

A Brief Review of the Use of the Term "Human Relations"

It likely is not surprising to know that "human relations" has been used in classic literature as a general reference to common interpersonal interactions. For example, in 1879 Robert Louis Stevenson published an essay titled, "Truth of Intercourse" in which he included the following statement: "it is easier to draw the outline of a mountain than the changing appearance of a face; and truth in human relations is of this more intangible and dubious order: hard to seize, harder to communicate." (Stevenson) In a 1917 translation of Leo Tolstoy's novel, *Anna Karenin*, a moment of realization for the central character was described with the following words: "This was not mere supposition, she saw it distinctly in the piercing light, which revealed to her now the meaning of life and human relations." (Tolstoy) And, in 1924, Virginia Woolf published an essay titled, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" in which she discussed the importance and process of character development in writing novels. Discussing social changes in the early 20th century, she wrote: "All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature." (Woolf)

The term entered popular culture as well. For example, ten years after Ms. Woolf's essay, a radio show called "The Court of Human Relations" began, and continued for five years, from January, 1934 to January, 1939. The show, which was broadcast first on NBC, then CBS, then NBC again, and finally on the Mutual network, was sponsored by *True Story* magazine. It featured "real-life dramas" based on cases described in the magazine. The audience was challenged to decide the verdict for each case. (Dunning)

Ms. Woolf's use of the term indicated that it had already broadened beyond interpersonal interactions to include intergroup relations. An early example in print is a piece from *The Social Democrat* in which "human relations" is synonymous with "social relations" (Quelch). Another example is Nasmyth's work published in 1916, titled *Social Progress and the Darwinian Theory: A Study of Force as a Factor in Human Relations*, in which he discussed what he understood to be social implications of Darwin's views. Nasmyth wrote: "the vast and complex co-operative partnerships of human association do not work towards efficiency by one of the parties...exercising compulsion or coercion upon the other, but by free co-operation based upon an intelligent recognition of mutual interest in such co-operation". (Nasmyth)

It is clear that by this time it was increasingly recognized that any consideration of intergroup relations must include examination of intergroup problems. An example of this recognition can be found in the plans that were part of the establishment of Regina College in Saskatchewan in 1912. This institution's first president included in the initial offerings a course in human relations "to raise awareness about the roots of social problems and the responsibility community members have to one another." (Cataldo)

Following World War I, awareness of the urgency for giving increased attention to such concerns grew. African-Americans in the military had been treated with much greater respect in Europe than that to which they were accustomed in the United States. Upon returning home they found that conditions had not changed. In January, 1919, a regional Commission on Interracial Relations was organized in Atlanta by an all-white group. That summer there were serious outbreaks of interracial violence in 26 different places around the country. By the next year the first African-American leaders had joined the commission. During the years that followed, the commission organized local and state committees. The name of the state committee in South Carolina was changed to the South Carolina Council on Human Relations in 1954. (Botsch)

At the same time that human relations increasingly included attention to the features and challenges of intergroup interaction, another emphasis emerged with the same label. In 1925, the work of Elton Mayo in Pennsylvania came to the attention of the dean of the Harvard Business School, who requested and obtained funding to create a position for Mayo in the study of human relations. From 1927 to 1932, Mayo and his associates conducted research in productivity at the Western Electric Hawthorne Plant near Chicago. They expected to find that improvements in working conditions would increase productivity. Instead, they were surprised to discover that productivity was most strongly affected by relational factors such as attention from supervisors and the influence of informal social networks. This led to a management approach that began to treat workers as distinctive, relational beings rather than mere resource components in a production structure. This view came to be called "human relations management" and continues to be influential today, though the term was replaced with "organizational behavior" in the 1970s. (Miller)

Meanwhile, the use of the term "human relations" to reference attention to intergroup interaction, particularly the challenges it includes, continued to grow. In 1936, a book was published with the title, *The American Way: A Study of Human Relations Among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews*. (Baker, et.al.) The next year the National Conference of Jews and Christians began to conduct annual "Institutes of Human Relations" at universities in various parts of the country. These yearly gatherings continued until

1943. (National Conference of Christians and Jews) Two years later, an article titled "Studies in Mathematical Theory of Human Relations" was published in the journal, *Psychometrika*. The article posited an abstract theory intended to represent interaction between different social classes, one of which controls the others. Equations were presented to predict violence between groups, including riots and war. (Rashevsky)

Not long after Harvard began its program of human relations study, Yale also initiated a new academic program using this label. In 1929, the school established The Institute of Human Relations as a means of researching and teaching medicine as a social science. The founders sought to bring together behavioral and biological sciences. Planned research included social organization; prevention of mental illness; the central nervous system; neurological, psychological, and biological factors in behavior; and local family, race, and demographic patterns. Published materials indicated that it was expected that understanding would be gained in societal problems, including the relationship between physical health and family income, mental stability and occupation, crime and the need for recreational facilities, child training and mental growth, and economic conditions that affect divorce. (Viseltear)

Less than ten years later, Yale's Institute of Human Relations had broadened its scope to include comprehensive study of cultural factors. In 1937 the institute began design of a classification system for organizing information about culture and behavior in societies. The scheme they created included 700 categories of human activity. These categories were used to organize data in their Human Relations Area Files, which include descriptions of 330 different ethnic, cultural, religious, and national groups. (HRAF)

Just five years later there was a notice published in the *Psychological Bulletin* announcing the establishment of The Council on Human Relations in New York City. The announcement stated that the council would be "devoted to the study of all those cultural factors...which, differing profoundly from one nation to another, are relevant to independent cooperation...." (Bateson)

The nation's cities were facing their own challenges regarding cultural factors that differed profoundly from one group to another. In 1943, for example, interracial violent clashes in Detroit led to the formation of the Mayor's Committee on Racial Relations in Chicago, which became the Mayor's Commission on Human Relations in 1945. (Mjagkij) Also in 1945, Hubert Humphrey was elected mayor of Minneapolis. The following year he established the Mayor's Council on Human Relations to investigate claims of discrimination. Within a short period this group sponsored educational programs on

racial relations, training for law enforcement, new anti-discrimination policy for veterans' housing, and ordinances to prohibit racially restrictive covenants by real estate brokers and banning distribution of hate literature. They also sponsored community surveys of attitudes and practices affecting intergroup relations. (Reichard)

During this same time period, longstanding inequities and emerging intergroup discord coalesced to produce tension and open hostility on the streets of Los Angeles. In 1943, these volatile elements exploded into what has been called the "Zoot Suit Riots". Among the many responses to these events was a citizens' group that came together and recommended the formation of a governmental agency to focus on intergroup relations. On January 11, 1944, the county's Board of Supervisors established the Joint Committee for Interracial Progress. This group was mandated to identify causes of racial tension and formulate all possible methods of removing them from our communities. Quickly the members of the committee became convinced that conditions leading to intergroup conflict were not limited to issues of race relations. In 1946, the group's name was changed to the Los Angeles County Committee on Human Relations. Its place in the county government structure was formalized with a new ordinance in 1958 that made the group an agency of county government. This ordinance also changed the name to Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations. (Los Angeles, DeGraaf, et.al.)

Currently, the term "human relations" continues to be used in all the ways referenced above. This includes its use to describe aspects of management and administration. It is applied to teacher education as well. For example, Nebraska requires its state-certified teachers to demonstrate six human relations skills, including:

- understanding of values, lifestyles, benefits, and history of pluralistic society,
- understanding of deleterious impact of prejudice, including sexism and racism, the ability to recognize and respond to prejudice, particularly as it may be expressed in instructional materials,
- the ability to apply human relations for the benefit of students,
- respect for personal dignity and human rights, and
- the capacity to relate effectively with persons from other groups. (Nebraska)

The term is employed to describe aims for students as well. For example, Hocking College in Ohio lists "Human Relations" among several success skills for its students. Such skills, according to the school, facilitate efficient interaction with others both in employment settings and everyday situations. Included in the list of skills are: trustworthy behavior, self-confidence and confidence in others, appropriate use of

humor, empathy, capacity to work well in groups, constructive conflict resolution, and capacity for ongoing self-evaluation. (Hocking)

Other occupations use the term “human relations” in similar ways. For example, the organization, Auto Careers of Arizona, lists what it calls human relations competencies considered important for productivity and coworker interaction. These skills include strong relationships with supervisors, mutually rewarding relationships with coworkers, positive attitude even in difficult work situations, high productivity, substantial contributions to team work, honesty regarding mistakes, capacity to change, listening, open communication, and willingness to overlook insignificant personal annoyances. (Auto Careers of Arizona)

Among government agencies human relations is used to describe concern for a wide variety of factors of interpersonal and intergroup interaction. For example, the Human Relations Commission of the City of Pasadena works to eliminate prejudice and discrimination, improve understanding among residents, and promote good will. (Pasadena) Azusa’s Human Relations Commission aims “to create and perpetuate inclusion, diversity, and civic peace.” (Azusa) The City of Los Angeles Human Relations Commission describes its concerns as being focused on Community Safety, Civic Engagement, and Intergroup Relations (City).

Two other noteworthy descriptions of the work of human relations that may be useful include a document produced by the federal government and one produced by an academic team. The federal Department of Justice has issued guidelines for human relations commissions. This document describes the aim of human relations as being the promotion of “ways in which people in communities learn to get along” and the protection of “equal opportunity for all.” It states that the practice of human relations assists communities to “become more harmonious, respectful, and cohesive.” (Wakabayashi) The City of Los Angeles Human Relations Commission commissioned a document by an academic team which included the following description of human relations: “an organized approach to intergroup relations, intergroup conflict resolution, and intergroup justice rooted firmly within the specific trajectories of race relations” (City).

If nothing else, this review makes it clear that Robert Louis Stevenson got it right nearly 135 years ago: the nature of human relations is “hard to seize, [and] harder to communicate.” (Stevenson)

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