields become digital. If, a century ago, Lewin used the metaphor of war to discuss his field theory, today, one can use the digital space to argue how individual experiences are influenced. Therefore, analyzing how the field theory applies to digital landscapes can provide valuable insights into the contemporary social or business frameworks. Future research might focus on how artificial intelligence or robotic agency relate to the social hierarchies described by Bourdieu: do these new technologies merely strengthen existing hierarchies, or, do they actually create a re-ordering of these hierarchies through new ways of power distribution? Focusing future research on AI or robotic agency might could prove a welcomed decision in order to try and bring Bourdieu's and Lewin's frameworks under contemporary circumstances.

As both Lewin's psychological and Bourdieu's sociological researches have shown, psychological fields are deeply embedded within social tissues, including modern digital ones. Acknowledging the ideas of the two scientists can help in gaining a deeper understanding of how modern human behaviour is shaped by digital fields and algorithms.

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