

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

Steffen Kaiser & Gisela C. Schulze

Person–Environment Analysis: A Framework for Participatory Holistic Research**1. Introduction**

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1943–1944, p. 169). This famous quote by Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) outlines one of his principle assumptions in describing human life: to describe life and make processes visible, it is necessary to shift from individual observations to general statements and to theories. Lewin’s work had a great influence on many different areas, and today, he is referred to as the founder of social psychology and one of the first researchers to study group dynamics and organizational development. Fundamental to the ecological thinking in psychology is his field theory. It is best to describe the field theory in his own words: “*Field theory is probably best characterized as a method: namely, a method of analyzing causal relations and of building scientific constructs*” (Lewin, 1943, p. 45). Burnes and Cooke (2013, p. 412) concluded that “Lewin saw field theory as a way of combining scientific rigour and practical relevance by offering a rigorous, theory-based method for analysing behaviour, and a practical approach to changing behaviour by allowing individuals to understand their actions better”. This rigor has been questioned by many critics, even among Lewin’s supporters. The use of a rigid mathematical system leads to difficulties in understanding and a lack of usability. Nevertheless, Lewin’s construct of *life space* and the underlying Gestalt principles offer a valuable foundation for both researchers and practitioners. A framework that advances Lewin’s method toward a more economical and understandable tool is the person–environment analysis (Schulze, 2002). The person–environment analysis offers a frame for qualitative research, which combines the holistic, subjective, and dynamic approaches of Lewin and makes the total situation accessible and understandable for researchers, practitioners, and – in the course of participatory research – participants as well. The visual representation of the situation makes it comprehensible and thus can initiate a change in behavior, as Lewin intended with his field theory. It is argued that the person–environment analysis offers a framework in qualitative research that captures the total situation of a person at a given moment and makes counseling and intervention possible.

This article presents the field theory of Kurt Lewin as the basis of the person–environment analysis. An outline of his life is essential to understanding his work. His famous formula to explain behavior as a function of the person and environment leads to the concept of the life space. The key parts of the life space are *forces* and how they interact with each other. These forces act against each other, leading to conflict situations, and like barriers, they also impinge on behavior. Following this outline, the article presents implications and limitations, mainly of Lewin’s topology. Based on the Gestalt principles of the field theory, the article goes on to explain the content of the person–environment analysis in order to examine its application. The following part discusses the person–environment analysis critically. The conclusion draws together the ideas presented in the article and points to a research project that is currently using them.

2. Kurt Lewin and his Field Theoretical Approach

At the beginning of the 20th century, scholars developed field theories out of Gestalt psychology. In contrast to popular behaviorist approaches, explanations based on stimuli–response and reflexes were rejected. Basic assumptions of the different field theories were the holistic character and the dynamic interaction of perception, experience, and behavior.

One of its prominent representatives is the German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947). Lewin’s academic roots lie in the Gestalt psychology movement at the University of Berlin. In World War I, he volunteered for the German army. The influence of Berlin Gestalt psychologists like Koffka and Köhler is visible in Lewin’s work, which “can be seen as an extension or application of Gestalt principles to the topics of motivation, personality, and group dynamics” (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2014, p. 456). Owing to the political situation in Germany, he immigrated to the US, where he continued to work on and expand his theory until his death in 1947. Although his influence in social sciences and psychology was already remarkable during his lifetime, his work was not drawn together until later (Lewin, 1951). *Field theory* is the most common name for his theory, although other terms such as *topological psychology*, *dynamic theory*, and *vector psychology* are common (Lück, 2007). Nowadays, Lewin is often referred to as the founder of social psychology.

2.1 Explaining Behavior

In 1931, Lewin distinguished between the scientific concepts of Aristotle and Galileo (Lewin, 1931). This distinction has far-reaching implications in Lewin’s theory of human behavior. Whereas Aristotelian science classifies objects by their nature, their inner essence, Galilean science stresses the relation of an object to its environment. “In Galilean thought it is the concrete whole, which comprises the

object and the situation, that determines the dynamics of the event defined: that is to say, an object is always in and part of its environment” (Likert, 1947, p. 133). Where there had already been the change from Aristotelian to Galilean science in physics and biology, Lewin saw the need for it in psychology. The implications for psychology “would mean de-emphasizing such notions as instincts, types, and even averages (...) and emphasizing the complex, dynamic forces acting on an individual at any given moment. For Lewin, these dynamic forces – and not any type of inner essences – explain human behavior” (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2014, p. 457). As visible in the following, this notion underlies all of his work.

Lewin developed his field theory as a dynamic model to analyze individual and social behaviors and combined a holistic character with dynamic interrelations of perception, experience, and behavior (Schulze, 2009). The holistic approach is visible in the explanation of behavior: Behavior (B) is “a function (F) of the person (P) and of his environment (E), $B = F(P, E)$ ” (Lewin, 1946, p. 791). This formula claims that behavior depends on the person and his or her environment. Both the person and his or her environment “have to be considered as *one* constellation of interdependent factors” (Lewin, 1946, p. 792). Lewin called the totality of these factors the *life space* of an individual (LSp) resulting in the following formula to explain behavior: $B = F(P, E) = F(\text{LSp})$. Thus, explaining behavior means “(1) finding a scientific representation of the life space (LSp) and (2) determining the function (F) which links the behavior to the life space” (Lewin, 1946, p. 792).

2.2 The Concept of the Field at a Given Time

Central to Lewin’s theory is the term *field*, which he has adapted from physics. With reference to Einstein (1933), he defines a field as “a totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent” (Lewin, 1946, p. 792). In psychology, this means to perceive the life space (LSp) as one field. The life space comprises everything in the perceived external environment (like other persons or things) and in the internal environment (needs, values, thoughts, feelings) that the individual is aware of at a given time, called as psychological facts (Lewin, 1943). Thereby, Lewin addresses the *principle of contemporaneity* by arguing that only present facts someone is aware of influence an individual. This includes experiences from the past, which are part of the life space as well, if a person is aware of them *at a given time* (Lewin, 1943). The life space consists of not only real physical, personal, and social facts but also imaginary, perceived events. Consequently, the subjective approach of Lewin becomes visible, as since not the physical but the subjective reality constitutes behavior.

Lewin uses a Jordan curve to represent the life space visually. It is a closed system in the sense of a Gestalt (Schulze, 2004). Everything outside of the life space is a *foreign hull* – the nonpsychological environment. The life space is divided into

different regions symbolizing the person and the psychological environment. The person is a region within the life space definite to the psychological environment. The act of a person's changing regions is called locomotion, but the possibilities of locomotion are dependent upon the structure of the life space at a given time (Lewin, 1946). In accordance to Gestalt psychology, as the life space contains interdependent parts, a change in one part of the field results in a change in the total field, although the general form is maintained. Central to Lewin's theory is the construct of tension (energy), which he did not conceptualize in the context of emotions. Lewin (1940) defined tensions as a disposition for action created by needs toward attaining a goal. Every region holds positive or negative valences, meaning their attractive or repulsive character. A region with a positive valence contains a goal that will reduce the tension, whereas barriers between a need and the goal will increase the tension. However, every person has needs, causing tension, and thus hindering balance. Lewin differentiated between biological needs such as hunger and pain and quasi needs, based on intent or purpose. Only the needs that exist at a given time are important (Lewin, 1940). The needs determine the strength of forces and valences. Lewin (1946, p. 808f) distinguished different types of forces in a person's life space. There are *driving forces*, "toward a positive, or away from a negative, valence" (Lewin, 1946, p. 808), causing locomotion and *restraining forces*, associated with barriers and themselves not leading to locomotion but affecting the driving forces. These forces, resulting from valences, make the dynamic character of Lewin's theory visible. Forces have direction and strength, which are visually represented as vectors. This system of forces leads to conflict situations.

2.3 Conflict Situations and Barriers

"A conflict situation can be defined as a situation where forces acting on the person are opposite in direction and about equal in strength" (Lewin, 1946, p. 809). Following Lewin, forces regularly acting in opposition to one another within the life space lead to the assumption that "no person is ever free of conflict" (Levinger, 1957, p. 331). Having knowledge about these conflicts is important for both researchers and practitioners, as conflicts impinge on behavior. Lewin describes three different cases of conflicts.

In a *plus-plus conflict* (Fig. 1a), a person (*P*) is "located between two positive valences" (Lewin, 1946, p. 809). He or she has to decide between one of two equally attractive objects. Levinger (1957, p. 332) describes the conflict as a "conceptual simplification of the usual situation where attaining either of the two goals also has its negative attributes—attaining one goal entails sacrificing the other". Figure 1b includes these negative aspects, called the *complex plus-plus conflict*.

In a *minus-minus conflict*, a person is "located [...] between two negative valences" (Lewin, 1946, p. 809). Resolving this conflict depends upon the situation.

As visible in figure 2a, the person can exit the two negative valences impinging on him or her. However, locomotion can be hindered by barriers (Fig. 2b), which can be physical (to be locked in) or psychological (prohibitions) (Schulze, 2002). In this case, leaving the region is not possible. If the negative valences are strong, a person “will turn against the barriers in his attempts to escape” (Levinger, 1957, p. 333).

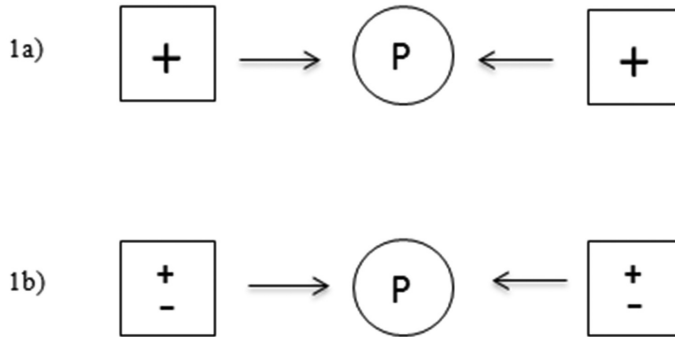


Fig. 1 Situations of plus–plus conflict: a) simple plus–plus conflict and b) complex plus–plus conflict.
Note: From Kurt Lewin’s approach to conflict and its resolution: a review with some extensions by Levinger (1957, p. 332).

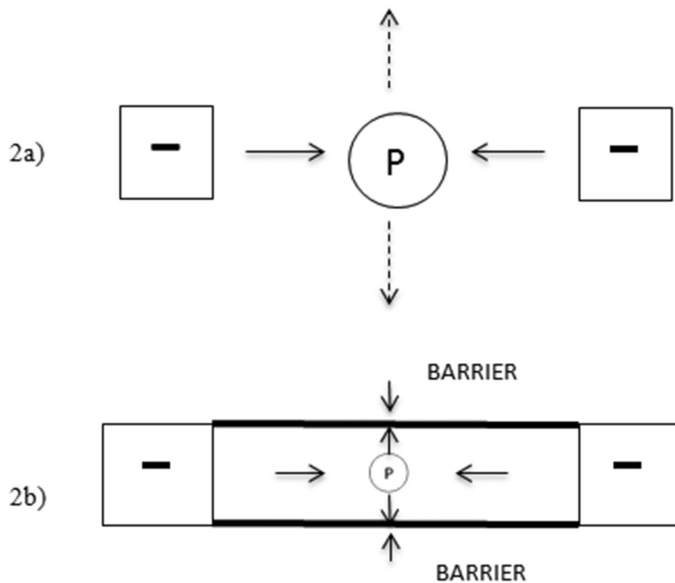


Fig. 2 Situations of minus–minus conflict: a) minus–minus conflict without barriers and b) minus–minus conflict with barriers.
Note: From Kurt Lewin’s approach to conflict and its resolution: a review with some extensions by Levinger (1957, p. 332).

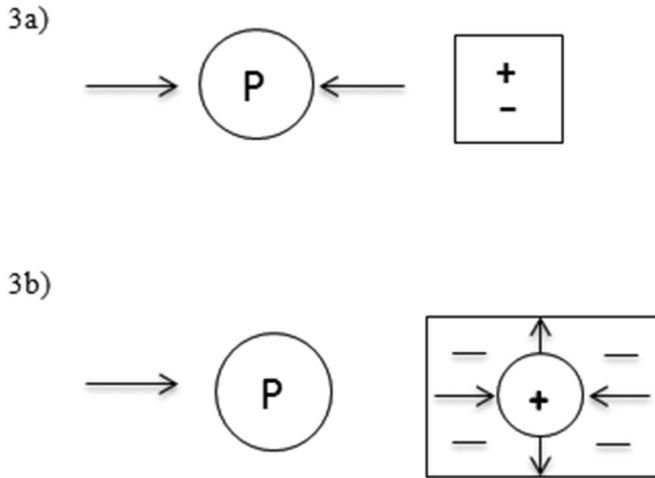


Fig. 3 Situations of plus–minus conflict: a) person located near a region from which both positive and negative driving forces emanate and b) person located near a region that produces positive driving forces, but he is blocked by negative forces.

Note: From Kurt Lewin’s approach to conflict and its resolution: a review with some extensions by Levinger (1957, p. 333).

In the conflict situations in figures 1 and 2, incompatible forces from different regions impinge on a person. In the *plus–minus conflict*, incompatible forces from the same region act upon a person, exemplified as the “promise of reward for doing a disagreeable task” (Lewin, 1946, p. 809f). Types of resolution for plus–plus and minus–minus were outlined. However, in a plus–minus conflict, “the attractions of the goal region hold *P* nearby, whereas its unattractive aspects prevent him from attaining it” (Levinger, 1957, p. 333). Figure 3a shows the situation where positive and negative forces stem from the same region. In figure 3b, the positively valent region is surrounded by negative valent barriers. To reach the positively valent region, a person “must undergo some unpleasant experiences” (Levinger, 1957, p. 333).

2.4 Implications and Limitations of the Field Theory

This outline of Kurt Lewin’s field theory has focused on the construct of the life space, which is meant to explain, and eventually change, behavior. The strong influence of Gestalt psychology becomes visible in “constructing and understanding the situation as a whole, the need to understand the dynamic equilibrium of the life space, and seeing current behavior as the product of the here and now” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013, p. 411; Lewin, 1942). The holistic gestalt character is a big advantage for both researchers and practitioners, which is best illustrated in own words of Lewin (1939, p. 889):

“Instead of picking out isolated facts, and later on trying to “synthesize” them, the total situation is taken into account and is represented from the beginning.

The field-theoretical approach, therefore, means a method of “gradual approximation” by way of a stepwise increasing specificity. Picking out isolated facts within a situation may lead easily to a picture which is entirely distorted”.

One other characteristic of the field theory is not derived from Gestalt psychology: the mathematical representation of the psychological situation (Lewin, 1942, p. 64). This aspect is based on Lewin’s philosophy, which included the concept that psychology should be on the same scientific level as physics or mathematics. Following this path, Lewin mathematized the life space by adapting topology, a branch of mathematics, extended to *hodology*. His “hodological geometry not only allowed him to use mathematics to represent the forces in a [...] life space, but also to measure them and their effect on each other” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013, p. 414). Using topology in order to achieve scientific rigor became an object of many of the criticisms of Lewin’s work, and Burnes and Cooke (2013, p. 414) cited it as “the Achilles’ heel of field theory”. We neither want to outline Lewin’s topology nor to write a criticism of it. There are two main critical aspects for practitioners and researchers. First is the lack of usability. The life spaces and its positions are calculated exactly. The mathematical representation is too cumbersome to support the aim of understanding and changing behavior. Second, Lewin developed his field theory as a participatory process, but “by couching his theory in complex mathematics, Lewin made it very difficult for those who should have been involved in the change process either to participate in it or learn from it” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013, p. 421). Both are drawbacks for researchers, practitioners, and participants. These criticisms of Lewin’s topology had been made previously, even by his supporters.

One adaption of the field theory is the force field analysis, a decision-making technique, which avoids the criticism by not using the hodology at all. Critics state that the force field analysis has nothing to do anymore with Lewin’s holistic approach (Cronshaw & McCulloch, 2008). In short, two poles become visible, the force field analysis, which “sacrificed rigour in the pursuit of relevance” and Lewin’s hodology, which “sacrifices relevance in the pursuit of rigour” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013, p. 420). The advantage of the holistic character of the life space to identify and visualize behavior and forces impinging on it is unquestionable. A framework for analysis using these benefits of the field theory is the person–environment analysis.

3. Person-Environment-Analysis

In the beginning of the new millennium, research on school absenteeism mainly focused on the so-called truants and school refusers. This categorization offered a classification for both researchers and practitioners. However, still there were school absentees who did not fit into this category. A study in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany, on the prevalence and genesis of school absenteeism clarified the multi-causality of the phenomenon, but the complexity

was difficult to capture (Schulze & Wittrock, 2001). With the objective of finding a person-centered approach to clearly depict the multi-causality of the phenomenon for both researchers and practitioners, the person–environment analysis was developed (Schulze, 2002). In the broad context of the field theory of Lewin, Schulze adapted the theoretical concept of the life space. The principle aim was to explain behavior and to make it approachable for practitioners and researchers by using a visual representation with positional relationships. Following Lewin, it became obvious that by representing behavior and influences in a way that is approachable for the students, it was possible for them to perceive their situation and change their behavior. Moreover, teachers and parents who saw the representation were able to change factors influencing the absentees' behavior. Through the person–environment analysis, the multi-causality of school absenteeism was efficiently ascertainable and suitable for intervention planning (Schulze, 2003). The person–environment analysis consists of the graphic representation and analysis of a person's situation with the utilization of diverse research methods.

The person–environment analysis has been adapted in mainly theoretical contexts such as research, in practical contexts such as counseling, or in a mixture of these contexts such as participatory research. The fields of application thus far are education (Schulze, 2003, 2008, 2009) and health (Alber, 2014; Schulze, 2010; Wist, 2015), though other areas are possible.

3.1 Content

The field theory is a comprehensive approach that captures behavior at a given time (Lewin, 1946). The person–environment analysis builds upon this premise and offers a framework to analyze and represent behavior economically. Figure 4 shows an ideal person–environment analysis of a student as a representation of his or her life space at a given time (Schulze, 2003). The student is located in the center of the life space and in a tension with his or her action spaces, which are representations of socialization agents. The society with its expectations, rules, and cultural norms has direct or indirect influence on the person and his or her behavior. Moreover, perceived situational terms, e.g., the financial situation or benefits from the government, are taken into account.

These societal expectations, as well as the situational terms, lie in part outside of the recognition of an individual and thus he or she is not aware of them at a given time. However, in contrast to Lewin, awareness of these factors is essential for understanding and changing behavior, since they influence it. The life space is presented as a Jordan curve. The tension between the person and his or her action spaces is shown using arrows symbolizing forces. The action spaces are interdependent, and each space has positive and negative valences, showing that a person perceives parts of it positively and others negatively. This leads to an attraction or repulsion on the part of

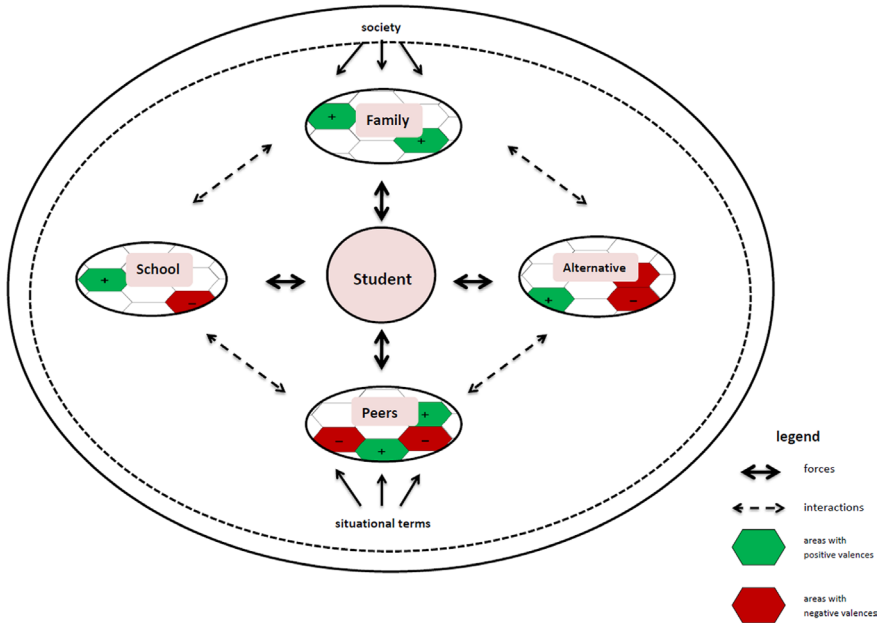


Fig. 4 An ideal person–environment analysis.

the person (positive/negative valences). The attraction or repulsion is influenced by accessibility; hence, they can be hindered by barriers. The arrows between the action spaces show interrelations, illustrating the dynamic approach (Schulze, 2002).

3.2 Application

The person–environment analysis offers a framework to analyze and represent behavior at a given time. It is meant to give enough flexibility to allow for research, consulting, or a combination of both. The user's purpose leads to the choice of research methods. In the following, we have given an outline of how to use the person–environment analysis. We have concentrated mainly on constructing the visual representation, but research standards have to be adhered to throughout the whole process.

3.2.1 Preparation and Collection

First, the focus of investigation needs to be identified, for otherwise, the method cannot be used economically. To gather the information, common methods of qualitative data acquisition can be used (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). Depending on the purpose, focus interviews or guideline-based interviews seem suitable, since they give a structure but leave enough openness to discuss and enlarge upon certain issues. It is also possible to work with the written material, such as biographies (Schulze, 2009), and further qualitative methods

seem possible but have not been used yet. The person–environment analysis offers a framework for participatory research. In accordance with the subjective approach, the participants talk about their personal perception of a certain issue or situation. The interviewer offers a structure that focuses the talk on the topic of investigation. The structure should be research/literature based. As it is necessary to find perceived positive and negative valences to represent behavior, the interviewer should lead the participant to a personal valuation of areas covered in the interview, such as personal situation or problems.

3.2.2 Analysis

The person–environment analysis uses common methods of qualitative analysis, e.g. the qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Mayring, 2004), to analyze the data and identify the action spaces of a person. Within these action spaces, the researcher and/or the practitioner have to analyze and subsume fields out of the variety of utterances by the participant/interviewee, which are positively or negatively valued. Table 1 gives an example of the

Tab. 1 Perceived facilitating and impeding factors of stroke patients (rehabilitants) and their partners

Facilitating Factors		Impeding Factors	
Rehabilitants	Partners	Rehabilitants	Partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – dedication and purposefulness – perception of positive factors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – active problem solving – satisfaction – creating a positive environment – own experience with illness 	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-weight: bold; margin-right: 5px;">Person</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – negative self-awareness – lack of determination – worries – low adaptability – lack of assertiveness </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-weight: bold; margin-right: 5px;">Partners</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – resentful behavior – disregarding the need to rest </div> </div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – support of normality and self-determination – acceptance and encouragement – partner coordinates visits and phone calls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – thoughtfulness and emphatic behavior 	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-weight: bold; margin-right: 5px;">Family</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – physical distance of family members – paternalism – excessive caretaking </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-weight: bold; margin-right: 5px;">Partners</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – poor relief from family members </div> </div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the feeling of “nothing has changed” – encouragement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lasting interest in well-being – integration through visits 	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-weight: bold; margin-right: 5px;">Peers</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lack of support – excessive caretaking </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-weight: bold; margin-right: 5px;">Partners</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – distinctive feeling of normality </div> </div>
...			

Note: From Partnerschaften nach Schlaganfall: Untersuchung zu Förderfaktoren und Barrieren im Rehabilitationsprozess by Alber (2014, p. 254).

analysis by Alber (2014, p. 254) where she analyzed the perceived facilitating factors and impeding factors of stroke patients (rehabilitants) and their partners.

The outline of facilitating and impeding factors represents the results of the qualitative content analysis leading to the visual representation. The positive and negative aspects (here: facilitating factors and impeding factors) are integrated within the action spaces – with either signal colors like green or red or signs like + or –. The following step consists of a representation of attraction and repulsion of the action spaces. This is not exact mathematics, but a subjective estimation based on the number of perceived positive and negative valences. Moreover, the analysis can reveal barriers within a life space, which can be graphically integrated and, moreover, be separately shown to explain conflicts, like the ones in Section 2.3.

Figure 5 shows a section of a person–environment analysis with integrated valences and barriers. Here it is shown that the action space of school drifts away from the student, due to the majority of negative valences, as the action space of the family gets closer.

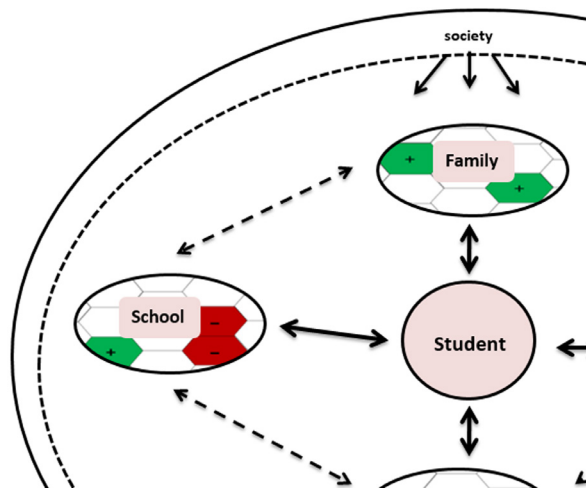


Fig. 5 Section of the person–environment analysis with positive and negative valences within the action spaces.

3.2.3 Exposition and further use

The visual presentation can be drafted manually, created using a magnet board (Alber, 2014) or by computer. Irrespective of the form, the presentation reveals behavior at a given time. The following steps of use depend on the purpose.

As Schulze (2003) showed, the presentation is appropriate for intervention planning in school. The graphic representation of the current situation works as a tool for a conversation between parents, teachers, and the student or as a basis for discussion at a round table.

Alber (2014) undertook extensive research, which illustrates possibilities for using the person–environment analysis. She interviewed 10 rehabilitants after stroke and nine of their partners, each separately upon leaving the clinic. She used a guideline and a magnet board with the outlines of the person–environment analysis. During the interview, she put, according to the valuation, green or red valences into the action spaces. She reported that the valuation of many statements was not immediately obvious to her, so that she needed to ask, as in this example from her pretest interview: “Rehabilitant: *My neighbor constantly offers me help.* Alber: *Do you perceive this as supportive?*” With this reassurance, she and the participant created a person–environment analysis on a magnet board, which she photographed and transferred into a version on the computer.

Six months later, she met the participants again and used the same guideline, extended by a few questions. Again she used the magnet board. Thus, at the end of the second interview, she had the person–environment analyses t1 and t2 for each participant and asked each interviewee about differences and to compare them. Within the conversation, she asked about reasons and possibilities for using the analyses.

4. Discussion

The person–environment analysis offers a framework for participatory and holistic research. Whereas Lewin (1939, p. 872) intended his field theory “to be a practical vehicle of research”, his use of rigid and complex mathematics hampers this aim. Nevertheless, his construct of life space and the underlying Gestalt principles are very valuable for research.

Different disciplines, such as organizational development, have referred to the field theory and adapted the force field analysis or force field technique (Thomas, 1985). The analysis is suitable to identify forces for and against a change. These forces are the only part of the life space construct used. Essential other parts like relationships are not depicted. Burnes and Cooke (2013, p. 416) stated that “force field analysis is not only free of any form of Lewinian topology, but it is also free of much of the underlying theoretical support provided by Lewin”.

Going on, they suggested that “if we remove the hodological math, i.e. the ‘not good theory’, and concentrate on the underlying gestalt theory and use of conventional topology to construct life spaces [...] great possibilities for participation and learning” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013, p. 421) would emerge. This is precisely the point where the person–environment approach comes into play. It is constructed as a framework to analyze behavior and make it approachable for participants, in order to initiate processes of reflection. In accordance with Lewin, it is a subjective procedure, which captures a perceived situation at a given time, leading to the conclusion that there is no right or wrong. However, there are important facts impinging on behavior that lie outside Lewin’s life space, i.e. in the foreign hull. If we not only want to capture behavior but also make change possible, knowledge about these factors is essential. Within the person–environment analysis, the classification for this is societal and situational factors. Because of the visualization, participants are able to understand and then to reflect upon their situation (Lewin, 1942). It is not only the participants who are able to understand and reflect but also other people involved in the particular life space. Using the person–environment analysis on the same topic with two or more participants illustrates different points of view that can give impulses for counseling (Alber, 2014). Thus, it can work as a tool for intervention or counseling, but if severe problems occur, interdisciplinary case-specific intervention needs to follow.

5. Conclusion

This article presents the person–environment analysis as a framework for participatory and holistic research. It is built on Lewin’s extensive body of work. By using common methods of qualitative research and analysis, it is possible to capture the situation at a given time. This is recommendable in case of situations in which individuals are in conflict and in danger of drifting out of the system. If need be, constructs like specific conflict situations can be created separately. Its use is economical for both researchers and practitioners. It is argued that the person–environment analysis works as a tool for counseling (Alber & Schulze, 2015) and intervention (Schulze, 2003). The person–environment analysis works on the subjectively perceived situation. This approach seems recommendable for counseling and intervention the participant and his or her environment can work on. By using qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews, self-reflecting processes can be initiated through the special communication relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Witzel, 2000). Clearly, using the person–environment analysis for the visual representation of the situation encourages this self-reflection. In her work, Alber (2014) impressively illustrated how the participants recognize themselves as acting subjects. More studies are needed to further evaluate these processes of self-reflection.

Another area for future research in which the person–environment analysis could prove useful is in assessing the promotive and inhibitive factors associated with effective diversity training initiatives in the workplace (Roberson, Kulik, & Tan, 2013). The framework can help provide diversity training to researchers and practitioners with a more holistic and comprehensive mapping of the social and contextual factors that either enhance or discourage the success of diversity training.

A current study aims at capturing the situation of school-age young carers. By using the person–environment analysis, we hope to capture the situation in school and to identify facilitating and impeding factors in education from different perspectives. Guideline-based interviews with young carers, their parents, and teachers are expected to illustrate the total situation and give information on different perceptions. This is especially interesting, as different perceptions of a phenomenon lead to different actions and to a divergent valuation of the actions of others (Fox 1995; Kaiser & Schulze, 2015). Similar to systemic therapy, a joint discussion about similar and different perceptions of the participants seems more valuable than talking about only one perspective on a topic.

Summary

This article presents the person–environment analysis as a framework for participatory and holistic research. By using common methods of qualitative research and analysis, it is possible to capture the present situation of a person. The person–environment analysis is built on Kurt Lewin's field theory and a further development of its system of visual representation of the *life space*. It is argued that the person–environment analysis offers a frame to represent the perceived subjective situation of a person, which can be used in research, yet offers the possibility of counseling and intervention.

Keywords: Person–environment analysis, Kurt Lewin, field theory, Gestalt psychology, participatory research

Die Person-Umfeld-Analyse: Ein Rahmen für eine partizipative und ganzheitliche Forschung

Zusammenfassung

Die Person-Umfeld Analyse gilt als Rahmung für eine partizipative und ganzheitliche Forschung. Mit qualitativen Methoden ist es möglich, die wahrgenommene Situation einer Person in ihrer Gesamtheit zu erfassen und bildlich darzustellen. Die Person-Umfeld Analyse baut auf der Feldtheorie nach Kurt Lewin auf und stellt eine Weiterentwicklung seines aus der Gestaltpsychologie stammenden personenzentrierten Ansatzes dar. Die Person-Umfeld Analyse bildet eine Rahmung, um subjektive Sichtweisen einer Person ganzheitlich zu erfassen. Neben dem Nutzen in der Forschung, bietet die Person-Umfeld Analyse dadurch auch die Möglichkeit zur Beratung und Interventionsansätzen.

Schlüsselworte: Person-Umfeld Analyse, Kurt Lewin, Feldtheorie, Gestaltpsychologie, Partizipative Forschung

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Steffen Kaiser, MEd, born 1988, is a research assistant at the Department of Special Needs Education, Carl von Ossietzky University. He is doing his PhD on young carers and education. His research interests are young carers, health literacy, and the field theory of Kurt Lewin.

Address: Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, Postfach 2503, 26111 Oldenburg, Germany

Email: s.kaiser@uni-oldenburg.de

Gisela C. Schulze, born 1960, holds the position of Professor for Special Needs Education, Rehabilitation/Health Care at the Department for Special Needs Education, University of Oldenburg. She is the director of the Graduate School of Social and Humanities, director of the PhD Program "Inclusion and Rehabilitation" at the Faculty for Education and Social Sciences, and Con-Director of the Department for Special Needs Education and Rehabilitation at the University of Oldenburg. Her research interests lie within participation research in the context of rehabilitation: the person–environment analysis based on the field theory of Kurt Lewin and employment in health services research, inclusion and exclusion in educational institutions for adolescents with hearing problems, and absenteeism and dropout in educational institutions and rehabilitation.

Address: Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, Postfach 2503, 26111 Oldenburg, Germany

Email: gisela.c.schulze@uni-oldenburg.de