Nothing as practical as a good theory” Does Lewin’s Maxim still have salience in the applied social sciences?

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ABSTRACT
In the spirit of the theme of ASIST 2015, the influence of Kurt Lewin’s Maxim—“there is nothing as practical as a good theory”—in the applied social sciences (including Information Science) is examined through the lens of Obliteration by Incorporation text analysis. Six hundred ninety three English language scholarly journal articles published between 1945-2013, retrieved through a search of broad and specialized full-text bibliographic databases as well as back issues of JASIS/JASIST using known variants of Lewin’s Maxim, were categorized based on the text associated with the Maxim. Psychology, Management, and Education articles dominated the retrieval (~70%) while Information Science was essentially invisible. In successive 5-year periods between 1989 and 2013, the proportion of Explicit Citations to Lewin’s writings increased in all three subject areas, while the proportions of invocations of Lewin (attribution without citation) and Implicit Citations (use of the Maxim without attribution) varied from one period to the next; Lewin’s influence appears to be increasing rather than being obliterated. The influence of Lewin’s ideas in Information Science was not visible here but merits further exploration.

Keywords
Citation analysis, contextual information, Kurt Lewin

INTRODUCTION
The research reported in this poster addresses the general theme of ASIST 2015—“Applied Research”—through an exploration of the influence of the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), founder of the concept of “Action Research” (Lewin, 1946) and a proponent of the importance of combining “theory” and “practice” in the social sciences. Lewin’s observation (herein labeled “Lewin’s Maxim”)—“there is nothing as practical as a good theory” (see, e.g., Lewin, 1943)—would seem to be fundamental to applied social science research. However, according to his biographer Marrow, the Maxim was already being incorporated without attribution in social psychology and related areas in the 1960s (Marrow, 1969, also see discussion in Delouvée, Kalampalikis and Pétard, 2011)—and apparently being subject to the Mertonian process of Obliteration by Incorporation (Merton, 1988).

In the present research, I examine the degree to which Lewin’s Maxim is being “obliterated” by being incorporated into newer authors’ writings without an attribution to Lewin’s work, with a focus on the social science, including Information Science. While Lewin was not an information scientist, the textual history of his Maxim over time and disciplines is relevant to the underlying focus of this year’s Annual Meeting—the impact of one’s research on individuals, institutions and communities—which, after all, is the goal of Lewin’s “Action Research.” As described in McCain (2015), an OBI analysis sorts articles containing text strings of interest (e.g., catch phrases or longer texts) into citation categories, depending on whether or not the original author is given explicit credit for the represented concept through a link between catch phrase and originating publication. Evidence of obliteration (decreasing explicit influence) will appear as an increasing percentage of texts that include the Maxim without appropriate attribution (an Implicit Citation).

METHODS
Lewin’s Maxim can be found in three forms—“there is nothing as practical as a good theory” (Lewin 1943, 1944, 1945), “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951, Marrow, 1969), and “there is nothing more practical than a good theory” (generally attributed to Lewin but no canonical source known). To capture a wide range of articles containing the Maxim, two key phrases from the Maxim variations—“practical as a good theory” and “practical than a good theory”—were searched in available full-text databases—broad-spectrum (JSTOR and ProQuest Research Library) and subject-focused (Education Research Complete, Business Source Complete, Library Literature & Information Science Full Text, and PsychARTICLES). In addition, the Web of Science was searched for articles with the phrase in the title or (post-1990) abstract and the back issues of JASIS/JASIST were searched for the phrase in the text. Full text of as many journal articles as possible was obtained by downloading or via Interlibrary Loan.
reviews were eliminated and 693 English-language scholarly articles published between 1945 and 2013 were retained for analysis.

Metadata including abstracts for the 693 articles were captured in a Filemaker Pro database. The full text of each article was scanned for the existence and location of some version of Lewin’s Maxim and the article assigned both a OBI citation category (see discussion in McCain, 2015, and Table 3 below) and a subject category based on *Ulrich’s International Periodical Index.*

**RESULTS**

**Overview**

Figure 1 and Tables 1 through 3 give an overall picture of the 693 journal articles. Over time, there is a general upward trend in the number of articles including some version of Lewin’s Maxim (Figure 1) with three subjects (Psychology, Management, and Education) contributing almost 70% of all articles in the data set (Table 1). The LIS category does not include any *JASIS/JASIST* articles—all retrieved items were book reviews. The box highlights the more recent 25 years’ worth of articles which were analyzed in more detail.

The distribution of OBI citation types is shown in Table 2 for the full data set.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Citation Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit citation (cites Lewin)</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit citation (no citation to Lewin)</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewin’s name attached but no citation</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrase in reference title only</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (including other attributions)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect citation (cites work that cites Lewin)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Distribution of citation types, 1945-2013

As noted earlier, Lewin’s Maxim exists in three different versions, one found in his original publications, one found in an edited chapter combining two original papers, and one that has no single source. Table 3 shows the number of articles with each of the Maxim versions (along with two outliers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORM OF LEWIN’S MAXIM</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
<th>LEWIN-RELATED SOURCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nothing SO practical AS a good theory</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>Lewin 1951/64; Marrow, 1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nothing AS practical AS a good theory</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>Lewin 1943, 1944, 1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nothing MORE practical THAN a good theory</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>Not found in Lewin’s writings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nothing more practical as a good theory</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rare variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nothing so useful as a good theory</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rare variant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Maxim text strings and sources, 1945-2013

A focused look at Education, Management and Psychology

Figures 2 and 3 show trends over five successive 5-year periods between 1989 and 2013 for the three top subject areas with articles containing Lewin’s Maxim—Education, Management, and Psychology. Figure 2 reports raw article counts for the three topics while Figure 3 focuses on the three important within-text OBI citation categories—Explicit Citations (where a reference to one or more of Lewin’s writings are linked to the Maxim), Implicit Citations (where the Maxim is used without any reference to a publication or attributed to any author) and Lewin “Invocations” (where Lewin’s name appears as “author” when the Maxim is quoted but with no explicit published source). The remaining occurrences of Lewin’s Maxim were either in the titles of items in article bibliographies (Phrase in reference title only), Indirect Citations (citing a work that cites a Lewin publication) or “Other” (which included invocations of other authors, such as James Clerk...
Maxwell, John Maynard Keynes, Henri Poincaré, or Emmanuel Kant).

Despite Marrow’s concern about the obliteration of Lewin in psychology in the decades following his death, and the findings of Pearlman (1984) that Lewin was not a prominently-cited author in Social Psychology texts and journal articles, Figure 3 shows that the proportion of Explicit Citations (a form of Lewin’s Maxim plus reference to a Lewin publication) has increased rather than decreased in Psychology as well as Management and Education while the proportion of Implicit Citations (Maxim text without any attribution) varies across time periods and disciplines. Unlike some previous studies (see McCain, 2015) there were too few Indirect Citations to be worth including in this analysis. Additional visibility for Lewin is provided by the substantial proportion of articles that “invoked” him by simply attaching his name to a quotation-format of the Maxim (e.g., as a quote preceding the article proper, setting the stage for the discussion of research). This OBI citation category (author invocation) has not been encountered previously, perhaps because previous studies have focused on eponyms or very short catch phrases (see also discussion of quasi-eponyms in McCain, 2015). The rhetorical function of a longer text such as Lewin’s Maxim may be worthy of further exploration in the context of Obliteration by Incorporation (more than a quasi-eponym, less than a fully-referenced text string).

Summary

Some version of Lewin’s Maxim—“Nothing as practical as a good theory”—has continued to serve a useful rhetorical function in three areas of the social sciences that are known to draw on Lewin’s research ideas (e.g. Action Research and Group Dynamics). The visibility of the Maxim in Psychology and Management research reports was anticipated; its use in reporting research in Education is not surprising, given the important of Action Research in assessing curriculum and instructional effectiveness. However, there was essentially no trace of the Maxim in the Information Science literature, although much applied research is reported in JASIS/JASIST and other LIS-related journals. Other relationships between Lewin’s writings and IS applied research remain to be explored.

References


Chapter 7, Problems of research in social psychology (1943-1944) includes part of Lewin 1943 and Lewin 1944.


