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A note on the aphorism “there is nothing as practical as a good theory”

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to consider one inaccuracy in the written record of our discipline. That is, how the aphorism “There is nothing as practical as a good theory” came to be regarded as Kurt Lewin’s signature saying.

Design/methodology/approach – Primary and secondary sources were used in the research.

Findings – By tracing the history of the above-captioned aphorism back through its use by the General Electric Company in the 1920s to Friedrich W. Dörpfeld’s 1873 book *Grundlinien einer Theorie des Lehrplans, zunächst der Volks- und Mittelschule*, it can confidently be concluded that it did not originate with Lewin.

Practical Implications – Those who study history soon become aware that inaccuracies in the written record are commonplace. Indeed, assuring historical accuracy has been a challenge confronted by historians for centuries.

Originality/value – The widespread acceptance of Lewin as the originator of the referenced aphorism underscores the observation that received knowledge is often wrong. It also provides one more illustration that, whatever their origin, once errors of attribution appear in print, they become diffused and amplified, taking on a life of their own as they are transmitted from generation to generation.

Keywords Friedrich W. Dörpfeld, G. Stanley Hall, Gustav Robert Kirchhoff, Immanuel Kant, Kurt Lewin

Paper type Viewpoint

“Es gibt nichts Praktischeres als eine gute Theorie”

Friedrich W. Dörpfeld (1873b)

Introduction

Those who study history soon become aware that inaccuracies in the written record are commonplace. Indeed, assuring historical accuracy has been a challenge confronted by historians for centuries. Warning of the dangers inherent in the inaccuracies that emerge with the passage of time; Griffiths (1757, p. 531) admonished historians to recognize that:

[...] in proportion as History removes from the first witnesses, it may recede also from truth, – as, by passing through the prejudices, or the mistakes of subsequent Compilers, it will be apt to imbibe what tincture they may chance to give it. The *later* Historian’s only way, therefore, to prevent the ill effects of that decrease of evidence which the lapse of years necessarily brings

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with it, must be, by punctually referring to the springhead from whence the stream of his narration flows; which at once will cut off all appearance of partiality, or misrepresentation.

As the following account will further underscore, this 250-year-old wisdom merits reiteration as each new generation of scholars enters our discipline.

Thus, the purpose of this brief note is to heed Griffiths's admonition and refer to the early "springhead" of our discipline and correct a persistent and widespread misrepresentation in the contemporary historical record. That is, the attribution of the aphorism "There is nothing as practical as a good theory" to Kurt Lewin. Considered to be the founder of modern social psychology, Lewin's first documented use of what has become his signature saying dates to an address given on September 5, 1942, at the annual meeting of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) held in Washington, D.C. Arguing for the value of theory as a tool for solving applied problems, he called for a synthesis of application and theory, commenting: "A business man once stated that 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory'" (Lewin, 1943, p. 118).

Lewin sounded a similar refrain in two other published papers. The following year, writing in the *University of Iowa Studies on Child Welfare*, he again argued for a "close cooperation between theoretical and applied psychology", and contended that this could only occur if "the applied psychologist realizes that there is nothing as practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1944, p. 27). One year later, writing as the Director of the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Lewin concluded:

There are increasing symptoms that leading practitioners in government, in agriculture, in industry, in education, in community life are becoming aware of the fact that a scientific level of understanding is needed, that the statement "nothing is as practical as a good theory" hold also in the field of social management (Lewin, 1945, p. 129).

In both instances, Lewin omitted reference to the unnamed "business man" mentioned in his 1942 SPSSI address.

When and why the unidentified "business man" in Lewin's original telling faded away, and how Lewin became known as the aphorism's author, is perhaps impossible to determine. Marrow's (1977, p. 128) well-received Lewin biography is no doubt one influence that solidified the "business man's" departure, as the aphorism is prominently displayed on the biography's opening page above Lewin's name. Later in the Marrow biography, Lewin's former PhD student Beatrice P. Wright further confirms Lewin's paternity, referencing "Lewin's oft-quoted saying". Contributing to this attribution, psychologists and management theorists had even earlier advised their readers to "Recall Kurt Lewin's remark, 'Nothing is so (*sic*) practical as a good theory'" (Morris, 1963, p. 251). In doing so, they joined a mounting chorus in suggesting that their findings had shown, "As Lewin has said, 'Nothing is so (*sic*) practical as a good theory'" (Horowitz *et al.*, 1951, p. 73).

A nice story and the General Electric Company

All this makes a nice story. It, however, omits several incontrovertible facts. Simply stated (Lewin's unnamed "business man" aside), the saying "Nothing is as practical as a good theory" was popular in Germany well before Lewin was born there in 1890 and was even widely used in advertising copy in the 1920s. Case in point, the General Electric Company was running a full-page ad asking "How Large is an Atom?" and responding, in part, "Years

may thus be spent in what seems to be merely a purely 'theoretical' investigation. Yet *nothing is so (sic) practical as a good theory*" (italics added; Figure 1, paragraph 5, line 2). This advertisement ran in campus magazines across the USA, including *The University of Oklahoma Magazine*, *The Aggie Squib* (Massachusetts Agriculture College, now the University of Massachusetts Amherst), *The Illinois Chemist* (University of Illinois), *The Cornell Chemist*, *The Gargoyle* (University of Michigan), *The Siren* (University of Illinois), *The Creighton Chronicle* (Creighton University), *The Holy Cross Purple*, *The Colorado School of Mines Magazine*, *The Radcliffe News*, *The Cornell Civil Engineer*, *Tech Engineering News* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), *The Simmons College Review*,



How Large is an Atom?

ATOMS are so infinitesimal that to be seen under the most powerful microscope one hundred million must be grouped. The atom used to be the smallest indivisible unit of matter. When the X-Rays and radium were discovered physicists found that they were dealing with smaller things than atoms—with particles they call "electrons."

Atoms are built up of electrons, just as the solar system is built up of sun and planets. Magnify the hydrogen atom, says Sir Oliver Lodge, to the size of a cathedral, and an electron, in comparison, will be no bigger than a bird-shot.

Not much substantial progress can be made in chemical and electrical industries unless the action of electrons is studied. For that reason the chemists and physicists in the Research Laboratories of the General Electric Company are as much concerned with the very constitution of matter as they are with the development of new inventions. They use the X-Ray tube as if it were a machine-gun; for by its means electrons are shot at targets in new ways so as to reveal more about the structure of matter.

As the result of such experiments, the X-Ray tube has been greatly improved and the vacuum tube, now so indispensable in radio communication, has been developed into a kind of trigger device for guiding electrons by radio waves.

Years may thus be spent in what seems to be merely a purely "theoretical" investigation. Yet nothing is so practical as a good theory. The whole structure of modern mechanical engineering is reared on Newton's laws of gravitation and motion—theories stated in the form of immutable propositions.

In the past the theories that resulted from purely scientific research usually came from the university laboratories, whereupon the industries applied them. The Research Laboratories of the General Electric Company conceive it as part of their task to explore the unknown in the same spirit, even though there may be no immediate commercial goal in view. Sooner or later the world profits by such research in pure science. Wireless communication, for example, was accomplished largely as the result of Herz's brilliant series of purely scientific experiments demonstrating the existence of wireless waves.

General Electric
General Office **Company** Schenectady, N. Y.

Figure 1.
"How Large is an Atom?", University of Oklahoma Magazine, 20, November 1920, Vol. 9 No. 1, np

The Virginia Reel (University of Virginia), *The Iowa Engineer* (Iowa State University), *The Michigan Technic* (University of Michigan) as well as the *Chinese Students' Monthly* and the Government Accounting Office's *GAO Review*.

Note on the
aphorism

And G. Stanley Hall, too

Digging a bit deeper, however, evidence indicates that the oft-quoted “Lewin saying” was well-worn decades before the 1920s. Psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall sounded the same claim (“nothing is so practical as a good theory”) in *The Princeton Review* (Hall, 1882, p. 310) and repeated it verbatim in *Pedagogical Seminary* articles published in 1892 (p. 76) and 1908 (p. 200). Hall’s fondness for “Lewin’s saying” is obvious, in that, he recycled it *ad verum* in his 1904 book *Youth, Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene* (p. 331), as well as in his 1923 autobiography, *The Life and Confessions of a Psychologist* (p. 447). In none of the above instances does Hall provide a source for the saying, thereby, inferring that the words are either in such common use as to not require attribution or are his own.

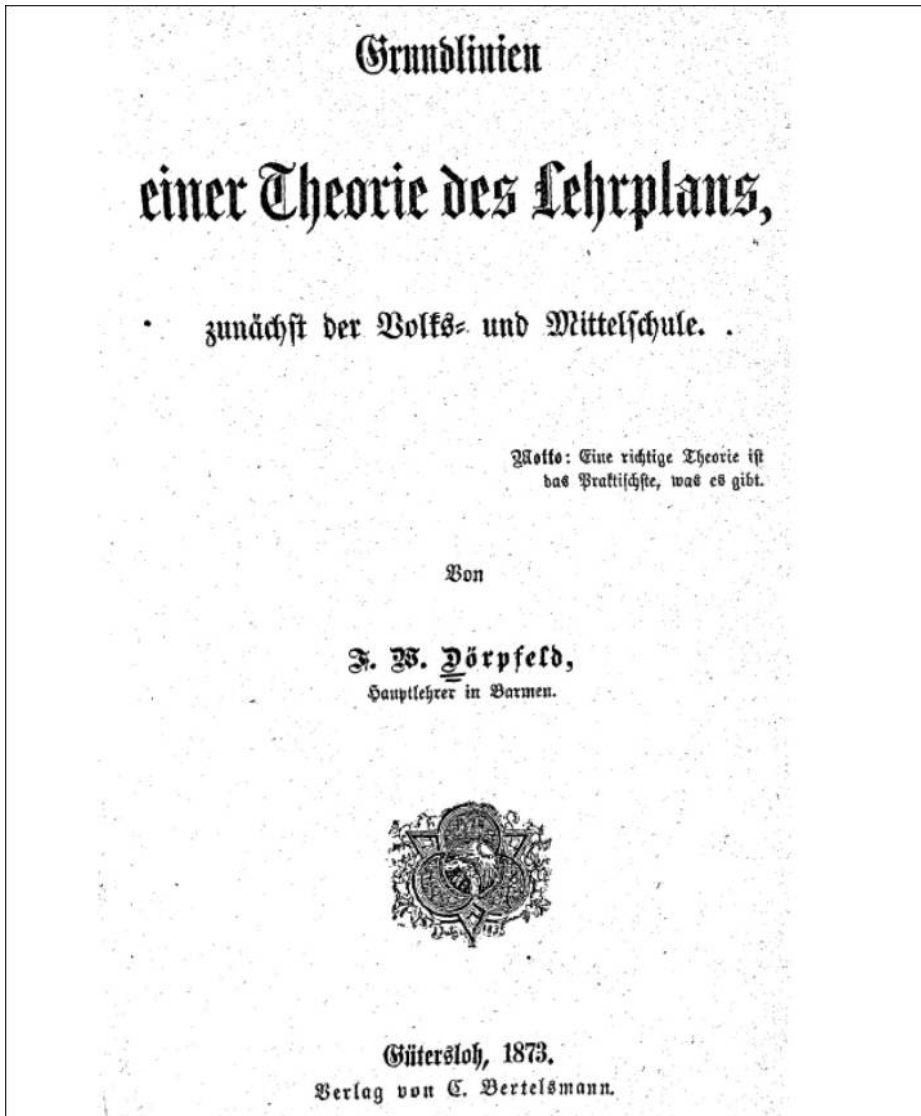
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Enter Friedrich W. Dörpfeld

The story of “Lewin’s saying” does not end here, however, as evidence also indicates that it was common in Germany years before Lewin was born and some two decades before the preceding Hall references. The earliest use of the saying that I have been able to document dates to German educator Friedrich W. Dörpfeld’s 1873 book on the theory of elementary curricula titled *Grundlinien einer Theorie des Lehrplans: zunächst der Volks- und Mittelschule* (An Outline of a Theory of the Curriculum: Initially for Primary and Secondary Schools). The following “motto”, appears on its title page: *Eine richtige Theorie ist das Praktischste, was es gibt* (Figure 2). Translated literally, this reads: “A correct theory is the most practical thing”. Before long, this wording, although still ascribed to Dörpfeld, morphed into *Es gibt nichts Praktischeres als eine gute Theorie* or, more in line with Lewin’s wording, “There is nothing more practical than a good theory”. The transition from *richtige Theorie* to *gute Theorie* may, perhaps, be explained by the fact that, in announcing the publication of his own book under the heading *Selbstanzeigen* (self-announcements) in the journal, *Evangelisches Schulblatt* (Dörpfeld, 1873b, p. 212), which he edited, Dörpfeld used the wording *gute Theorie* rather than as *richtige Theorie* in quoting his own motto. Contemporaries who cited Dörpfeld and likewise quoted his motto as it appeared in his *Evangelisches Schulblatt* announcement rather than his 1873 book, include Kehr (1880, p. 13), Hofmann (1907, p. 14), Cauer (1909, p. 402) and Zeifsig (1911, p. 267). Examples of later German authors who did not cite Dörpfeld, but cited his motto per his *Evangelisches Schulblatt* notice, include Rohden (1908, p. 7), Pick, (1908, p. 32) and Hellpach (1918, p. 111). Volkmer (1908-1909, vol. 1, p. 194) is the only source I have been able to locate that both cited Dörpfeld and quoted his motto as printed in his 1873 book. Granted, the relationship between theory and practice expressed in the two versions of Dörpfeld’s motto is slightly different, his understanding of this relationship is clear. As he further explained: “Sie wissen wohl, daß zur Praxis eben so gut die Theorie gehört, wie zu den Trauben der Weinstock” or “They know well that to practice belongs theory, just as to grapes belongs the grapevine” (Dörpfeld, 1873a, p. v).

As an aside, I have been unable to locate any direct evidence that Dörpfeld’s “motto” *Eine richtige Theorie ist das Praktischste, was es gibt* was familiar to Hall. The fact that Hall authored the Introduction to Herman T. Lukens’s 1895 book, *The Connection between Thought and Memory: A Contribution to Pedagogical Psychology on the Basis of F.W.*

Figure 2.
Title page:
Grundlinien einer
Theorie des
Lehrplans
Grundlinien einer
Theorie des
Lehrplans: zunächst
der Volk- und
Mittelschule



Source: Dörfeld (1873a)

Dörfeld's Monograph "Denken und gedächtnis" does indicate, however, that Hall did have some general knowledge of Dörfeld's work.

Immanuel Kant and G. Robert Kirchhoff, too

Unequivocally establishing the source of an aphorism can be a precarious undertaking at best. Whether Dörfeld should be credited as the original source for "Lewin's saying"

remains an open question. A Google search using the terms “*eine gute Theorie ist das praktischste, was es gibt*” results in other source attributions, including German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and German physicist Gustav Robert Kirchhoff (1824-1887). None of these suggested alternatives, however, provides a source for its claim. Kant did author an essay that appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1793 titled *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis* (“On the Common Saying: That May be Right in Theory but It Won’t Work in Practice”). As Kant (1793) explains, the essay’s primary intention was to rebut the notion that “was in der Theorie sich gut hören läßt, für die Praxis von keiner Gültigkeit sei” (what in theory sounds good, does not have relevance for practice) (p. 203). At no point, however, does Kant comment on the practicality of a good theory *per se*. Alternatively, Kirchhoff is cited as the aphorism’s originator in various German mathematics textbooks, but (again) none that I have been able to locate provide a source citation nor, after searching Kirchhoff’s published work [*Gesammelte Abhandlungen (Collected Works)*, 1892], have I been able to locate any such statement on his part (Kirchhoff, 1882).

Conclusion

At best, it thus seems that whereas the true origin of the aphorism “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” may never be known, it can be confidently concluded that it did not originate with either Kurt Lewin or an unnamed “business man”. The widespread acceptance of this attribution, however, underscores the observation that received knowledge is often wrong. It also provides one more illustration that, whatever their origin, once errors of attribution appear in print, they become diffused and amplified, taking on a life of their own as they are transmitted from generation to generation.

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