HISTORY – WORK, ORGANIZATIONS AND INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY (IP)

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ABSTRACT

Industrial Psychology is almost as old as Psychology itself. Psychology came about in 1879 in the laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt in Germany and William James at Harvard. Both of them were philosophers and physicians fascinated with the mind-body debate. The older discipline of philosophy could not alone deal with this debate, more room and new tools were needed, giving way to Psychology. Texts applying psychology to business first appeared in 1903; the first I/O psychology text appeared in 1910 (Landy, 1997). It is believed that four men developed the ‘tone’ and ‘structure’ of I/O psychology: Hugo Munsterberg, James Cattell, Walter Dill Scott, and Walter Bingham (Landy, 1997). This paper attempts to deal with the history, work, organization and industrial psychology within the context of the mind–body debate and further attempts to place and situate the subject matter within the ambit of the world of work. It however, must be realized that not all the issues that encompass this field can be enunciated and discussed in this paper.

Key Words: Psychology, Industrial, Organizations, Conflict, Functionalists, Intelligence, Approaches.

Moore and Hartmann (1931:4) stated that while psychology moved into the educational and clinical fields, “no psychologist who respected his position dared venture into the office or workshop”; and Hugo Munsterberg was the “first man to break the ice” It is speculated that Munsterberg was ‘forced’ to the field of I/O psychology because of conflict with his Harvard colleagues (Landy, 1997). His book, Psychology and Industrial Efficiency, is regarded as the first I/O psychology textbook, published first in 1910. Krumm (2001) states that formal training in Industrial Psychology began when the book was published, while Landy (1997:470) asserts: “This book was the bible for the application of differential psychology in industry… later publications… did not replace the structure Munsterberg has put in place; they built on it.” Munsterberg was primarily interested in personnel selection and use of psychological tests in industry.

James McKeen Cattell was, like Munsterberg, a controversial figure. He held a long position at Columbia University until he was fired for continuously challenging and ridiculing his colleagues.
and the president of Columbia (Landy, 1997). He owned and edited many psychological journals, in this way contributing to the growth of the field. His main contribution to the field of I/O Psychology was, besides his openness about speaking of its’ potential, his creation of the Psychological Corporation in 1921, still in existence today. His reputation and company of functionalists, applied psychologists and statisticians helped him “to establish the legitimacy of psychology applied to industry with other nonapplied psychologists. This was no small feat” (Landy, 1997: 473).

Landy (1997: 473) declares: “If I/O psychologists were searching for a role model, [Walter Dill] Scott would best fit the bill.” He worked on applying psychological principles to advertising and published books on the topic as well as essays on using these principles to solve problems in industry. When he opened The Scott Company he began the longstanding practice of consulting I/O psychologists in the business world (Krumm, 2001), and because of his wide recognition, had a major impact on creating public awareness and credibility of the field. Furthermore, Landy (1997: 474) asserts that were it not for Scott, the testing movement that began in WWI, and the subsequent growth of I/O psychology that was a result of it, would not have occurred, as Scott had “the vision, administrative skill, and scientific stature to pull it off.”

Walter Bingham’s contributions to the field are many and diverse. He started the Division of Applied Psychology – the first academic program in industrial psychology (Krumm, 2001). He headed the Personal Research Federation and directed The Psychological Corporation. He was instrumental in Scott’s and Yerkes’ development of the mental testing program. And, most importantly, he assumed a caretaker and spokesperson role and worked, till his death, to “achieve recognition and respectability for I/O psychology… because there were no ‘elder statesman’ left to fill that role” (Landy, 1997: 476). He publicly represented the field, in commissions and on radio, and made numerous contributions to magazines, newspapers and other areas on it’s’ topics.

My primary aim in this essay is to focus on Frederick W. Taylor’s Principles of Scientific Management and Elton Mayo’s Human Relations as two historical approaches that fundamentally altered the field of industrial psychology and has had lasting impact. I will briefly describe them but will largely concentrate on an analysis of these approaches, taking a more critical and apathetic stance. Although I take this stance, this does not mean that there are no defenses to the criticisms or that either approach has no worth.

Frederick Winslow Taylor was primarily interested in removing all inefficiency from the workplace, and he targeted his efforts toward the manual worker, aiming to increase their productivity and reduce their judgment. As a result he invented scientific management, which was based on four principles (Beder, 2000: 98):

1. The most efficient way of doing a task should be worked out scientifically.
2. Workers should be carefully selected and trained to do the work in this way.
3. Workers should do their work under the close supervision and control of management and be paid a bonus for doing exactly what they say.
(4) Management should take over the planning and thinking part of the work.

Taylor considered the manual worker to be stupid, slow and unintelligent, with little or no thinking abilities. The ‘thinking’ part of any job, he claimed, was for intelligent, educated people, and the workers’ job was to “follow instructions about what to do, how to do it and how much time to spend doing it” (Beder, 2000:98). His approach removed thought, skill, pride and enjoyment from the work process, breaking up tasks and leaving the worker with only the bare necessities. Beder (2000) states that Taylor “removed the more desirable and challenging parts of the work and made it monotonous, tedious and unremittingly boring” (p99). His justification was that the worker’s stupidity would ensure that they would not be troubled by the tediousness of their work. Critics were not convinced of Taylor’s argument or rationale: “We do not hesitate to say that Taylorism is inhuman. As far as possible it dehumanizes the man, for it endeavors to remove the only distinction that makes him better than a machine – his intelligence” (Beder, 2000: 99).

The effects of Taylorism on the worker were manifold. I focus on five: unemployment, exploitation, monotony, weakening of trade unions, and ‘over speeding’ (Beder, 2000; Backer, 1998; Krumm, 2001). Taylor argued that his approach required a smaller and cheaper workforce; skilled labor became disposable and cheap labor easily replaceable. This meant fewer jobs, and unemployment increased. As big tasks were broken into smaller tasks, individuality was removed from a worker’s job and tasks lacked variety as workers performed the same routine over and over. Taylor himself described this as “grinding monotony” (Beder, 2000: 99). Furthermore, management decided the time that was to be spent on each task; this reduced the worker’s discretion and sped up their work so they eventually performed as machines and it became impossible to soldier, or even to think. This, the emphasis on productivity and efficiency, and the piece-rate pay system made workers feel undervalued, dehumanized and exploited. Also, because everything was fixed by management - standard output, time, tasks, and working conditions - no room was left for trade unions to bargain. This essentially weakened the collective power of workers.

Taylor believed that scientific management would result in happier, more productive workers. On the contrary, his approach was found to be inconsistent with human needs. Because of his methods, workers became machines, devalued and paid less for their efforts, becoming increasingly alienated from their jobs. Marx’s conception of the alienation of the worker is thought to perfectly describe Taylor’s scientific management. He states that alienation is caused by the work being “external to the worker… he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself… does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is… mentally debased” (Beder, 2000: 96). Rose (1990: 55 – 56) adds: “Workers work because they have to; they work at the behest of others in a process they do not control… Work is made up… of obedience, self-denial, and deferred gratification.”

The Human Relations approach, now synonymous with the name Elton Mayo, was seen as an alternative to scientific management, and was essentially about being nice to workers on the assumptions that “a certain style… of supervision and of reaching decisions with subordinates… will greatly increase the morale and satisfaction of workers”, and that the “more satisfied a worker is (e.g., in his social relations with his work group) the harder he will work” (Beder, 2000:102). According to Isaacs, Bobat and Bradbury (2004: 15), this approach emphasized: industrial
democracy, employee participation that would increase motivation and decrease resistance, “fostering a greater sense of involvement and belonging for workers, and providing workers with opportunities to grow and develop” The approach was given recognition after the Hawthorn Studies in the 1920s. Although the studies observed a range of factors, I focus on Mayo’s idea of work groups.

Bendix and Fisher (1949) have argued that Mayo interpreted the findings of the Hawthorne studies with “certain looseness”, resulting in sloppiness and ambiguity. One ambiguity lies in direct relation to the studies. The work group observed in the Hawthorne experiments was a group of women kept in isolation from the rest of the factory. Bendix and Fisher (1949: 316) state: “The ‘sense of social function’ which was created in the experimental work group without much exercise of authority, is to him the model solution,” and Mayo believed that managers should adopt the approach of the work group because, amongst others, he believed groups had a large impact on workers’ motivation and productivity because of the social relationships that they formed within the groups. Besides the obvious question of whether factories and organizations can be based on a model of 5-6 girls, there are other inconsistencies in Mayo’s findings. The social function of the work group that was thought to be the reason for the increased output of the group was limited in the sense that an isolated work group could not be transferred or reproduced to a real factory or organization setting. In addition, it could be argued that it was the isolation itself that caused the individuals to attach to each other and serve that valuable social function, and not actually the context of the work group that caused it. Most importantly, this isolation, necessary for observation reasons, “Disguises the interdependence of group with factory and the factory with the economy as a whole”, and also obscures the fact that the worker, ultimately, “is subject to the authority of the employer” (Bendix & Fisher, 1949 316).

Mayo despised competitiveness, conflict and/or disagreement. In an organization, Mayo believed that “conflict is a ‘social disease’ and cooperation is ‘social health’” (Bendix and Fisher, 1949:314). A discrepancy lies with Mayo’s idea of social health. He believed (1949: 316) that when workers cooperate with management in order to fulfil managerial objectives such as increased efficiency and productivity, then it would increase their self-fulfilment. On the other hand, participation in trade union activities, for the worker’s own objectives, is not viewed as the same. In other words, the authors believe Mayo’s writings “are open to the interpretation that the cooperation of workers with management is ‘socially healthy’, while cooperation among workers for ends of their own is not.” In this way, human relations were not much different to scientific management – they both had the same aim, that of increasing the cooperation of employees with employers. Beder (2000:107) emphasizes this point: “Whilst the Human Relations literature called for cooperation and collaboration, it really meant cooperation of workers with management since it was the cooperation between workers involved in soldiering that they sought to end.” In other words, both human relations and scientific management were approaches siding with management; they took up the management perspective and attempted to use their research to increase cooperation of workers in order to attain the goals of management (Beder, 2000).

So, while human relations offered for the organization possibilities of productivity, it eventually became, according to Beder (2000: 105), “an important strategy in the battle to get the most out of
workers and to combat the unions.” The unions themselves were suspicious of it, and a critic at Ford was blatantly mocking, calling human relations ‘human engineering’ and stating that its’ “profit possibilities are fantastic. As a result of this discovery… employers are trooping to special classes… where they learn workers are not in the least bit mercenary, and… workers report to the plant each morning for love, affection, and small friendly attentions.” Rose (1990 58 argues that while human relations may have offered a departure from the way scientific management regarded the worker, in that he or she is no longer viewed a robot, but an individual and social person, “the rationale of production remains profit for the owners. And, whatever changes may have been made in work… workers do not manage themselves.” In the end, it is always the boss or manager exercising power and influence upon the workers, that is, there is always some form of domination present.

Human relations was criticised from many directions and in many ways (Rose, 1990). Socialists/radicals condemned its managerial orientation that validated the manipulation of the worker, the denial of inevitable conflict and the suppression of power differences. Psychologists and sociologists were not convinced by the research methodology and the lack of logic that its’ principles were based upon. As discussed above, there was no actual support for the propositions human relations made as findings of the Hawthorne studies could be interpreted in other ways. What’s more, its’ strategies were found to be fruitless: the worker could derive as much satisfaction from defiance as he could from cooperation; and, there was a discrepancy in the relationship between supervision and morale.

One may argue that human relations is just another type of scientific management, perhaps improved, but basically with the same aim in mind: to manipulate and exert power over workers, not as directly and inhumanely as scientific management did, but deceiving them in a more subtle and understated way (Isaacs et al., 2005). While scientific management used more direct manipulation, the non-authoritative supervisor advocated by human relations, told to listen and be sympathetic to workers, was human relation’s manipulative device, functioning, as Beder (2001: 108) states, “to control and to direct those human processes within the industrial structure… not adequately controlled by the other agencies of management.”. The increased productivity through the manipulation of workers that Taylor sought to achieve was strengthened by Mayo, who with his ‘cow sociology’ sought to “make the workers content and satisfied so they will produce more” (Beder, 2001: 102).

These new visions of work, like Scientific Management and Human Relations, all came about to make the workers satisfied so that they will be productive and profits will increase for the employer. According to Rose (1990 56), it was then that the idea of the subjectivity of the worker emerged, and the need to understand, regulate and explore this subjectivity became of utmost importance. In other words, the worker emerged as a ‘tool’ whose body and soul needed to be manipulated, fixed in space and time in order to be made efficient and productive, thereby increasing the profits of the organization. Psychology or more specifically, Industrial Psychology was one of the disciplines that decided this, increasing the need for the field. As Rose states, when management became “dependant upon an objective knowledge, a scientific expertise and a rational technology of the personal and interpersonal.” it was then that Industrial Psychology was born.
Rose (1990) also states: “The changes in the conception, organization and regulation of work and the worker… involve relations between many aspects of thought and practice” (p60). That is, the history of work and society that has impacted on the worker and the nature of work has changed with different movements and conceptions of work and the worker, for example, “the elaboration of an expertise of management [and] innovations… to incorporate the human resources of the enterprise” (Rose, 1990:60). Rose (1990) views all these changes from the subjectivity of the worker, and Industrial Psychology played a critical role in each change. Scientific Management and Human Relations are examples of different ways of thinking of and acting on the worker, the workplace and the economy. Thus, at the centre of every changing conception of work, whether Human Relations or Scientific Management, was the worker and the worker’s subjectivity, and it was Industrial Psychology that was at the centre of the battle for this subjectivity, the attempt to own the subjectivity of the worker.

Rose (1990:93) discusses the fundamental conflict that lies at the heart of work, which is regardless of the approach work takes. At the one end of this conflict stands the worker, trade unions and labour movement, seeking to boost wages, increase employment, reduce exploitation, gain better working hours and better conditions of employment. At the other end stand the bosses, managers and psychologists whose goal is to increase profit via productivity, keep wages low, and weaken worker resistance and the workers’ collective power. The question lies here: “What organization of work was consistent with both the imperatives of productivity and efficiency and the ethics of humanization, fairness, justice and democracy?”

Following from the above, one may ask: Was any approach to work consistent with meeting the ends of both the employer and the employee? Was Human Relations, the so-called alternative to Scientific Management, really as progressive as they say it was, or did it also serve to sustain exploitation? In other words, was Human Relations just another form of influence and manipulation, albeit a more subtle one?

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