When Ignorance is Bliss, and Very Poor Social Science

Merrelyn Emery
March 2026

This is a brief review of 'Living Theory: From Lewin to Scharmer', by Eva Pomeroy, *Organization Development Review*, Vol 56, No. 3, 2024, pp38-44.

It is a brief review because that is all it deserves if it warrants a mention at all. But of course some articles are so bad, they stand out and this is such a one. Don deGuerre kindly sent me the article and when I first flicked through it, I laughed. It really is an accomplishment to manage to write a whole article about taking Lewin's work further without mentioning the now huge body of work which does exactly that with great success. And just to illustrate the dire straits into which social science has descended, Eva Pomeroy is Affiliate Faculty in the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University where this work has been taught for many years. I also checked several of Otto Scharmer's books and they appear to have also totally ignored all this work. Apparently some social scientists are above the practice of literature searches or learning from the work of others who have made gains in relevant knowledge.

The work ignored is Open Systems Theory (OST) which is solidly based on the work of Lewin and his colleagues as any of the old papers from the Tavistock (Trist & Murray, 1990. 93 and 97) will attest. The summary paper, *The Emery version of Open Systems Theory*, (Emery M, 2000a) describes the two fundamental streams of science, the Platonic and the Aristotelian, known as realism, based on material universals, and idealism, based on abstract universals, showing that OST is firmly based on realism as was most of the work of Lewin:

"The Aristotelian stream (idealism) runs through philosophers such as Kant to the physicist Newton, to social scientists such as Thorndike, Freud, Hull and Lewin. Lewin occupies a unique place in this schema as the diverse nature of his huge contribution spawned two separate interpretations of his work, open human systems and the human relations movement (Trist, 1985; Emery M, 2000b). The later Platonic stream (realism) runs through the philosopher Leibnitz to the physicists Maxwell, Faraday and Wigner who explored electrical *fields*, and then to the polymath philosopher Charles S Peirce. In the modern era of social science proper there are many such as Pepper, Asch, Chein, Tomkins, Jordan and Gibson whose realist contributions, as mentioned above, provide some of the foundations of OST(E). This chronology brings us up to the early flowering of OST(E) at the Tavistock Institute in London in the period 1951-1969. The Tavistock contribution is documented in 'The Social Engagement of Social Science' (Trist & Murray, 1990). Fred Emery and Eric Trist led this development which was explicitly based on the realism stream which they called the *Thin Red Line* (Emery M, 2000a)".

Definitions in the realism stream are operational or functional, (what does it do?) while those in the idealism stream are based on nouns, labels (what is it?). A whole host of consequences follow from the choice of material or abstract universals as each of the streams provides a constellation of internally consistent dimensions:

"One of these views accepts as real physical bodies and their activities; the other nontangible formal qualities and logical and mathematical truths" (Chein, 1972, 146). Human knowledge develops from the identification and classification of particulars and these competing views of reality identify entirely different types of taxonomies. Cassirer and Lewin define them as the "class concept and the series concept" which are also described as phenotypical (superficial appearances or similarities) and genotypical or 'genetic' (Lewin, 1931, 10-11). These classes or laws are called 'universals' and there appear to be only two basic forms of universal, known as *material* and *abstract*. *Material universals* describe a material or real world (Feibleman, 1946, 451) and derive from particular dynamic instances or events. They identify the limits of reality within which a claim to 'truth' is made so that the search for material universals inclines more to 'verities' than to an abstract 'truth' (Chein, 1972, 319-336). Despite the recent sorties of physics into a 'theory of everything' (Wertheim, 1995), science generally proceeds by structural corroboration (Pepper, 1942, 39-70) or the identification of invariants (Gibson, 1966), the same actions happening in different places at different times. Science uses a language based on *serial genetic constructs* or functional entities that have testable relations with other entities, including context (Cassirer, 1923). This language is very different from the everyday usage of

nouns to express the *generic* nature of things which is one of the reasons that popularizing science is so difficult. Identifying things as nouns out of context involves us in circular arguments as properties such as extroverted behaviours define an 'extrovert' and the 'fact' that a person is an 'extrovert' explains the extroverted behaviours."

If Living Theory, or solid practical theory without the trendy meaningless 'Living' is what they are after, in the best tradition of Lewin, OST would be their modern starting point.

The social field

Following Lewin who was famous for developing field theory, Pomeroy describes the key characteristics of Living Theory as:

- Living theory is deeply connected to context: it arises from, and in service to, the social challenges of a given time.
- Living theory remains in close, ongoing 'dialogue' with this context and evolves as a result, generating concepts, frame works and processes in response to evolving needs and circumstances.
- Living theory fundamentally shifts and expands our understanding of social reality, opening the door to whole new ways of knowing, understanding and acting in the world (p39).

Sounds good, sounds like open systems but I can find no clarification or definition of this context or the nature of the relations between the context and the theory.

It just so happens that long before Scharmer and Pomeroy began working, Emery & Trist (1965) had taken field theory and put it on a totally objective scientific footing with far reaching practical consequences. As this 1965 paper is one of the most cited in the social science literature, it is hard to imagine how Scharmer and Pomeroy could have missed it.

Emery & Trist established that organizations are open systems, i.e. systems with boundaries permeable to the social field, later fully described as the extended social field of directive correlations (Emery F, 1977). Similarly, it was also established that this field is a global one, to which all systems, organizational or not, are open. Systems and environment or field co determine.

But the work did not stop there as Emery & Trist built an exploration of this social field into their first design of a Search Conference (Trist & Emery, 1960). It has since then become a major plank in not only the Search Conference (Emery M, 1999) but all social methods where an understanding of the ever changing social field is an essential component.

Nor did it stop there as Emery went much further and categorized not only the changing causal textures of the social field over human history but also with Merrelyn Emery, categorized the possible adaptions and maladaptions to our current field (Emery & Emery, 1979. Later, Merrelyn Emery showed how these adaptions and maladaptions formed social change over time (Emery M, 2021

Now contrast this with Pomeroy's description of Scharmer's extension of Lewin's field theory: "Both Lewin and Scharmer focus on social fields as the interiority of a social system—the dynamics and behaviour of a system as experienced from within. What Scharmer adds to Lewin's conceptualization of the field, and to his understanding of social reality, is the dimension of consciousness (p42)."

What this quote makes clear, and we go into the definition of consciousness below, is that by focusing on Lewin's notion of the life space, Scharmer is adopting a ***closed systems*** approach.

"The life space consists of the person and the psychological environment as it exists for him (p. xi)" (p42). There is no objective, external reality here that people, organizations, industries, communities or nations can explore to discover how to plan and implement an adaptive future for themselves. It is totally encapsulated within the individual. Yet we know now the changes in the extended social field have dramatic impacts on the systems within it, meaning it is imperative that healthy systems keep in regular touch with changes in this field. Scharmer and Pomeroy miss all this so their solutions in their work with others is without one of the most powerful influences on any system's future. It would appear that their relationship to wider field theory consists of no more than some vague words.

Consciousness

As mentioned above, Scharmer has added consciousness to Lewin's concept of the life space but nowhere can I find any sort of operational or functional definition of this important concept which could guide understanding of it. We are told consciousness is "the source from which our perception and action originate" (p39). This confirms the whole approach is a closed systems venture, unable to escape the person.

Nowhere could I find any of the clear incisive definitional analysis such as that of Angyal which led him to define Life as "an autonomous dynamic event which takes place *between* the organism and the environment" (1965, p48).

Scharmer and Pomeroy also discuss different states and levels of consciousness without any form of clarification which means it can cover anything from being awake rather than asleep to being under the influence of psychedelic drugs to the capacity to see yourself as object. Consciousness used like that isn't science, it is pop psychology.

Nowhere do we find anything like the powerful explanatory power of Chein's (1972) discussion of consciousness. Behaviour he defines as "any spontaneous directed action" (p77). From this he derives the concept of awareness:

Awareness is "minimal behaviour, behaviour conceptually stripped of all components save that which is barely sufficient to maintain some spontaneous directed action with respect to an object" (Chein 1972: 83). Awareness is included in every instance of observed behaviour. Every awareness is inherently a directed act and therefore motivated. And as Shaw et al (1982) add, awareness is perception. Dreams, hallucinations, etc, are simply different kinds of acts (p162). So too then are all our perceptual behaviours including imagining or conceptualizing our futures. They too are inherently directed or motivated awarenesses and will be subject to the same psychological laws as any other perceptions, particularly so in this context of bringing them under conscious control.

Chein (1972: 95) then formally derived the relationship between awareness and consciousness:

> "Let us call any awareness which is itself an object of a behaviour of the same object a **conscious awareness;** it is an awareness accompanied by an awareness of it. By the same token, any behaviour that is itself an object of another behaviour of the same actor is a **conscious behaviour**; and, if it is a motivating behaviour and if, as motive...it is similarly an object of another behaviour, it is a **conscious motive."**

A desirable future for example, therefore, becomes conscious when we are aware of ourselves perceiving our desirable future. It functions as conscious motivation when it is a goal of another conscious behaviour such as creating a community. To maximise the success therefore of the Search Conference, it is critical to ensure that each particular element and motivating behaviour is brought to conscious focus (This extract is adapted from Emery M, (1999, chapter 3).

I have spent some time on Chein's conceptualization of consciousness because it is the rigorous and comprehensive approach to any concept which must be present if one is to be assured that one's practice is built on a reliable construct. Again we see that rather than following Lewin in his strand of work based on material universals, Scharmer and now Pomeroy have reverted to the far inferior practice of using abstract universals, just a lot of words.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Scharmer's work on 'presencing'.

"In the concept of presencing, we can draw a parallel to Lewin's group dynamics in two ways. First, the concept of presencing encompasses a wider domain of human experience familiar to many as an experience but little articulated, at least not in a manner as accessible as Scharmer's conceptualization. Second, the concept, and the complex phenomena it represents, have been picked up more broadly and there are some signs it is becoming a wider domain of practice" (Pomeroy, p41).

Scharmer and Pomeroy apparently do not realize that it was the group dynamics area of Lewin's work where he lapsed into idealism, leaving behind the precise scientific approach with which he had made such enormous gains in knowledge and understanding.

There was very little about presencing in Pomeroy's paper so I went foraging and found that presencing is "at the heart of theory U, a shift in consciousness from ego-centric to eco-centric awareness. Presencing means to operate from the emerging future: sensing, tuning in, and acting from one's highest future potential" (Presencing website). The book on presencing outlines 7 critical contributions for elevating our civilization. These are: "becoming aware; generative listening; dialogue and co-sensing; presencing; ecosystem leadership; co-creating across boundaries; building unity" (as above).

If there was a prize for the most concentrated application of trendy buzz words, this site would certainly be a foremost contender, but seriously, all this raises more questions than it answers.

The contrast with the simple purposeful scan of the social field, where participants compile a database of recent changes in that field, check their accuracy, so that these participants can see what is emerging and most likely to comprise major trends in the future (Emery M, 1999), could not be more stark. Rather than an objective, validated understanding of the social field, Scharmer and Pomeroy present a collection of fashionable items in today's Human Relations School. It is probably as far from the main body of Lewin's work as you could ever get.

Commented [ME1]:

Conclusion

Scharmer and Pomeroy claim to be following Lewin but it is only in one small part of his work, that part which was least useful because it deviated from his predominantly scientific stance. This was his work on group dynamics which became known as sensitivity training or T groups.

They may think they are following Lewin but the reality is that rather than systems based on realism, they have reverted throughout to idealism and 'science by noun'. There is nothing in Scharmer's work on the social field or consciousness that is new, indeed it is lagging in both areas.

Similarly, Scharmer's approach to the bedrock of systems, wholes and parts, is as mushy as the rest of his work. It bears no resemblance to any serious attempt to accurately conceptualize the relation of parts to whole, let alone come close to Angyal's formative work (1941, 1965). It can offer no guidance to the aspiring systems analyst.

Scharmer's whole approach is firmly centred in the Human Relations School, not at all the objective scientific systems approach Lewin used to such enormous benefit. In the end, unfortunately, it seems Pomeroy's paper is a lot of words about little of any real import.

References

Angyal, A. (1941). *Foundations for a science of personality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Angyal, A. (1965). *Neurosis and treatment: a holistic theory.* New York: Wiley

Cassirer, E. (1923). *Substance and Function in Einstein's Theory of Relativity*. Chicago. Open Court.

Chein, I. (1972) *The Science of Behaviour and the Image of Man.* Basic Books.

Emery, F. (1977). *Futures we are in.* Martinus Nijhoff. Leiden: Revised and updated. *Futures We're In*. (1998). www.socialsciencethatactuallyworks.com.

Emery, F. & Emery, M. (1979) Project Australia: Its Chances. P.A. Consulting Services, Melbourne. In In Trist, E., Emery F. and Murray, H. (Eds) (1997*). The Social*

Engagement of Social Science. Vol III. University of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia. 336-353.
Emery, F. E. & Trist, E. L. (1965). The causal texture of organizational environments. *Human Relations,* 18: 21-32.
Emery, M. (1999). *Searching: The Theory and Practice of Making Cultural Change*. John Benjamins. Amsterdam.
Emery, M. (2000a). The current version of Emery's open systems theory. *Systemic Practice and Action Research, 13*(5), 623–643
Emery, M. (2000b). The evolution of open systems to the 2 stage model. In M. M. Beyerlein (Ed.), *Work teams: Past, present and future* (pp. 85–103). Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic
Emery, Merrelyn. (2021). Did 9/11 change the world? Tracking the future. www.socialsciencethatactuallyworks.com
Feibleman, J. K. (1946). *An Introduction to Peirce's Philosophy Interpreted as a System*. Harper & Brothers. NY.
Gibson, J. J. (1966) *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. Houghton Mifflin Co.
Lewin, K. (1931). The conflict between Aristotelian and Galileian modeas of thought in contemporary psychology. Chapter 1 of *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*. (1935). McGraw-Hill Book Co. NY and London.
Pepper, S. C. (1942). *World Hypotheses.* University of California Press. Reprinted in 1970.
Presencing. https://www.presencing.org
Shaw, R; Turvey M T and Mace W. 1982. "Ecological Psychology: The Consequence of a Commitment to Realism." In Weimer W B & Palermo D S (Eds), *Cognition and the symbolic processes.* Vol. 2. NJ. Lawence Erlbaum Associates. 159-226.
Trist, E. L. (1985). The last time around, 1949. In Trist, E., Emery F. and Murray, H. (Eds) (1997*). The Social Engagement of Social Science*. Vol III. University of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia. 676-7.
Trist, E. L. and Emery, F.E., (1960). Report on the Barford conference for Bristol/Siddeley, aero-engine corporation. July 10-16, Tavistock TIHR, Document No. 598. London.
Trist E.L., & Murray, H. (Eds). (1990. 1993, 1997). *The social engagement of social science: A Tavistock anthology. 3 Vols.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press
Wertheim, M. (1995). *Pythagoras' Trousers: God, Physics and the Gender Wars*. Five Continents Music Inc. Times Books.