

Human relations theory essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This is a flawed story in my view, and the way I will tell the story emphasizes the many connections and similarities between the two. But I suppose the fact that I am referring to 'the two' implies that there must be some points of difference as well. Maybe so, but it is a different sort of difference to that which standard commentaries identify. Human relations theory (HRT) is normally thought of as having its roots in the Hawthorne Studies conducted in the 1920s and 1930s at the Hawthorne works of the Western Electric Company, near Chicago in the United States.

These studies have now taken on an almost mythological status within the study of organization, so that the details of what happened there and even when they happened is reported differently in different accounts. For example, different books give 1923, 1924 and 1927 as the date the studies started. Related to this mythology is a disjuncture between these precise details of what was done and what was written and the received version of what human relations theory is. Since human relations theory was the work of many years and many people, it contains a huge amount of variation and nuance (some of it extremely interesting) This same disjuncture is present in relation to Taylor's work (and scholarly commentaries on it) and that of many other organizational theorists. It isn't a matter of saying that the received version is deficient in detail or scholarship.

They are different things for different purposes. Apart from anything else, received versions are simpler and more memorable. In many ways my purpose in this book is to put out another version of organization theory, no more scholarly than the received version but hopefully no less memorable.

hich is not captured by the received version. 1 Although it would certainly be worthwhile to look at the detail (if you fancy it, Schwartzman, 1993, is a nice place to start), it is perhaps more important to examine the received version, for it is this which figures most strongly both in textbooks and, consequently, in the way that human relations theory is used to structure understandings of organizations, especially on the part of their managers. Indeed, as Nancy Harding (2003) observes of the conventional canon of management thinkers: ... neither the writers themselves nor indeed what they wrote is important.

What defines them as important ... is what they signify, i. e. conventionality, continuity, the conservative way, or, in one word, patriarchy. (2003: 117)

The basic suggestion of the received version of HRT is that through a series of experiments and interviews, the Hawthorne researchers and, most notably, the man who became their chief popularizer and canonical emblem, Elton Mayo, identified the importance of 'the human factor' in organizations. That meant that workers were now recognized as having social needs and interests such that they could no longer be regarded as the economically motivated automatons envisaged by Taylorism. Within these terms, two parts of the studies stand out as being especially important: the 'illumination experiment' and the 'bank wiring room experiment'. In the first of these, lighting levels were varied up and down within an experimental group of workers, whilst light levels were left unchanged within a control group. Almost all of the lighting changes led to an increase in productivity and, most interesting of all, productivity also increased within the control group.

What was going on? Apparently, it was the fact that something 'unusual' was happening and that the workers felt that they were part of it and that what they were doing was of interest and importance to the researchers. It was this which caused the increase in productivity and which demonstrated that the workers could not be regarded as mere parts in the organizational machine. Thus was born the notion of the 'Hawthorne Effect', a staple part not just of organization theory but of social science as a whole. The other study I want to mention was that conducted in the bank wiring room.

Here, a small group of male workers were engaged in producing electrical components. It emerged that the group set informal norms around production levels so that, rather than produce their maximum output (which would earn them a bonus) the workers performed sub-optimally. These norms were enforced by a mixture of peer pressure (including physical sanction) and an unofficial 'gang leader'. This suggested that workers were not solely motivated by economic 3257-Grey-02. qxd 2/21/2005 12: 33 PM Page 45 Human Relations Theory and People Management 5 considerations and, moreover, that the 'informal side of the organization' was as important as, or maybe even more important than, the formal side (i. e. the rules and official hierarchy). The discovery of the human factor, so the story goes, ushered in a new era in which workers' needs were acknowledged and met. This claim fits not just the 'good guy, bad guy' story, it also promotes a version of organization theory as gradually discovering and refining truths, much in the way that science is supposed to proceed.

There is one tiny flaw in this, however: it's not true. It's not true for lots of reasons. One is that an interest in workers going beyond economic concerns

can be found well before Hawthorne. It was present in the various attempts of nineteenth century industrialists, especially those of Quaker background, to meet the ‘moral needs’ of workers. This is evidenced by towns like Port Sunlight and Bourneville in the UK, where housing and religious and communal activities were designed to cater for workers’ leisure time and to provide an environment conducive to good living.

True, it was the new ‘science’ of psychology rather than paternalistic religiosity that informed human relations theory but they share a similar humanizing imperative, and the latter had a paternalism of its own. The second issue is that the original impetus for the Hawthorne experiments was firmly located within the tradition of scientific management, well established by the 1920s. The desire to ascertain the effect of lighting levels on productivity was informed by the idea that management was about the control of physical variables, and in fact there were many other experiments designed to explore a whole array of such variables.

Finally, and crucially, it is simply wrong to think that Taylor had been unaware of, or uninterested in, the informal side of the organization. On the contrary, the heart of Taylor’s project was an attempt to overcome its effects. For the output restrictions observed in the Bank Wiring Room were nothing other than an instance of what Taylor has identified as the systematic soldiering of the workforce. That is not to say that his approach was the same as human relations theory, it was not.

For whereas Taylor sought to eradicate the informal side of the organization, the human relations message was to acknowledge its irrepressibility and to

find ways of managing it into an alignment with the formal parts and purposes of the organization. And so now human relations theory begins to take on a very different aspect. In one way, it is a response to the failure, or at least limitations, of scientific management as a means of organizational control. But it is a response which in many ways offers not an alternative to, but an extension of, scientific management.