

Review: Midwest and Its Children

Sherri E. Cavan  
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*Following are outlines of Lewin's concept*

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Early in their book, Barker and Wright state that they are concerned with two interrelated problems. One is the search for adequate categories to be used in the description of molar behavior and the other the quantitative analysis of this behavior, within a limited community setting. (cf 1:13-14) In one sense, what is ultimately produced from this dual focus of concern is a number of circular propositions. This is the specific problem which I wish to focus on in the context of this review.

The conceptual orientation which Barker and Wright take is based upon the topological orientation of Kurt Lewin and the phenomenological orientation of Fritz Heider. Briefly, what Barker and Wright attempt to do is to describe the Lewinian concept of life space in terms of its phenomenological presentation to the acting individual. The distinction here between topology and phenomenology is far from a clear cut distinction. Both refer to a bounded reality which is meaningful to the actor. What appears to be the essential difference between Lewin and Heider is merely a difference in emphasis. While Lewin tends to focus upon the space and the actor's movement through it, Heider tends to focus upon the meaningful organization of this perceptual field.

Social science done in the Lewinian tradition is characterized by its explicit emphasis upon the ground upon which action occurs. But social science in general, irrespective of the particular tradition, tends to at least implicitly incorporate the terrain. Thus, as a very general example, the sociologist tends to study behavior of

individuals in institutions, the anthropologist tends to study the behavior of individuals in cultures and the social psychologists, the behavior of individuals in groups. All of these disciplinary cuts of the world tend to imply that behavior is grounded on some sort of meaningful space.

The relevant questions are, whose meaning is it and what difference does it make?

Barker and Wright elect to define the action space in terms of actor-meaning rather than observer-meaning<sup>1</sup>: the justification is that the phenomenological approach is the approach which will "do justice to its great richness." (1:13) What is implied by doing justice to its richness seems to be that, for lack of a better phrase, the phenomenological approach will account for the greatest amount of the variance.<sup>2</sup>

While there are two positions with respect to the task of philosophical phenomenology,<sup>3</sup> within psychology at least, it is agreed

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 "Observer-meaning" in this context refers to the meaning imputed to the phenomena according to the criteria which are not inherent in the phenomena. This is the positivist position: in no case is the meaning inherent in the phenomena. What has come to be known as the a-positivist approach, or Verstehen in sociology, is that there is, pre-existing to the observation of social phenomena, (inherent) meaning, i.e. meaning on the part of the actor. (Cf 5) Thus, even while Barker and Wright state that "Our choice for study of behavior settings has been the standpoint of the observer" it is qualified by the statement, "...a standpoint close to that of Midwest people in general." (1:192) which appears to imply that the meaning of the actor is what is actually theoretically relevant.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is not altogether inapplicable, since the second problem which Barker and Wright face is the problem of quantification (cf. 1:14) With respect to the phenomenological approach as a least-squares approach, see D. Snygg, "The Phenomenological Field" in M. Marx, *Psychological Theory*, MacMillan, 1951, especially pp.324-325.

<sup>3</sup> See MacLeod, p.34, fn.3  
 Farber, pp. 199ff

upon that the phenomenological orientation is the "systematic attempt to observe and describe in all its essential characteristics the world of phenomena as it is presented to us." (4:34) The goal of this approach is to "clarify the essential laws which determine the manner in which the objective world sinks its roots into transcendental subjectivity, i.e. the laws which make comprehensible the world as constituted meaning." (2: 532-33)

The characteristics of this phenomenological world is that it contains "things which possess properties phenomenally inherent in things..." along with "characteristics which are accidental and extraneous to thinghood." (4:41) Phrased somewhat differently, it is a world in which the "characteristic properties make known the objects to which they are attached." (2:224) It is a world in which "the empirical unity of a thing or occurrence is a phenomenal unity by virtue of the fact that the parts and sides of the appearing objectivity appear to belong together." (2:225)

The essential points to be made are that the phenomenal world (1) is considered to be the world of the actor and (2) it is a world which is taken for granted by the actor; it is taken as given.

"Common sense" is that which is attributed to the knowing actor. Common sense is to the actor what theory is to the observer. And in the same way in which theory is utilized by the observer to make predictions about behavior, common sense is utilized by the actor to make predictions about behavior: both his own behavior and the behavior of others.

But the relationship between common sense and theory is not

only a relationship by analogy. From the standpoint of phenomenology, common sense is related to theory by virtue of its being the subject matter of theory.

As the subject matter of theory, sociological or psychological, the world of constituted meaning, the world attributed to the actor as the world of common sense, can be taken as either the dependent variable or the independent variable for any specific research problem. For problems conceptualized in terms of common sense as the independent variable, the general form might be, Given a common sense conceptualization of the world, what must be the consequences in terms of the behavior of the actor.<sup>4</sup> For problems conceptualized in terms of common sense as the dependent variable, the general form might be, What are the structural characteristics of the world which would lead to a specific common sense conception.

In the first part of their book, Barker and Wright appear to be dealing with the "behavior setting" as a structural characteristic which sets the boundaries for the phenomenal world of the people of Midwest. This is to say that the people of Midwest live in a world of constituted meaning which is in part defined by these stable, persistent aspects of extra-individual behavior. In the second part of the book they appear to be concerned with the way in which the children of Midwest behave in terms of the phenomenal world of Midwest. But in part the very behavior which is taken as part of the structural

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<sup>4</sup> Garfinkle (3) sees the whole general problem of the construction of sociological theory as the problem of defining the world of action once the theorist has defined the common sense properties of the actor.

behavior setting is taken as the behavior which is dependent upon the common sense world of the actor.

This can be brought out most clearly in a concrete example from the second part of the book. In the phenomenological world, how does one go about defining an "adult"? According to Farber's statement, "characteristic properties make known the objects to which they are attached." This is to say that one knows an adult by the properties which are perceived as attached to adults, e.g. large size, many years, relatively great freedom of movement, general success in controlling other objects known as children, etc. Now if we look at one of the findings of Barker and Wright's quantitative analysis of social action and interaction, we find that they conclude, from the analysis of the phenomenological life space of their children,

Frequent submission by the children complements frequent dominance by grown ups. Adults preeminently ordered and directed...These two relationships of dependency and control are taken to be fundamental in the pattern of action relationships involving children with adults. (1:436)

If the phenomenological world is the world of common sense which is attributed to the actor, and if this world of common sense is in part determined by the structural arrangements of objects, then it becomes circular to explain this structural arrangement in the terms of the common sense world of the actor.

Another variety of this same problem is brought up quite early in the book with respect to the concept of the "behavior setting." Barker and Wright define behavior setting as

...a standing pattern of behavior and a part of the milieu which are synomorphic and in which the milieu is circumjacent to the behavior. (1:45)

As they expand the discrete parts of this definition, behavior settings come to be behavioral patterns which are stable, persistent and independent of particular individuals involved. They are contained by non-psychological phenomenon, that is, by physical and temporal aspects of the community. (1:46) Synomorphic is defined as "of similar structure," as the perceptual congruence of behavior and milieu. (1:46) The sources of the synomorphy are both social and non-social (cf. 1:55-57) The congruence between behavior pattern and milieu may be the result of physical forces, physiological processes or physiognomic perception, the result of social forces, learning, selection of behavior settings by persons with suitable behavior repertoires, or the result of the influence of the behavior on the milieu. Thus, one may stand in an elevator because there is physically no room to behave in any other way, or because one learns that this is proper deportment for elevator riders, or because the shortness of an elevator ride makes it more practical to remain standing than to rearrange one's body into a sitting position and hence elevators have no seats.

The point which Barker and Wright make with respect to synomorphism is that there is a "reciprocating causal relationship between behavior and milieu." (1:57) The point which they neglect to make is that from the standpoint of the behavior setting as a phenomenological thing, the synomorphism is taken as given and from the standpoint of the behavior setting as a structural element, the synomorphism is an element of common sense to be accounted for.

Their statement that this causal interrelationship between behavior and milieu is not a contradiction is quite true. From one



actor-as-observer will be in agreement as to what is occurring. Similarly, there may also be situations in which the potential for disruption of such misunderstandings would be greater than others.

#### References

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