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## **UNIT 8      HUMAN RELATIONS APPROACH**

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### **8.0    LEARNING OUTCOME**

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After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the meaning and emergence of human relation approach;
- understand the significance of Hawthorne studies;
- assess the findings and principal conclusions of Hawthorne studies;
- identify the differences between human relations and classical approach;  
and
- evaluate the human relations approach.

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## **8.1 INTRODUCTION**

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In the previous unit, we have discussed about the classical approach in which we try to understand the various streams of the classical approach such as Scientific Management, Administrative Management and Max Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy. The classical approach focused mostly on the structural aspects of the organisation. It has not paid much attention on the human aspects of the organisation. Subsequently, a few scholars devoted their attention to the human aspects of the organisation, thereby contributing to the emergence of the human relations approach.

The classical organisation theory has focused attention on the physiological and mechanical aspects of organisational functioning. These variables were tested in the field to increase the efficiency of the organisation but to the surprise of the researchers the positive aspects of these variables could not evoke a positive response in work behaviour in contributing to the increase in productivity. In this context, the researchers tried to find out the reasons for human behaviour at work. After the investigations they came to conclusion that the real cause of human behaviour was somewhat more than mere physiological and mechanical variables. Then they focused attention on the human beings in the organisation. This approach is referred to as the human view of organisation, or the human relations approach administrative theory.

In this unit we will try to discuss the meaning and emergence of human relations approach and various research studies conducted at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company, under the leadership of Elton Mayo.

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## **8.2 THE HUMAN RELATIONS MOVEMENT**

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The human relations movement emerged in the late 1930s as an outgrowth of scientific management. This movement came from number of sources: psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists who were critical of the narrow and limited concept of organisation held by the scholars who contributed to the classical theory. They were mainly against

the de-humanisation of organisation and against treating human beings as cogs in the machine.

However, a major change in organisation theory came after the results of the Hawthorne experiments, conducted by Elton Mayo and others during the 1920s. It made two significant contributions in organisation and management. These are:

- It posed a challenge to the physical or engineering approach to motivation;
- The first real assault was made on the purely structural, hierarchical approach to the organisation.

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### **8.3 ELTON MAYO AND HIS RESEARCH FINDINGS**

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George Elton Mayo is considered as one of the pioneers of the human relations approach to organisation. His main hypothesis is that relations between employers and employees should be humanistic, not mechanistic. Employees and workers deserve to be treated as individuals with dignity and self-respect rather than as factors of production or interchangeable elements of the production system. He looked upon industrial organisations as psychosocial systems with primary emphasis on human resources, their behaviour and welfare, needs and satisfactions, interactions and co-operation. He focussed his attention on the behaviour of the workers and their production capacity keeping in view physical, economic and psychological aspects. He called this approach a clinical method. He has published books and contributed a number of research articles.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Harvard Business School, under the leadership of Elton Mayo and his associates, conducted research at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company. This research marked a landmark in organisation theory. Described in detail in the landmark volume, 'Management and the Worker', Mayo's work research led to the first systematic conception of organisations as social systems, and destroyed some of the basic assumptions of the machine model. In all, four studies were undertaken

### **8.3.1 Early Experiment**

Before studies at the Hawthorne plant, Mayo undertook his first research in a textile mill, which came to be known as first enquiry. He started this research in a textile mill near Philadelphia in 1923. The employees of the mill were provided with all facilities, by the management, which was highly enlightened and humane. The mill was considered to be a model organisation. The general labour turnover (absenteeism) in all the departments was estimated to be approximately 5 per cent per annum while in the mule-spinning department the turnover was approximately 250 per cent. To cope up with this problem of high labour turnover, a number of incentives were provided to the employees in this department. Despite incentives, the labour turnover did not come down. Elton Mayo studied the problem of the mule-spinning department.

On the basis of the information collected through his study, Mayo diagnosed the problem as one of lack of adequate rest which was causing fatigue to the workers. He introduced rest periods. The scheme motivated the workers and the labour turnover almost came to an end. In addition, the production rose and the morale of the workers also improved. Encouraged by results, Mayo suggested a new formula to earn bonus under this scheme, if the workers were to produce more than a certain percentage, they would earn bonus proportionate to their extra production. With this scheme i.e. rest periods and new bonus the workers were highly motivated and happy.

In his first experiment Mayo concentrated his attention on fatigue, accidents, production levels, rest periods, working conditions, etc.

One of the important decisions the Management took was that control of rest periods was placed squarely in the hands of workers. This led to consultations among the workers. Social interaction was set in motion. A new awakening began. Workers began taking collective decisions. With this, the assumption of 'rabble hypothesis', which assumes 'mankind as a horde of unorganised individuals actuated by self-interest' was reversed.

## **Hawthorne Studies**

There was a strong feeling that there exists a clear-cut cause and effect relationship between the physical work, environment, the well-being and productivity of the worker. If proper ventilation, temperature, lighting, improvement in other physical working conditions, and wage incentive schemes, are provided to the workers, in turn they will produce more, was the opinion of the management. Taking this clue into consideration the National Research Council of the National Academy of Science under the leadership George Pennock decided to examine the relationship between illumination and the efficiency of the worker with a research programme at the Hawthorne Plant of Western Electric Company (WEC). The WEC employed 30,000 men and women. Here we will know more about this Western Electric Company the reason being why this has been selected for research. The WEC, located in Chicago, was engaged mainly in the manufacture of telephone apparatus. The employees of WEC were drawn from 60 nationalities, representing a typical cross section of American population. More over, within each of the national groups there was a wide variety of skills. These were the main factors which attracted the research academy to take up the research study.

### **8.3.2 Great Illumination Experiment (1924-27)**

In the first study, it was based on parallel observation of two groups of operatives, one a test group and the other control group, engaged in a task related to the production of electrical equipment took part in these tests. The study was designed to examine the level of production on the basis of varying levels of illumination. The control group remained with constant illumination of the level and the type with which the two groups started. Where as in the test group's room, experimental changes were introduced periodically. Then slowly the conditions of work were changed to mark the effect of this change on the output. The researchers observed the groups and kept accurate records of production. The research, spread over a period of two years, established that regardless of the level of illumination, production in both the control and experimental groups increased. The

researchers were surprised and abandoned the illumination theory and began manipulating wage payments, rest periods, duration of working hours. Instead of group incentives plan, an individual piece rate plan and provision of refreshments were introduced. All yielded a further rise in production. Surprised by the outcome, the research team decided to withdraw all the above-mentioned privileges and return to the conditions prevailing at the beginning of these experiments. For a while the output fell a little, but soon it rose to a point higher than at any other time. The research team was totally puzzled over the outcome. The illumination hypothesis was rejected, the relationship between incentive scheme, rest periods, etc., had no apparent relevance to the productivity per se. The research team came to conclusion that it might be due to the interest shown by the research team in the workers or to the incentive wage plan that was retained while several other privileges were withdrawn.

In 1927 Mayo was invited to unravel the problem through further studies. In these studies Mayo collaborated with Fritz Jules Roethlisberger. After interpreting the outcome of the Hawthorne studies Mayo was of opinion that the test room girls became a social unit and because of the increased attention of the research team to them, the unit developed a sense of participation in the project. Then they picked up the loose threads of the earlier WEC studies and found far more valuable insights into the industrial man. After eliminating various explanations they proposed the following two hypotheses to explain the failure of the original illumination project:

- **The first hypothesis:** the individual wage payment incentive had stimulated increase in the output.
- **The second hypothesis:** the changes in supervisory techniques had improved the attitudes and output.

### **Relay Assembly Test Room Experiment (1927-1932)**

To test the above two hypotheses, two new groups were formed. They were placed in a special test room, apart from all the other workers. The group were placed on an

individual incentive plan on a piecework basis. Initially the total output went up and after sometime it remained constant. The second group, although they were placed on individual incentive plan, was experimented with variations in rest periods and duration of work. Changes in the output were recorded.

In this group there was an average rise of output in the production over a period of 14 months. The research team concluded that the first hypothesis was not confirmed since it was not wages, but something else that led to greater output in the both groups.

To test the second hypothesis, the atmosphere was made more relaxed and congenial. The girls were allowed to interact freely with fellow workers and supervisors. Supervisors were told to behave more as democratic oriented supervisors. The other important factor was that managerial practices were modified. Before any change or move, the workers were consulted and advised about changes, their suggestions were also considered sympathetically. The workers responded favourably to the improved style of supervision. This had led to a feeling that they were a team of individuals, not cogs in a machine, allowed the workers to feel free to air their problems and they established new interpersonal contacts with their fellow workers and supervisions. Such work satisfaction led everyone to feel more valued and responsible for his or her performance and that of the group as a whole. The production increased when work groups felt that they were important and their efforts were meaningful.

Mayo felt that work satisfaction depends to a large extent on the informal social pattern of the working group. He said that change in the style of supervision improved the morale of worker, which in turn increased production. This link between supervision, morale and productivity became the corner stone of the human relations

### **8.3.3 Human Attitudes and Sentiments (1928-31)**

The next study of Mayo and his team, conducted during 1928-31, was on human attitudes and sentiments. The workers were given an opportunity to come out and express freely

and frankly about their likes and dislikes on the programmes and policies of the management, working conditions, how they were treated by their boss, etc. They interviewed over 20,000 workers, each one given an adequate time to comment or complain on his or her own thoughts on any aspect of employment or condition. Later, these complaints were analysed and it was found that there was no correlation between the nature of complaints and the facts. Although no reforms were introduced, the workers thought that in view of their complaints the working conditions were improved. They also felt that the wages were better although the wage scale remained at the same level. It appeared that there was an opportunity to 'let off steam' which made the workers feel better even though there was no material change in the environment.

The study team of Mayo and Roethlisberger identified the following two aspects:

- First, the workers appreciated the method of collecting the information on the problems of the company from them. They thought they had valuable comments to offer and felt elated on the feeling that they had an equal status with management. They also realised that they were allowed to express themselves freely and felt satisfied with it. They also entertained a feeling that the conditions in the environment were changed to the better although no such change took place.
- Second, there was a change in the attitude of the supervisors because they realised that the research team closely observed their methods of supervision and the subordinates were allowed to comment freely about their supervisors.

Mayo and his team finally led to the conclusion that the explanation for these unexpected findings lay in the informal social forces at work in the organisation. They became convinced that the behaviour of workers cannot be separated from their feelings and sentiments, which are the products of the individual's personal history and his or her social situation in the organisation. Therefore, to explain behaviour in the workplace, it was necessary to move beyond the limited idea that organisation was simply an economic



and technological structure; the organisation was also to be seen as a **social structure**, “an intricate web of human relations bound together by a system of sentiments”.

#### **8.3.4 Social Organisation (1931-32)**

This was the last study undertaken by Elton Mayo and his team in Western Electric Company to observe a group of workers performing a task in a natural setting. It is a detailed study of a social organisation and the operation of intra-group forces within a work group. Three groups of workmen whose work was inter-related were chosen for observation. It was known as ‘The Bank Wiring Experiment’. In this experiment, wages were paid on the basis of a group incentive plan, and each member got his share on the basis of the total output of the group. The research team found that the workers evolved its own norm of standard output, which was lower than the management target. The group, according to its standard plan, did not allow its members to increase or decrease the output. Although they were capable of producing more, the output was held down to maintain uniform rate of output. The work group developed a highly integrated social structure and used informal pressure to set right the deviant members. The following code of conduct was maintained for their group solidarity:

- One should not turn out too much work. If one does he is a ‘**rate buster**’.
- One should not turn out too little work. If one does he is a ‘**chesler**’.
- One should not tell a supervisor anything negative about an associate. If one does he is a ‘**squealer**’.
- One should not attempt to maintain social distance or act officious. If one is an inspector, for example, he should not act like one.

After the study Mayo and his team identified the following views of the workers:

- The workers felt that the behaviour of the research team had nothing to do with the management or general economic conditions of the plant.

- The workers viewed the interference of the extra departmental personnel, such as ‘efficiency men’ and other ‘technologists’ as disturbance.
- They thought that the experts follow the logic of efficiency with a constraint on their group activity.
- The supervisors as a separate category represented authority, to discipline the workers.
- The logic of efficiency did not go well with the logic of sentiments, which had become the cornerstone of ‘social system’.

The Mayo and his team concluded that:

- One should not miss the human aspect of organisations, while emphasising technical and economic aspects of the industries.
- The Hawthorne experience suggested a new mix of managerial skills. In addition to technical skills, the management should handle human situations, motivate, lead and communicate with the workers.
- They also felt that overemphasis on the technical progress and material life at the expense of social and human life was not good.
- The concept of authority should be based on social skills in securing cooperation rather than expertise.

Harmony between the informal social system and the formal organisation is the key concept in Mayo’s approach to human relations. An internal equilibrium has to be established and maintained in the organisation. The logic of organisation behaviour is primarily non-rational in economic terms; it is more social and psychological in its roots. Accordingly, management would have to develop diagnostic skills and the capacity to deal effectively with the dynamics of informal groups and the sentiments of the workers.

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#### **8.4 ABSENTEEISM IN THE INDUSTRIES**

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During the Second World War, The turnover of labour in most of the industries in USA was more than 70 per cent and absenteeism was chronic. Alarmed at this state of affairs, the managements of three industries requested Mayo to study the problem of heavy turnover and unjustified absenteeism in the industries and suggest remedial measures. The research began in 1943.

Mayo and his research team found that in one industry in which the turnover was minimum and the absenteeism was negligible, the management was found to have introduced group wage scheme and made it clear that workers would earn group wage without any shortfall in any shift in a day. In the event of any shortfall in any shift, the cut in the wages was uniformly applied. Therefore, all the workers became alert and formed into a group under the leadership of a natural leader who devoted time and energy in consolidating group solidarity. Now it was the turn of the employees to ensure high productivity and smooth functioning of the industry. Mayo found out how an informal group demonstrated its strength and capacity in raising the level of production by cooperating with the management. In the present case, the positive response was possible because the supervisor and his assistants were too busy otherwise and rarely paid any visit to the department. All the work was under the charge of a man who had no official standing and this person emerged as a natural leader of the team. In the case of the other two factories there were neither informal groups nor natural leaders to knit the workers into a team. They were unable to form a team as they were not given an opportunity to form informal teams. Hence, there was heavy turnover and absenteeism of the labour in the production centres of the industries concerned, resulting in very low productivity.

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## **8.5 HAWTHORNE STUDIES/EXPERIMENTS: PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS**

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- The results of the Hawthorne experiments and subsequent studies led to the discovery of the informal organisation and to the inference that the social and psychological factors at work place are the major determinants of workers' satisfaction and organisational output. However, Fritz Roethlisberger, the principal research associate of Mayo, arrived at different conclusion. According

to him the Hawthorne studies reveal that the primary group had as much, if not greater, impact upon productivity as the formally physical surroundings and economic benefits derived from the job.

- Nigro and Nigro remark that, it was upon the foundations laid by discoveries of Mayo's team that the human relations schools or movement of later years was constructed. Negro et al continue: "On the applied level, the movement's objectives were to provide management with social and psychological insights needed to diagnose problems rooted in the informal organisation and to devise the appropriate interventions". Great emphasis was thus placed on the development of human relations skills, which would help supervisors to effectively bridge the gap between the informal and formal organisations.

Based on the Hawthorne studies, scholars have identified the following concepts:

- **Social Norms:** The level of organisational effectiveness is determined by social norms. Principles of administration such as division of work or the physiological capability of the worker are not critical factors in productivity.
- **The Group:** Group standards are a major influence on the behaviour of individuals in organisations; workers do not act or react as individuals, but they do as members of the group. Groups set standards of productivity and enforce them upon all members. The group also provides a shield against executive reprisals. In both ways, the informal group acts as a restraint on executive power.
- **Rewards and Sanctions:** Instead of economic incentives, non-economic rewards such as social rewards and group sanctions are the strong job motivators. They play significant role in guiding the behaviour of the workers.
- **Supervision:** Supervision is most effective when the supervisors involve and consult the group and its informal leaders in order to ensure their acceptance of

organisational objectives. Human relations scholars believe that effective communication, supplemented by a willingness to allow workers to participate in decision-making, is the key to effective supervision.

- **Democratic Administration:** Workers achieve the highest level of effectiveness when they are allowed to manage their own affairs without bossism from their formal supervisors.

From the various studies conducted by the human relations school the following essentials of theory emerge:

- Workers are basically social beings and they must first be understood as people if they are to be understood as organisation members. Their attitudes and effectiveness are conditioned by social demands from both inside and outside the work situation.
- Work is a group activity. Workers may react to management, the organisation, and work itself as members of groups of informal organisations rather than as individuals.
- The need for recognition, security and sense of belonging is more important in determining a worker's morale and productivity than the physical ability or stamina and the physical conditions under which he/she works. In other words, productivity is strongly affected by social and psychological factors, not simply by conditions of work.
- Non-economic factors, i.e. social rewards and sanctions are significant determinants of worker's motivation and their level of job satisfaction. Economic incentives, by contrast, are less powerful as motivators on the job.

- Informal groups (i.e., natural groupings of the people in the work situation) within the work plant exercise strong social controls over the work habits and attitudes of the individual worker. Group standards strongly influence the behaviour of individuals in organisations.
- The most effective style of supervision is created when the managers consult the work groups and their informal leaders before introducing every change in the work schedule. Subsequent theorists of the human relations school have called this participative management. This style of management allows the workers to influence decisions that affect them and leads to the highest level of effectiveness on the part of the workers. It not only prevents the alienation of workers, but also helps to win their acceptance of organisational goals.

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## **8.6 THE HUMAN RELATIONS VS. THE CLASSICAL APPROACHES**

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While the human relations writers, like the Scientific Management theorists, acknowledge the importance of ‘management’ in production, they differ from them in their basic approach to the organisation which they characterise as a social system consisting of individuals, informal groups and inter-group relationships, in addition to the formal structure. The Human Relations theory is called the ‘neo-classical theory’ because it accepts efficiency and productivity as the legitimate values of organisation, although it relies on a different set of techniques to achieve these values. Both the classical and human relations theories are alike in their objectives but differ in the approaches adopted to accomplish those objectives. The human relationists seek to maximise the values of efficiency and productivity by eliminating dehumanisation approach of the classical approach. The human relations theory differs from the classical theory in the following respects:

- The classical theory focuses on structure, order, the formal organisation, economic factors and rationality. The human relations theory identifies the informal group as a major explanation of the behaviour in the organisation.

- The classical theory emphasises the formal organisation structure consisting of jobs and job descriptions as spelled out in charts and manuals. In contrast, the human relations theory is concerned with the informal organisation, i.e., the social relationships of individual workers within the organisation.
- The classical theory takes the atomistic view of man and considers workers as various cogs in a machine. On the contrary, the human relations theory considers workers essentially as social beings who react to management, organisation and work itself as members of groups rather than as individuals.
- In determining worker's motivation economic rewards and physical conditions of work are regarded as important factors by the classical theorists. In contrast to this, the social-psychological rewards and group sanctions are considered by the human-relationists as important motivators to work.
- The classical theory emphasises the authoritarian style of supervision, while the human relations theory lays emphasis on democratic type of supervision.

The preceding discussion clearly shows that the classical approach and human relations approach have taken two views of organisations. If classical theory has underemphasised the importance of people, the human relations theory. Neither of the approaches is wholly right, although each is partially right. In reality, an organisation is both a formal structure and informal relations among employees. These two aspects of an organisation are not contradictory but allied to each other. Informal organisations do exist in all formal organisations and are not always harmful; they may facilitate teamwork and collaboration. The human relations theorists state that if the aims of management are in line with group norms, harmony and high productivity have a better chance. But, if the aims and methods of management are in conflict with that of group, management aims are likely to suffer. Therefore, it would be in the broader interests of management to

recognise the informal social system and its dynamics and develop harmony between the formal and informal organisation to enhance effectiveness and promote efficiency.

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## **8.7 EVALUATION OF THE HUMAN RELATIONS APPROACH**

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Although human relations approach is an improvement over the classical approach, it is not free from certain criticisms levelled against it. The more important ones are noted here.

- The human relationists are accused of being as preoccupied with efficiency as the classical theorists. Both wanted to increase material wealth through greater productivity. The human relationists did not go far enough to assert that the ultimate objective of an organisation is to ensure the employee happiness.
- Mayo and his team tried to substitute human relations-oriented supervisors for union representatives. The criticism is, therefore, about not understanding the role of unions in a free society. Scholars like Loren Baritz and others criticise 'Mayoists' as anti-union and pro-management. Marxist-oriented writers have branded the Hawthorne researchers as 'cow sociologists'. They consider that a conflict and tension-free organisational situation is utopian.
- In its emphasis on informal relations and harmony, the human relations theory almost totally ignored the roles of formal structure, technology and conflict in influencing the behaviour of workers. Hence, it is also one-sided. Thus, it does not adequately explain the multifaceted organisational behaviour and organisational relationships.
- The human relations theory has overdrawn the contrast between the formal and informal organisation and does not attempt to synthesise these two aspects of an organisation to an adequate extent.
- Peter F. Drucker criticises human relationists for their lack of awareness of the economic dimension. He feels that they neglect the nature of work and instead focus a great deal on inter-personal relations.



- The research studies of human relations school at the Hawthorne plant covered the behaviour of small groups only and did not deal adequately with the entire organisation. Carey criticises group selected the Hawthorne experiments on methodological grounds. He calls the small groups of ‘cooperative girls’ (samples of five and six) as an inadequate and unreliable sample to make sweeping generalisations. He is also of the opinion that the data only supports the old view about the importance of monetary incentives, leadership and discipline as motivating factors for better performance. His overall criticism is that the Hawthorne investigations lack a scientific base.

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## **8.8 CONCLUSION**

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In spite of its shortcomings, Mayo’s human relations approach marked a major turning point in the history of administrative theory and practice. According to Bertram M. Gross, Mayo made an attempt to understand the problem of the workers from an angle different from that of the traditional approach of the scientific management era. Indeed, it is regarded as a major development in the American administrative thought of the period, 1900-1939. It has a great deal of impact initially on business administration, but also in the administrative system of state, particularly in the case of bureaucracy.

Mayo’s findings have profoundly changed the nature of organisation theory. His most important finding is to identify the roots of work satisfaction as non-economic and to connect it with the interest taken in a worker’s performance. These findings reverse Taylor’s emphasis on the incentive of monetary rewards and disprove the rigid Taylorist philosophy of self-interest of the worker.

The Hawthorne studies developed a more realistic model of human nature. As a consequence, human beings are recognised as social entities and an influential input into organisational performance. Human beings are regarded as key contributors to organisational efficiency, productivity, and to its goal attainment and hence they have a respectful place in the organisation.

An important discovery of Mayo and his team is the concept of proper management-workers communication, especially between the lower rungs of the organisation and the higher levels. Communication with the leaders of the informal groups is also considered equally important.

Both Taylorism and the Human Relations schools were a response to the changing needs and problems of an industrial society, albeit with different theoretical frameworks. Taylorism emerged during the heyday of the individual ethic, according to which the individual, acting intelligently in pursuit of his own self-interest, would eventually contribute the most to the good of the group. This ethic has never been completely rejected, but with the human relationalists it coexists with a social ethic that “affirms the value of human collaboration and social solidarity”. As William G. Scott notes, “The conditions existing in pre – 20<sup>th</sup> century America caused an ethic of individualism to make sense for management. Equally, the changing conditions in 20<sup>th</sup> century America created a climate in which the social ethic has progressively enlarged its role in management philosophy”. Peter Drucker observed in 1973 that management practice did not reflect the key approaches of the human relations school led by Elton Mayo.

But, to the extent to which it has been accepted and acted upon the human relations approach becomes an explicit central facet of organisational theory and behaviour.

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## 8.9 KEY CONCEPTS

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**Case Study:** A research design that focuses upon an in-depth analysis of a single subject. It is particularly useful for the understanding of a dynamic processes over time.

**Clinical Method:** A variety of research and diagnostic techniques such as interviews, life histories, testing projective techniques and case observation.

**Industrial Revolution:** A very general term that refers to a society’s change from an agrarian to an industrial economy. The Industrial Revolution of the Western world is considered to have begun in England in the eighteenth century.

**Let-off Steam:** Express one's complaints/emotional concerns openly.

**Turnover:** The rate at which employees leave an organisation – usually expressed as a percentage of all workers who leave, resign or are fired in a specified period.

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## 8.10 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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## 8.11 ACTIVITIES

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1. Identify the measures taken by your organisation towards the human relations.
2. Do you envisage in term of the future work life, does participative organisation seems appropriate? Why or why not.