

## Reading for interest

*At the beginning of his term as Editor-in-Chief, Professor Mark Learmonth (Durham University, UK) gives a personal take on the pleasures of reading Human Relations, and the contributions it has made to 'social relations in and around work' both in the past – and into the future.*

For many years, *Human Relations* has been among a handful of journals that I not only read, but read regularly; and read as much for interest's sake as for any other reason. This has been the case especially since becoming an editorial board member of *Human Relations*, when I started to receive my own hard copy every month or so. Browsing through the titles and abstracts, it was not unusual for me to be drawn in to read a whole article on the spot – just because I found it thought-provoking and stimulating; even if (and possibly because of the fact that) it happened to be some distance from my personal research agenda. In other words, there are a good number of articles in *Human Relations* that I have read for no better reason than just wanting to read them – surely the best possible reason for reading anything. As I am now in the enviable position of reading articles submitted to *Human Relations* for a significant part of my working week, I suppose it is just as well that I find many of them interesting.

For me, in order to be interesting, scholarly work has to make a new contribution in some way or other to important issues relevant to the world we live in. It also has to do so in ways that communicate effectively the authors' personal commitment to what they are saying. Both these things matter if any kind of scholarship in the social sciences is going to be interesting – regardless of method or theoretical approach – and both come on top of the basic requirement for the research to be technically correct. In trying to nurture this kind of work, journals need to be places for high-quality research that reflect methodological plurality and interdisciplinary curiosity while covering a wide breadth of topics. *Human Relations* has a proud, 70+ year-long legacy of communicating ideas in this way, <sup>(1)</sup> a tradition which I very much hope will continue to develop further over the next few years. Indeed, providing accounts of work and organizing that characterize 'social relations in and around work' (Mission Statement, 2016)

seems to me to provide an excellent framework for encouraging the production of interesting work that contributes in – and to – this long tradition.

Over the next few years, the *Human Relations* editorial team's top priority will remain focused on maintaining and furthering the publication of high-quality work that many people will want to read. Regardless of disciplinary traditions, we aim to attract world-leading research on significant issues connected to social relations in and around work. This is true, whether the articles are what some might consider to be on the fringes of work and organization studies,<sup>(2)</sup> or whether they contribute more obviously to debates about established topics; the sorts of topics exemplified by many of the themes explored in our recent special issues (*Human Relations*, 2020a) and virtual special issues (*Human Relations*, 2020b). We are also seeking to extend the use of two article formats in particular. The first of these is the critical essay. Critical essays can be somewhat shorter pieces, but whatever their length, they should engage directly with a controversial issue within the scope of the journal while, of course, maintaining scholarly rigour. The second is the critical review. In this category, we are especially seeking work that identifies new research questions and that makes connections between management and organizations and the wider social sciences.

Equally important for us, however, is to make sure that more people get to know about the work we publish so that they can have the opportunity to read it in the first place. Being listed in all the right places – such as in the *Financial Times*' list of 'Top-50' academic business journals – obviously helps immensely; though inevitably, more can always be done. There appear to be certain geographical areas in which readership is at lower levels than it is elsewhere, for example. This is an issue we hope to remedy, in part by targeted marketing, but without changing the distinctive flavour of the journal. Publishing work quickly after acceptance is also important for increasing readership – speedy publication attracts readers, as well as authors – because the research is more likely to be fresh and topical. To this end, 98% of editorial decisions being made within 90 days of submission appears to be an eminently do-able target for us. The same is true for our goal to ensure that articles are published in 'OnlineFirst' format as soon as possible after acceptance. A further consideration that is also key to growing the numbers of *Human Relations*'s readers is effective promotion on social media. As well as active Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn accounts, we are

now also using the particularly social media-friendly format of vodcasts. These are short videos in which invited authors discuss their findings in order to supplement their articles. The vodcasts are all available on our own Youtube channel (*Human Relations 2020c*).

A third priority for the editorial team is cultivating and promoting talent among existing authors, reviewers, the editorial team and editorial board members. My sense is that *Human Relations* has a special place in the affections of many academics – in business and management schools certainly, but also in other social sciences. It occupies this special place not least because articles in the journal have played key roles in the intellectual growth of so many of us over the years. We hope, therefore, to expand membership of the editorial board in the coming months and to find new ways in which to ensure board members can contribute directly to the life of the journal. We shall also be looking at the possibility of organizing a regular conference related specifically to the journal so that more of our wider readership can take part directly in the life of the journal. Watch this space for more news on this event!

Finally, we are aware that the forthcoming decade promises to be a somewhat turbulent time for the academic publishing industry. In particular, growth in open access articles is introducing uncertainty into how journals have traditionally been funded, as we start to move away from an exclusive reliance on the relatively predictable and secure subscription-based system. In the three years between 2016 and 2018, open access articles only represented about 4% of the papers we published. Needless to say, we expect that percentage to rise steeply in the next few years. Any upward trend in open access articles is good for the journal in terms of the numbers of people who are able to read the work we publish; this is true especially for those outside institutions with subscriptions. On the other hand, open access will be a challenge to the way the journal has traditionally been funded.

We are confident, however, that *Human Relations* will not merely survive but thrive – notwithstanding open access and the other changes in the wider publishing environment that are bound to come our way in the future. Indeed, we are envisaging no immediate, or major changes for the journal in its intellectual trajectory or ethos. We shall continue to publish, as our mission statement puts it,

‘incisive investigations from an international network of leading scholars in management, psychology, sociology, politics, anthropology and economics’. Furthermore, these studies will remain ‘grounded in critical social science that challenges orthodoxies and questions current organizational structures and practices’.

One of the main factors underpinning this stability has been the work of my immediate predecessor as Editor-in-Chief, Nick Turner. Nick has done an incredible job in steering *Human Relations* over the last few years (cf. Turner, 2017) and I thank him for his invaluable advice and support during our handover period. I also want to record thanks to the Associate Editors who have stepped down in the last year or so: John Cordery, Aichia Chuang, Jackie Ford, Kim Hoque and Mathew Sheep. I am very much looking forward to working with the current team of Associate Editors over my own period in office. And I am sure I shall continue to enjoy reading many of the articles in *Human Relations* – often still simply out of interest – (even) as Editor-in-Chief.

## Notes

1. The year 2022 will be a landmark for the journal, as it will mark the 75<sup>th</sup> volume of *Human Relations*.
2. Among the many examples of excellent work that might be regarded by some as on the fringes, take a look at recent pieces such as Bozkurt and Cohen’s (2019) article about craft and love in classic car restoration; Butler and Stoyanova Russell’s (2018) research on the precarious nature of work as a stand-up comedian; or French, Mortenson and Timming’s (2019) piece on the relationship between body art and wage rates.

## References

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