gestalt theory

Relations and Structures in Developmental, Educational and Social Psychology

- Gestalt Theory's Impact on Methods and Content of Current Developmental Psychology Research
- Gestalt Theory in Educational Psychology: Formative Process, Teaching and Learning and "Peer Group" Culture
- Action-Research in Social Psychology
- Lewin's Field Theory and its Development in Current Social Psychology

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MAJORITY AND MINORITY IN DEMOCRACY:
THE RELEVANCE OF LEWIN´S AND WERTHEIMER´S VIEW

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Social Psychology is more and more frequently called to face current events and social emergency issues; politics, environmental problems, the sense of being in a community and health and are all fields of study and action that tightly commit our discipline, and other ones, to intertwine different forms of knowledge in a perspective of inter-dependence. Lewin, who strongly believed that psychology must come out of the laboratories and embrace daily problems - as any research performed within a real society should be - yet underlined also the need to never loose the connection with theory, epistemological problems and method. This dialectic between theory and concrete problems of everyday life led Kurt Lewin to the idea of action research that, after having fallen into oblivion for a long period of time, is now largely applied within the psychological and social sciences - and not only in those disciplines .

The psychology for politics has particularly targeted its research to try to explain behaviour during elections, or attitude towards politics of some categories of people (women, young people …) and the ways through which individuals cope with decision-making processes. From a more complex standpoint - or, according with Lewin, from an ecological standpoint - the effort that politics psychology should make is to be more social, and try not to limit its research to only one of the elements of a given field, but try to connect it to a system of relations. The problems and questions peculiar to the social and psychological dynamics of our present culture lead us to re-examine and reflect upon the relations between individuals and political groups, between majority and minority, between individuals and community; furthermore, we are urged to question ourselves on real representation, participation, change and on the concept of democracy itself. This particular concept I would especially like to explore, in order to build, with the contribution of illustrious forefathers, a study plan and a strategy of action and training.

A Definition of Democracy

The first form of democratic government was established in the 5th century B.C. in Athens: it was a form of direct democracy in which the people have the power (however, from this notion of "people" we have to leave out slaves, foreigners and women), according with the etymology of the word (from the ancient Greek language "Demos" = people and "Kratia" = power). The form of democratic government of a community provides that all its members have got the right and the real power to intervene in decisions relevant to the community, either *directly*, by personally expressing their will in an assembly form - and this is the case of the government in Athens and, maybe, also the most difficult type of government to realize, or *indirectly*, through representatives freely elected by the vote of all the citizens who are appointed to do so, as in the present forms of government of the European democracies.

A political psychology that doesn't lose its social dimension should study phenomena

which are peculiar to a democratic government system: at present, those phenomena appear to have so deeply changed that we are driven to question ourselves on what type of democracy is the one where:

- governors and citizens are definitely distinguished?
- citizens don't take an active part in the political life and abandon their role of *governors*?
- the relationship between minority and majority is not dialectical but based on submission?
- the voters don't have any democratic culture?
- the voters don't have any knowledge or information to freely play their role? (Where 'freely' stands for 'without any physical pressure' but also 'aware and informed')

And, moreover, a very topical but also basic question: can a democratic government impose itself or must it be the result of a slow and gradual bottom-up change? Plus, what characteristics must a government have to be defined 'democratic'?

Many of these questions clearly look exquisitely political, and therefore pertaining to political sciences, but they definitely subtend some psycho-social issues which are connected to individual, intersubjective and social dynamics. To deal with these issues with a comprehensive view means also to relate among each other in a relation of interdependence, knowing that it is not the answer to anyone of those questions what will help us understand what kind of democracy we are living in.

Therefore, reading Lewin (1948, 1951) and Max Wertheimer (1991) can help us develop some psycho-socially relevant themes *with method*; we will see this while analysing the studies of the two Gestaltists, if we adopt the principles of the *field-theory*, particularly if we think about the importance that a single analyzed element may have if related to the whole, even speaking of democracy.

It may seem too obvious and plain that we go back to Lewin's contribution; on the contrary, our reference to Wertheimer may be less immediate, as he is a *Gestaltist* in the original meaning. Yet we'll see that Wertheimer, without dealing with any of the themes dear to historians, sociologists and politic experts, manages to make us think about how to interpret the elements of which a democracy is made up. He does that without making the mistake of confusing the part with the whole or, even worse, without trying to give significance to the parts while not considering that they actually belong to a whole (to a whole structure – democracy in this case).

Lewin and the Concept of Interdependence

Lewin and his works can surely help us while trying to find an interpretation key to psycho-social phenomena connected with politics.

Adriano Ossicini (1972) says that Lewin's work is absolutely important for its method: the field theory, group dynamics and education to democracy are all themes where the methodological approach is very innovative.

The Method in Psychology

The article "*The Conflict Between Aristotelian and Galilean Modes of Thought in Contemporary Psychology*"(1931) is very important not only as he introduces some significant elements in the method, but also as he consequently brings relevant changes into the study and comprehension of psychological phenomena.

Lewin underlines how, in psychology, too often non-frequent and non-regular phenomena were considered irrelevant, and other phenomena, as they occur regularly, were considered excessively important. Lewin didn't really criticise the use of statistical methods in itself, but the way they were used.

The connection to his *field theory* is quite evident; the psychological phenomenon should be studied as part of a whole of phenomena interacting among each other and being in a relation of *interdependence*.

The Field Theory

The psychological field is defined as a whole of facts coexistent in their interdependence.

The whole, the organization and the functional dependence are taken from the *Gestalttheory* and are peculiar to perceptive contexts; Lewin utilises them for the understanding of the individual's reality and social reality.

However, the characterizing concept of the Lewinian field is the interdependence of facts; the real meaning is that every single fact has its explanation and its function as it concurs to the system dynamics; indeed, the properties of every fact result from their relation with the other coexisting elements.

The Group Dynamics

It is the field theory that brings Lewin to the group concept, as this is peculiarly the social environment with which, in various moments of their life, individuals come into contact.

Lewin transposes one of the basic concepts of the *Gestalttheory* and speaks about the group as a dynamic whole, in which members are strictly interdependent, and the change occurring in one element in the group affects all the others. Therefore, the group is a complex structure of roles, positions, communication channels and power exertion modalities.

He did the research on different leadership styles' effects on behaviour and group atmosphere with Lippit and White (1939).

Lewin put a thorough attention on the results of those experiments trying to analyse their spin-offs both in the school environment and generally in the social context.

This experiment has the structure of *action research*. The group in which the research is conducted is seen as a means of education in democracy as it stimulates the participants to be active and generates a change while the research is being

performed. The peculiar psycho-social research themes start to come into sight: the democratic collaboration, the participation and the cooperation based on a social change. Lewin was actually interested in individuating the strategies to generate a non-authoritative, participative and democratic social change. Francesco Colucci (2005) firstly highlights the way Lewin deals with the problem of *change*, which indeed had been studied and theorized by others before. The processes of change Lewin deals with are democratic by their own nature, as they spring from the dynamics implied in groups, from exchange and from the natural and inner conflict within the groups themselves; so they are slow and very difficult processes. They cannot be imposed "from the above": they can only be "bottom-up" processes as many of his studies have demonstrated. His interest was surely generated by the historical events in which he found himself involved (the persecution of the Jewish people, the rise of Nazism, the liberation and then the postwar period) and which swept away nations with a democratic tradition. This interest is centred right on democracy and on how easy is to pass from a democratic to an autocratic form of government and how difficult the reverse process is. For Lewin, democracy is based on undertaking responsibility and on a deliberate action of individuals, and from here derives the need for an education in democracy.

Majority and Minority

Lewin devoted much time and energy in research and reflection on psycho-social problems of minority groups; his belonging to the Jewish community drove him, as many other researchers in that period of time, to try to understand the intra-group and inter-group dynamics that brought about the rise of Nazism.

The relations among groups, according with Lewin, are a two-faced problem; studying the majority problems without connecting them with the minority ones prevents us from understanding and from intervening. He individuates in the submission of the minority, due to a lack of trust and self-esteem, one of the obstacles to change and progress; and surely that is an obstacle particularly to democratic change processes. The assumption, by the minority groups, of the opinion that the majority group has of them, often leads them to develop an opposing attitude toward their own group:"the so-called minority problems are actually majority problems, and the problem of the Afro-American is the problem of the white, and the Jewish question is the non-Jewish question" (Lewin, 1972, 260).

Wertheimer and the Concept of Democracy – a Method Problem

Wertheimer deals with the theme of democracy, but refers the answer to the innumerable questions to historic research and to other disciplines; he proposes a Gestaltist model. He believes that listing the single elements that make democracy different from other forms of government is not enough; there is rather greater need to analyse the structural function of the elements and the hierarchical structure of the whole. Within this approach to search for the meaning of the elements characterizing a democracy, he tries to describe some examples to better explain his methodological approach.

In a democracy (the representative or indirect one) the people can vote and the majority rules, taking strategic decisions.

In this first statement we can already see two elements characterizing democracy: the vote and the principle of majority.

Now, the vote in itself is definitely not a democratic element, but it is democratic if is a free vote, as to say if the voter is not subject to psychological or, even worse, physical pressure, and is informed enough to be able to vote with full knowledge; from here another element springs, related to the right to information.

So let's analyse the principle of majority. This is not democratic in itself; so it is not the principle to be democratic but its function, a technical means to reach the real scope: to take decisions in a fair way.

The attitude towards minorities can make more or less democratic the criterion of majority. In this process, the minority role is vital, as the minority can bow and be subject to the majority power or, on the contrary, have an active role, make proposals or disagree.

The research performed by Salomon Asch (1951) on social influence of majority stress just some modalities, used by the majority, that are not democratic in themselves, whilst we could state that those used by the minority better meet the democratic principles.

He sets a problem of method, as we were saying above, by re-examining some key points of the *Gestalttheorie*, and highlighting in particular the significance that the part has, if put into that whole, and related to the other parts. Even in this case, he underlines the difference between taking every single element separately and giving it a significance (for example, the criterion of majority) or attempting to understand every element according to its function within the structure (the criterion of majority as a technical means to make decisions in a fair way).

Therefore, the elements are to be examined bearing in mind their place in the hierarchical whole structure, and how are they correlated with each other, what is their structural centre, what is their role and function, which ones are central and which ones peripheral.

At the beginning of the great democracies the main point seems to be opposition to injustice both for oneself and the community, and not be subject to arbitrary commands of the ruler.

So the *structural centre* could be "The wish to create and assure a more just procedure, to get decisions and rulings that are not arbitrary but directed by reason and justice" (Wertheimer 1937, 47).

The people's government, the vote and the principle of majority are therefore secondary elements, determined by another central principle, and their content should be evaluated by taking this into account

Conclusions

Today's study of some of the ideas of these two *Gestaltists* reminds us of concepts that we know very well. Yet those ideas should be reconsidered in the field of psycho-social research, in order to avoid, as Lewin says, that researchers, too eager to describe, calculate and measure phenomena, forget that they are actually dealing with human beings, having their personal and social relations and acting within a given context and period of time.

The concept that Wertheimer underlines is the one of structure and relation between the parts and the whole, underlining how every phenomenon that we study takes a significance as being connected with the other phenomena and as a part of a *whole*, or of a structure, like in the case of the majority criterion.

There emerges, therefore, a problem of identifying the research topics within the psycho-social field. In particular, the bigger difficulty is in political psychology, where several elements, complex and coming from different fields, are involved. In which way can analysing a topic without identifying the meaning that the topic has within the structure, vanify the research itself, even if using a correct method? Which is the correct relationship between social psychology and the other disciplines?

As Piero Amerio says (2006), the fundament of the Lewinian view is the concept of relation, which settles what was divided: subject and context, objective and subjective world, individual and social dimension, theory and practice. In his field theory, the properties of every fact spring from the relation with the other concurrent facts; basing on this system of interrelations, every fact gets its explanation and function while concurring to the system dynamics. The truly peculiar feature of Lewin's field theory is the interdependence of facts (as in his analysis of the relation between majority and minority).

This reflection supports the previous consideration and underlines the need to enlarge the research field, according to the interdependence principle.

Summary

In this contribution I address issues of great relevance in the studies of political psychology, considering the works of two very important authors of the Gestalt approach, such as Wertheimer and Lewin. I take into account their methodological approach, the principle of "totality", the field theory and the concept of interdependence. These notions are used to analyze the concept of democracy and the meaning that in a democracy has the relationship between majority and minority.
Keywords: Democracy, field theory, interdependence.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag gehe ich auf Fragen von großer Relevanz innerhalb der Studien zur politischen Psychologie ein, unter Berücksichtigung der Arbeiten zweier besonders wichtiger Autoren des Gestalt-Ansatzes, Wertheimer und Lewin. Dabei werden deren methodologischer Zugang, das Prinzip der „Gesamtheit", die Feldtheorie und das Konzept der Interdependenz berücksichtigt. Diese Begriffe werden verwendet, um das Konzept der Demokratie sowie die Bedeutung, die in einer Demokratie der Beziehung zwischen Mehrheit und Minderheit zukommt, zu analysieren.

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Die Anfänge der Gestalttheorie reichen in die 30er Jahre des vorigen Jahrhunderts zurück. Seitdem hat sie zahlreiche Weiterentwicklungen erfahren und gilt mittlerweile als bedeutende Metatheorie nicht nur der Psychologie, sondern auch vieler anderer Disziplinen.

Der vorliegende Band beschäftigt sich in seinen Beiträgen sowohl mit den Grundannahmen der Gestalttheorie, als auch mit ihren systemtheoretischen Weiterentwicklungen. Er bietet Vertiefungen in den traditionellen psychologischen Disziplinen neben neuen, fruchtbaren Ansätzen in den Bereichen Sprache, Didaktik, Kunst und Musik.