Editorial: Introducing the Special Issue to mark the 75th Anniversary of *Human Relations*

Landmark anniversaries tend to be occasions for reflection as well as for celebration. It was tempting, therefore, to celebrate the undoubtedly important and impressive heritage of the journal by reflecting upon *Human Relations'* history and on its contribution to the academic community (and beyond) over the last 75 years. In the end though, I resisted the temptation to write at any length on the journal's heritage, mainly because I felt that an essay of this kind would be unlikely to add much more to what has already been written so well and so comprehensively for previous anniversaries.[1] Instead, I curated this Anniversary Special Issue (ASI) with the aim of celebrating the heritage of *Human Relations*, while doing so in ways that directly serve our current readers' scholarly interests. All eight articles in this ASI build on (and in some cases critique) the legacies and traditions of the journal, traditions that have been established so distinctively and effectively over the last 75 years. But they do so in order to develop scholarship that speaks directly to our contemporary world in new and, I hope, interesting ways.

The first two articles in the ASI are invited contributions that focus on major intellectual themes that have been central to *Human Relations'* influence on the academic community over the past 75 years. Importantly, however, these themes remain of considerable significance to current scholarship, as well as to practice. The next group of four articles were also invited, but this time are from authors of articles published in *Human Relations* over the last 15–30 years or so and that have proved to be particularly influential. I asked all these authors to reflect on the subsequent development of the issues with which their original articles engaged, especially in the light of current debates, and to suggest where these debates might be going next. The final two articles were originally submitted as standard articles but caught my eye because they engaged with topics that relate in interesting (if not always entirely direct) ways to a consideration of the journal's heritage and history, as well as to its continuing influence.

In sum, the ASI was designed to speak to today's concerns, doing so through developments that reflect the legacy of the journal's first 75 years. Of course, it is impossible to do justice to the entire heritage of a journal like *Human Relations* in a single issue (for a more comprehensive appraisal, see Edwards, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c and 2016d). It is my hope, nevertheless, that the ASI holds much of value for every reader, whatever their methodological and epistemological preferences might be, and regardless of their precise disciplinary interests. In other words, this ASI is intended to reflect something of the nature of the journal as a whole, and to illustrate its multidisciplinary ethos, its genuinely

broad intellectual scope across all the social scientific approaches that focus on social relations at work and its influence on the wider field. As our mission statement puts it: 'The journal is grounded in critical social science that challenges orthodoxies and questions current organizational structures and practices. It promotes interdisciplinarity through studies that draw on more than one discipline or that engage critically across disciplinary traditions' (*Human Relations*, 2022).

The article that opens the ASI, by Gianpiero and Jennifer Petriglieri, concerns the contributions of a psychodynamic approach to social relations at work. I invited an article on this theme because, from its first issue, *Human Relations* has undoubtedly been at the forefront of developments and debates in this area, even though (as the authors point out) the prominence given to psychodynamics within the journal may have varied somewhat during the journal's history (see also Edwards, 2016d: 1-2). The leading role that the journal has nevertheless played overall in developing the contribution of psychodynamics is owing, in part, to the fit between psychodynamics and the ethos of *Human Relations*. As Petriglieri and Petriglieri put it, the psychodynamic 'approach [is] devoted to dismantling defenses, countering authoritarianism, and nurturing development and democracy' (p. 1431); all characteristics, it seems to me, which might be good ways to encapsulate part of the basic purpose and mission of *Human Relations*. Furthermore, a significant proportion of today's scholarship within the journal explicitly values and/or directly employs psychodynamics within their analyses (for some of the latest examples see Brown, 2021; Gilmore and Harding, 2022; or Nixon and Scullion, 2021). Psychodynamics is also, incidentally, if hardly coincidentally, one of the main approaches used by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (the journal's governing body) in their not-for-profit consultancy activities (Lawlor and Sher, 2022). And if a brief personal aside can be allowed, perhaps because of my background in health administration, the impact of one of the most famous *Human Relations* articles in this context, Menzies Lyth's (1960) 'A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety', has long been especially important to me. The influence of this article has certainly been long-lasting for others too. According to her obituary in the UK newspaper, the *Guardian* (2008), the article:

> . . . though controversial at the time, has had a continuing impact. In it, she showed how the stresses of nursing and the intimate relationship it demanded with patients, impacted on the organisation of care, unfairly leaving those closest to patients exposed to emotional pressures that more senior staff and managers were defended against. Her message remains relevant to NHS [i.e., the UK's National Health Service] management today.

The ASI's second article, by David Guest, Angela Knox and Chris Warhurst, interrogates the contribution of research that develops the idea of socio-technical systems and its later conceptual offspring that came to be known as Quality of Working Life (QWL). This is another major theme (albeit heavily intertwined with psychodynamics, especially in its earlier years) to which *Human Relations* has made a range of foundational contributions throughout its 75 years of existence. Importantly, such ideas have strongly influenced policymakers and corporate managers, as well as academics. Perhaps the most famous article in this tradition is Eric Trist and Ken Bamforth's (1951) 'Some social and psychological consequences of the Longwall method of coal-getting'. However, many,

more contemporary authors have continued to work towards the broad aims of these early studies – a number of which are highlighted in Guest et al.'s article. More generally, as the article emphasizes, the desire to improve the quality of people's working life is perhaps particularly evident in the growing stream of articles we are publishing on the so-called gig economy (see, for instance, Carr and Kelan, 2021; Caza et al., 2021; or Tirapani and Willmott, 2022) even though some of these authors may not necessarily see themselves as members of the QWL movement as such. However, as Guest et al. put it, contributing, in one way or another, to the 'humanisation of work through sustainable interventions that can produce positive outcomes for employees and employers in the first instance and, in the second, wider society' (p. 1477) is an activity to which almost all *Human Relations*' authors, reviewers and editorial team would surely subscribe.

Article three, by Blake Ashford and Ronald Humphrey, develops ideas first encountered in their article published in 1995 in order to consider the institutionalization of emotions, moods and sentiments in today's research. As the authors point out, traditionally, the dominant assumption in much thinking about formal organizations has been that they are essentially rational places. Emotions in the workplace (if noticed at all) tended to be viewed as 'annoying grains of sand that threatened to mar the smoothly operating gears' (p. 1484). There is a sense in which highlighting the central importance of the affective to institutional life has been part of the quest of the Human Relations movement – and *Human Relations* – from its beginning. It is pleasing then that these issues are being much more widely explored in the scholarly writing of today than was generally the case in 1995. The authors' suggestions for future research are intended therefore, at least in part, to animate future submissions to the journal, and to encourage others to join the 'tsunami of terrific research' (p. 1506) that now characterize work in this area. Such analyses can, of course, proceed from a wide variety of perspectives, methods and epistemologies. Contrasting work recently published in the journal (which, despite evident methodological and epistemological differences, can still be located within the broad tradition that Ashford and Humphrey identify) includes articles by, for example, Dwyer et al. (2021) and Scharp et al. (2022).

The next article in the ASI, by Keith Grint, revisits work he published in *Human Relations* in 2005. How we understand and respond to 'problems', by which Grint means not so much academic questions, but problems and uncertainties facing the wider world, represents a huge challenge for us all. Indeed, the issues addressed by this article seem particularly pertinent as I write today, at the end of February 2022, while the Russian army invades Ukraine. This, and other momentous events, make the theme of leadership in tackling the uncertainties inherent in real-life organizational problems (another theme on which *Human Relations* has focused throughout its history) especially salient – and pressing. Of course, leadership in times of uncertainty has connections with other issues addressed in this ASI – most obviously with psychodynamics and with affect. And again, in common with so many of the topics that are central to *Human Relations*, analyses of leadership lend themselves to a wide variety of conceptual approaches. For an insight into the range of theoretical possibilities under the broad heading of 'leadership' to have recently been published in the journal, compare the conceptual approach taken, for example, by Liu et al. (2021) with that used by Ford et al. (2022).

The fifth article, by Paula Jarzabkowski, David Seidl and Julia Balogun focuses on Strategy-as-Practice (SAP). It takes as its jumping-off point the SI on SAP published in

Human Relations in 2007 that Jarzabkowski et al. edited. Unlike the articles so far in this ASI, SAP as such is, of course, a phenomenon of the 21st century. Nevertheless, it has continuities with much of the output of the journal because (in contrast to many of the received approaches to thinking about strategy) SAP emphasizes the importance of human actors to strategy development. It is unsurprising therefore that *Human Relations* played a significant part in ensuring that SAP gained legitimacy and impact within the scholarly community – in what the authors refer to as SAP's 'germination' phase. Their article takes us through its further stages of development – SAP's 'blossoming' and 'harvesting' periods – before considering where SAP might be heading next. The authors emphasize the centrality of pluralism in its likely future development, and I see SAP (along with other fields where practice theory is central) as particularly fruitful areas for future articles in *Human Relations* to explore.

The next article, by Brooks Holtom, Yehuda Baruch, Herman Aguinis and Gary A. Ballinger develops and extends the analyses of survey response rates examined in the past in *Human Relations* by Baruch (1999) and by Baruch and Holtom (2008). *Human Relations* has published survey-based research since its inception, of course; but, as the authors point out, the landscape for survey designs has changed substantially, particularly over the last 15 years or so. These changes have been brought about largely because of the increasing availability of online interfaces, the use of other electronic collection methods and the advent of panel administrators such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), Qualtrics Panels and Study Response Project. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that response rates in published studies have risen considerably over the first two decades of the 21st century. However, as the authors argue, 'high response rates do not guarantee validity. Instead, we believe it is imperative to know more about the data-collection effort to gather evidence about its validity' (p. 1573). Around 50% of the empirical studies published in *Human Relations* are quantitative, and a good proportion of these use survey designs. Unfortunately, many survey studies submitted to the journal are rejected on methodological grounds, which can include problems associated with response rates. Part of the intent in publishing this article therefore is to provide a validity assessment framework for future authors (along with reviewers and editors) on best practices in deploying this method.

The final two articles in the ASI look at the history of the intellectual ideas that relate in one way or another to the development of *Human Relations* and the Human Relations movement. I believe they do so in particularly interesting (if not entirely direct or uncritical) ways. As such, they join a long tradition of work on the history of social relations at work to have been published in the journal (for recent examples, see Decker et al., 2021 or Weatherburn, 2020).

The first of these articles, by Mairi Maclean, Gareth Shaw and Charles Harvey, casts new light on our understanding of workplace relations during the interwar years. This period is commonly characterized as being an interplay between scientific management and the Human Relations school (a characterization that Guest et al. in this issue also explore). However, the authors advance the idea of 'business as service' as a third important influence on management practice during the interwar era, largely based on an analysis of archival material from the Rowntree business lectures and management research groups operating in the UK in the 1920s and 1930s. On the face of it, such an ostensibly

humanistic style of management might seem to exemplify a commitment to community solidarity; one that emphasized how employers and employees faced shared challenges together along with a common commitment to building fairer, more ethical workplaces. But the authors detect a thinly veiled attempt to bolster managerial authority lying beneath what, for them, was a veneer of public service. Indeed, this kind of a critique might arguably be applied to the humanistic intentions of the Human Relations movement from its beginning. Such an assessment is not merely of historical interest, of course. As the authors argue:

> Social responsibility is an imperative for business in present times; but as Bourdieu (1986: 257) points out, "the most sincerely disinterested acts may be those best corresponding to objective interest". Viewed in this light, responsible business emerges as a handmaiden to vested corporate interests. (p. 1605)

The final article of the ASI, by Oliver Pol, Todd Bridgman and Stephen Cummings, explores the origins of the influential and commonly cited idea of 'group think'. In many widely used texts today, this notion is said to originate in the work of Irving Janis, but the authors show that the term was in fact coined by the social critic William H. Whyte. That Whyte has largely been forgotten in this context might have more than a little to do, the authors suggest, with the discomforts inherent in the fact that:

> [Whyte's] target [in group think] was the fledgling field of Human Relations – the body of knowledge that this journal played a key role in nurturing. Whyte was dismayed that employees had subjugated themselves to the tyranny of groups, which crushed individuality and were instinctively hostile to anything or anyone that challenged the collective view. (p. 1616)

Group dynamics was an idea famously introduced by Kurt Lewin (1947a, 1947b) in the first two issues of *Human Relations*; its influence has been immense and, in many ways, very positive. Nevertheless, Pol et al. encourage us not to forget about what they call the dark side of groups. They end their contribution by asserting that there is 'much more work to be done uncovering the uses and abuses of history in Management and how they limit future horizons' (p. 1633). I agree, and this theme is yet another area that I hope will be fruitfully explored by work submitted to *Human Relations* in the coming years.

Having introduced the articles in the ASI, I would like to end my remarks on a slightly more personal note by briefly reflecting on reading the very first issue of *Human Relations* – one of the things I did while drafting this editorial. The experience of reading it was a curious, almost uncanny one, not least because that first issue of 1947 transports the reader into a different epoch in almost every way imaginable: culturally, emotionally, economically and politically. Unsurprisingly enough, all the articles were written very much 'in the shadow of the last war' as the Editorial Policy (1947: 1) puts it. And yet, for all the differences between 1947 and today, it is still possible to see certain continuities from 75 years ago with the qualities we continue to seek in *Human Relations* articles today.

For instance, as I have emphasized throughout this editorial, we still juxtapose different – and often highly contrasting – research traditions from a wide variety of social scientific approaches within the same issue. One of the outcomes of this practice is that a roughly equal number of qualitative and quantitative studies are published in the journal

each year. More importantly, I hope that this practice will encourage a cross-fertilization of ideas that might otherwise stay within the relatively narrow confines of what can sometimes risk becoming almost entirely independent disciplinary conversations.

Another aspiration shared by *Human Relations* today as well as by the *Human Relations* of 1947 is that of (what might now be called) international reach. Importantly, however, this concept was understood rather differently in 1947 (when, for instance, the post-war dismantling of the British Empire had only just begun) compared with how we understand it today. In 1947, *Human Relations*' editorial committee and advisory board were made up of leading research scientists from North America and Great Britain. In 1947, having both sides of the Atlantic represented was doubtless seen as a major step forward in facilitating international research. Today, *Human Relations* has developed its international aspirations much further. Taken as a whole, our group of Associate Editors have links to every continent in the world (other than Antarctica), and the editorial advisory board is similarly diverse, though we are seeking to enhance its geographical diversity even further.[2]

The nature of these editorial arrangements means that while we shall certainly continue to value work focused on established debates, and in research traditions that have a long pedigree within the journal, different intellectual currents are also becoming more prominent. In common with many social scientific journals, we are publishing an increasingly sizeable proportion of articles that focus on empirical settings outside the West (see Holtom et al., this issue). Importantly, however, we are starting to publish more articles whose primary intellectual resources also originate from outside the West (e.g., Ashraf et al., 2021; Haar and Martin 2021; Jamjoom and Mills, 2022) as well as those focusing on issues that, historically, have been stigmatized (Anand and Mitra, 2022) or trivialized (Muzanenhamo and Chowdhury, 2021). I am confident therefore, that if, in 2047, the editors of *Human Relations* decide to produce a similar ASI for the journal's 100th anniversary, they will be able to choose from a wide range of new landmark articles that will be even more varied and ground-breaking than those we have available to us in 2022.

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Notes

1   As part of the celebrations for *Human Relations*' 50th anniversary, Eric Miller (1997) provided a detailed history of the journal in the wider context of the Human Relations approach, including the circumstances that led to the conception and birth of the journal, along with its relationship with the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (the not-for-profit organization that continues to oversee the journal). Later that same year, the then editor, Ray Loveridge (1997), reviewed the journal's contribution to the social scientific study of work as well as introducing a Special Issue (SI). This SI, among other things, speculated on what the next 30 years might hold for

the journal and for the social sciences more generally. The 60th anniversary was marked by a further historical and intellectual review of the contribution of the journal (Loveridge et al., 2007) as well as by Bill Cooke's (2007) study of Kurt Lewin (one of the journal's founders) based on files the FBI and CIA held on him. Most recently, to mark the 70th anniversary of the journal, the then editor, Paul Edwards (2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d) wrote a series of commentaries upon a small selection of *Human Relations* articles published up to the early 2000s. These were articles he had personally chosen to highlight work that he considered to have had a particularly lasting impact on social studies of work (see https://journals.sagepub.com/page/hum/collections/classic-papers).

2   For details of the current editorial team and advisory board see https://journals.sagepub.com/editorial-board/HUM

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