



Organizational Psychology's Golden Age, 1940–1970

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss organizational psychology in the mid-twentieth century Britain. This chapter explores why organizational psychology flourished between 1940 and 1970 by tracing the influence of war, social, and cultural factors that made organizations more receptive to the efforts of psychologists to extend their expertise and professionalize the field. It focuses on the work of psychologists for the British military and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which was the most notable group applying psychological theories and methods to the study of organizations in Britain at the time.

Keywords

British management · Great Britain · Military · Selection · Leadership · Tavistock Institute

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Introduction

Was the period from 1940 to 1970 a “golden age” for organizational psychology? There was certainly a boom in the sort of work we would identify as organizational psychology during this era, and many see this period as a time when significant developments took place (Featherman and Vinovskis 2001; House 2008). But why? What was it about this form of management that was so appealing at the time?

This time was a time of “Big Science,” characterized by large-scale projects, often supported by governments or international agencies, with research conducted by teams that often bringing together different forms of scientific expertise (Dennis 2015). Organizational psychology shares some of these characteristics (House 2008). The people who have worked and who currently work in the field of organizational psychology consider that they approach the problems and questions of organizations scientifically: Viteles, considered one of the earliest organizational psychologists, was quoted as saying “If it isn’t scientific, it’s not good practice, and if it isn’t practical, it’s not good science” (Katzell and Austin 1992). This chapter thus approaches the history of organizational psychology from a history of science perspective.

Analyzing the development of the field in terms of theories, methods, and professionalization enables us to trace the problems and opportunities that gave rise to new ways of managing people. Looking at who engaged with organizational psychology (whether as practitioners, patrons, workers and unions, and funders), and why, demonstrates what people hoped to get from the application of these methods. Understanding what organizational psychology consisted of, and the structures and cultures within which it operated, helps us to make sense of what made this approach particularly appealing, leading to a seeming “golden age.”

What Is Organizational Psychology?

Organizational psychology, simply defined, is “psychology applied to work” (Takooshian 2012). It encompasses topics such as employee selection, job analysis, motivation and morale, leadership, and relations between and within groups and teams. It was initially known as industrial psychology in many places because work focused on factories before the growth of service work and corporations in the postwar period.

The term organizational or industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology is more commonly used in America than elsewhere; in the UK, the field came to be known as occupational psychology, and Peter Warr observes that in continental Europe, the term work psychology is traditionally used (Warr 2014). The terms psychotechnics and applied psychology have also been applied to the same set of concepts and methods. To keep things simple, though, this chapter will refer to organizational psychology.

As this list of terms and places indicates, there is no single history of organizational psychology. It has proceeded with varying focuses and been received

differently in different times and places. The history of psychology in American management is discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume (► Chap. 24, “Organizational Psychology and the Rise of Human Resource Management” by J. Muldoon) and has been written about in many other places: most histories of organizational psychology give accounts of organizational psychology in America (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2016), or “the United States and abroad,” as illustrated by the US-focused summaries in timelines (Jex 2002; Takooshian 2012; Koppes Bryan 2012).

Recent histories of organizational psychology discuss the reception and growth of the field other parts of the world, and many recent national histories of psychology discuss organizational psychology in a local context. Accounts that center upon countries such as Canada, India, Australia, and New Zealand note significant Anglo-American influence on the development of ideas and practices from the Second World War onwards (Webster 1988; Bhawuk 2008; Haig and Marie 2012; Nixon and Taft 2013; Warr 2014; Carpintero 2017). Moreover, while some have suggested that American psychology was “parochial” until relatively recently (Triandis 1994 as cited in Warr, p. 82), recent historical research indicates that organizational psychology was shaped by new ideas and practices from Britain during the Second World War and postwar era (Burnes and Cooke 2013; Warr 2014; White 2016). This chapter thus covers the history of organizational psychology in the UK, which offers lessons in its own right and will enable the reader to trace its influence in other places in future reading and research.

The Early Years: Applied Psychology Before the Second World War

The application of psychological analysis and methods to the workplace has a long history. Some histories of organizational psychology locate the roots of the field in the studies of individual differences arising from Darwin and Galton’s work and the studies of fatigue that were influenced by the concept of entropy and the laws of thermodynamics (Rabinbach 1992; Kozłowski 2012; Vinchur 2018). Carpintero’s history of organizational psychology situates the foundations of organizational psychology in the scientific study of work organizations in the late nineteenth century (Carpintero 2017). Vinchur’s account of the early years covers the period from the late 1800s to the early 1930s, and likewise, the chapter in Koppes’ book discusses influential figures such as Walter Dill Scott, Hugo Münsterberg, and Walter Van Dyke Bingham, whose work took place before the 1930s (Koppes 2014; Vinchur 2018). In 1932, in what is often considered the first organizational psychology textbook, Morris S. Viteles wrote about the history of the field. He discussed factors such as social trends, an economic emphasis on efficiency in industry, and the growth of interest in experiments and individual differences that gave rise to the field (Viteles 1932).

Specific focuses within organizational psychology have had their roots traced back to the first half of the twentieth century. In terms of research into individual

differences, one of the largest-scale early applications was that of the Alpha and Beta tests administered by Robert Yerkes and colleagues during the First World War (Carson 1993; Koppes Bryan 2012; Carpintero 2017). The Hawthorne Studies into attitudes and motivations of workers took place in the 1920s and early 1930s, and have been mythologized in many histories of management since then (Gillespie 1993; Gale 2004). They are one of the best-known examples of organizational psychology research and are discussed elsewhere in this volume (► Chap. 23, “Spontaneity is the Spice of Management: Elton Mayo’s Hunt for Cooperation” in the chapter by J. Muldoon).

In Britain, notable efforts to apply psychology to organizations included studies of morale and employee attitudes at the Cadbury and Rowntree works, led by psychologists such as Charles Myers, who founded the National Institute of Industrial Psychology in 1921 (Bunn 2001). The Industrial Fatigue Research Board was created in 1918 and followed by the Industrial Health Research Board. Figures such as Lyndall Urwick, Frank Watts, and Clarence Northcott all researched and published works in the field of human relations before the Second World War (Guillén 1994; Ussishkin 2011; Weatherburn 2019).

So, with these developments taking place in the first half of the twentieth century, why might the “golden age” of organizational psychology span the 1940s–1970s? Koppes explains that by the end of the 1930s, “psychologists had developed the basic infrastructure for applications in business and industry” and that “the groundwork had been laid for greater concern with employees’ place in the workplace” (Koppes 2014, p. 30). The period that followed was one in which psychologists built upon these foundations, staking their claims to expertise and increasing the remit of their field.

Organizational Psychology at War

The Second World War provided opportunities to make significant inroads in this regard. As the nation mobilized to engage in total war, British psychologists sought new outlets for their expertise. Though there was little demand for psychologists’ services initially, it was not long before the success of German Blitzkrieg caused alarm and a sense that, for Britain to survive, it would need to ensure that its human resources were used in the most efficient possible way (1942). There was a sense that, during the First World War, many technically able men and potential leaders had wasted their time or been killed while in roles that did not utilize their skills (Bruton 2013; ► Chap. 24, “Organizational Psychology and the Rise of Human Resource Management” by J. Muldoon, this volume) and there was a fear that this was beginning to happen again in the Second World War. *The Times* published an article decrying that “weapons and equipment are wasted [because] sufficient corresponding attention has not been paid to the best methods of attaining an equal standard in the human component of the Army” (1941) and William Beveridge was charged with investigating how efficiently the nation was deploying its people.

Influential up-and-coming leaders in the British military, such as Sir Ronald Adam, sought out experts to help with efficiency and also to enable them to say that they were doing something to remedy shortcomings (Crang 2000; French 2001; Field 2011a). In this context, psychologists from different backgrounds justified their entry into new spheres of work. Initially, their work concentrated on selection, testing, and dealing with problem individuals.

Selection in the Services

Frederick Bartlett headed the psychology program at the University of Cambridge, and he and his staff were chosen to assist the most prestigious of the forces, the Royal Air Force (RAF), with solving various personnel problems such as fatigue, personnel selection, and training. Bartlett's prewar work had been predominantly laboratory-based, testing for cognition and perception. This made his group well-suited to the task of assessing whether potential airmen would be capable of performing specific tasks required of them under specific circumstances, such as under the influence of amphetamines. In 1941, Bartlett resigned after the Air Ministry demanded proof of the military usefulness of his work, which he took as a personal insult. He was replaced by Edward Alexander Bott, who came from Canada to lead psychological research in the RAF (English 1992).

Psychologists from the NIIP such as Alec Rodger and J.G.W. Davies became consultants for the British Navy and built upon their prewar work in career counseling and aptitude-testing by creating tests to allocate servicemen and women to appropriate roles (Vernon and Parry 1949). A general selection scheme based on their methods was rolled out in the Army too, where a Directorate for the Selection of Personnel was created to oversee testing for specific capabilities for qualities such as intelligence, agility, following instructions, mechanical, mathematical, and verbal aptitude (1944; Crang 1999). Specific tests were devised for roles such as Morse-code operators, where the ability to perceive the differences between sounds was vitally important. This form of selection, which focused on the rank-and-file soldier and allocating people to jobs they might not have tried before, built on prewar work, where the NIIP had been involved in selecting machine-operators based on their dexterity and mechanical aptitude and helping school-leavers who did not yet have workplace experience.

Psychological methods for selecting people for specific technical roles were swiftly put into place but one significant personnel challenge to the British military remained well into 1942: the selection of officers. The popular perception was that Army officers were chosen from those who wore the correct "old school tie" and had attended elite private schools. The supply of competent men from this source was running low and capable men from other backgrounds were overlooked or had been put off from applying for commissions. The scientific approach of psychology offered hopes of a way to remedy this, promising to select based on potential and merit rather than class.

Most British psychologists were busy selecting rank-and-file soldiers, sailors, and airmen though; they had no tests ready to deploy to measure leadership ability and reputations to lose (Vernon and Parry 1949; Ahrenfeldt 1958). So remarkably, it was psychiatrists who played a significant role in investigating what made someone “officer material.” Psychiatrists who had specialized in maladjustment investigated “problem” officers who were failing to perform as expected in leadership roles. Many of the people conducting this work were affiliated with the Tavistock Clinic, such as John Bowlby and Wilfred Bion. They began by making suggestions about managing or reallocating these difficult cases before moving on to test new methods for selecting potential leaders to avoid ill-suited people being chosen in the first place (Thalassis 2004; White 2016). Psychologists such as Eric Trist, Isabel Menzies Lyth, and Harold Bridger did play a key role though, developing tests specially adapted to select the most intelligent people rather than merely filter out those at the bottom of the scale.

The work of the Army’s psychological staff resulted in the creation of War Office Selection Boards (WOSBs), which featured intelligence tests, personality “pointer” tests, group tasks, and discussions (which became known as Leaderless Group tests) (Vinden 1977; Crang 2000; White 2016). WOSBs were tested by being used on people about to complete officer training, whose “officer potential” had already been established by Army leadership to use as a yardstick by which to measure the new methods, which they considered a success because they met expectations about what made a good officer. Similarly, Bartlett noted that the RAF liked the tests he provided them because they achieved the same results as were already being achieved but “in less time and with less difficulty” (Bartlett 1942). The candidates themselves also approved of WOSBs; they felt they received useful advice on their abilities and potential even if they did not pass.

With War Office approval following the successful pilot, the WOSBs scheme very rapidly expanded, with boards established around the UK for men and for women, and then around the world to select leaders in British Army units positioned overseas. Bott adopted similar selection methods in the RAF, and Boards were set up for what were seen to be special cases in the Army, such as selecting young men to attend accelerated university courses that would lead to commission on graduation, selecting artillery officers, and selecting repatriated prisoners of war (POWs) who might be able to return to service (White 2016).

Planning for Demobilization

Though its application was popular with Army modernizers, the press, and the common soldier, some people had concerns about the increasing influence of organizational psychology. The psychological basis selection that made it an appealing solution to the Army’s problems led to criticism from other psychologists, who questioned the WOSBs’ scientific validity and the competence of the staff administering them (Vernon and Parry 1949; Ungerson 1950; Field 2011b). However, the same critics tended to acknowledge that the WOSBs were tremendously successful

in changing perceptions of the organization, helping the Army to appear more modern and forward-thinking, and that they solved the most pressing “officer problem” by significantly increasing the number and quality of officer candidates available.

If psychologists were concerned about what applied psychology might do to the reputation of their discipline, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was aghast at the thought of what psychologists might be doing to his armed forces. He initiated an Expert Committee on the Work of Psychologists and Psychiatrists to investigate their work, with the hopes that it would prevent them from asking inappropriate or probing questions. Ronald Adam, who sought to modernize the British forces, saw to it that people amenable to social science methods such as Stafford Cripps participated, and soon the committee vindicated the psychologists work. The committee then began to look to future applications of psychology. They divided the spoils of war by agreeing that laboratory studies were Bartlett's domain, that any future technical selection and counselling work should be the remit of the NIIP psychologists and that selecting managers was best suited to the Army psychologists and psychiatrists.

Only 6 months after the Expert committee was established, representatives from the Ministry of Labour and the Civil Service were being invited to see the new techniques of selection in action and appreciate the potential value of psychology to employers. Various influential figures were also invited from companies such as Unilever. The minutes of this committee offer insight into the way that organizational psychologists explained and justified their practices, carved out niches for their work, and established connections with organization leaders who could employ them and sustain them in their new roles after the war (White 2016).

Psychologists had the ideal opportunity to demonstrate their ability to apply their military experience on demobilization via their work with returning POWs. They argued that these men would need assistance in returning to democratic society and that society would need assistance in accepting them back. The military was already experiencing difficulties with some returning POWs, and psychologists warned heads of industry that returning men who did not adjust well would be difficult employees to manage who could potentially direct their dissatisfaction into revolutionary fervor or disruptive, criminal acts. The Army sanctioned the creation of a psychological scheme to manage the POWs' return, and numerous industries agreed to participate. The resulting collaboration was Civil Resettlement Units (CRUs), which brought together experts and practices from selection, social work, counselling, and career guidance. Like the Expert Committee, the CRUs functioned as a bridge to take organizational psychology beyond the military and into peacetime contexts.

As the variety and scale of military psychology projects indicate, war acted as a turning point for psychologists and enabled them to apply their ideas not just on a new scale but also in new ways. Military historians have described the influx of psychological experts into the Second World War British military as a move on the part of new leaders looking to modernize the organizations, especially in the case of the Army (Crang 2000; French 2001; Field 2011a). What is often overlooked is why

the military opted for psychologists rather than other forms of expertise, and why psychologists might want to do this sort of work. Psychologists offered the appearance of a scientific new approach, even when held to produce the same sort of results as older systems, just on a different scale. They proved their practical credentials by working with and within large organizations to develop large-scale programs that built on existing methods and expertise. Hundreds of thousands of men and women underwent psychological testing to be allocated to a suitable role. Even just to operate the various schemes, a great number of people had to be trained in psychological principles and methods to administer the testing programs. Previously, most psychologists in Britain had been confined to often short-term investigations of specific problems that organizations faced, “problem” people or groups, school-leavers, and factory hands. With the need to mobilize the entire country under conditions of total war, psychologists were able to select people for many different roles, and even investigate leaders and question what made a good manager. Moreover, they took every opportunity to ensure that business leaders were aware of their work. Organizational psychology had begun its boom.

Patronage and the Professionalization of Organizational Psychology

At the end of the war, one psychologist explained in wonder that the psychologists who had gone to work with the military “may have no profound grasp of psychopathology, but they can teach us something in the way of practical psychology. . . in the practical handling of negotiations” (King 1989). This epitomizes both the advances that had been made by organizational psychology and the skepticism with which it was still viewed by academics. After the war, organizational psychologists in Britain flung them into establishing their organizational work as a respectable field of scientific endeavor by establishing research institutes and groups, ensuring that their work could be published, and securing funding.

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) was officially founded in 1947 with the support of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The TIHR was created by psychologists and psychiatrists who had worked with the British military and who were keen to continue their organizational studies. Long before the war, Tavistock staff had expended lots of time and effort in seeking Rockefeller funding, competing with the psychiatrists at the Maudsley for patronage (Jones and Rahman 2009). It was the interdisciplinary and organization-focused approach they developed during the war that finally enabled them to secure it. External funding for research most often supported projects that were interdisciplinary and problem-focused (House 2008). Organizational psychology benefitted from this funding because its foundations lay in practical problem-solving involving teams of experts working with organizations. The 1945 funding proposal to the Rockefeller contains the first proposal bringing together all of the components that would come to be defined as organization development (Burnes and Cooke 2013), which would later be popularized by the group surrounding Kurt Lewin.

The relationships established with industry leaders and influencers during the war provided valuable sources of income and projects for research after the war beyond Rockefeller too, which was crucial to the TIHR's survival. Right away, the Post Office asked for help with personnel problems and asked for help with selection and training, and Unilever asked Bridger to help them develop a WOSB-like program to select managers (Trahair 2015). Soon afterwards, Stafford Cripps formed a Productivity Committee with a Human Factors Panel administered by the Medical Research Council, which funded several projects led by psychologists who had worked on WOSBs, including the Glacier Project and the Longwall Coal Mining Project (Trist 2008).

Elliott Jaques headed the project at Glacier Metals, where he and his team studied psychological factors in group morale, productivity, stress, and attitudes. With this project, as with the military work and the subsequent TIHR research, an “action research” technique was used that involved collaboration with the people in the organization that has requested the consultation on everything from what the problems are that exist, how problems might be resolved, and even how this should be written about afterwards. Significant findings from the Glacier Project were that people become frustrated when their roles and status are unclear, and people in managing positions sometimes avoid responsibility and exercising their authority by delegating too much (Hickson and Pugh 2012; Jaques 2013). Jaques also went on to theorize about the relationship between time-periods that people were trusted to work independently and how their pay should correspond (Hickson and Pugh 2012).

The Mining Project run by Eric Trist was much more difficult to establish than the Glacier Project. The Coal Board was perplexed that, despite having brought in expensive new technology that had significantly increased production in America, productivity was not increasing in British mines: in fact, the opposite was true as absenteeism and group rivalries arose. One of Trist's research fellows, Ken Bamforth, had been a miner and was able to get his former pit in Yorkshire to agree to participate in a study of a mine using the new technology. They found that social systems were considered completely separately from technical systems and argued instead for a socio-technical approach that incorporated the ways that people liked to work and found rewarding with methods that enabled them to operate new machinery (Karwowski 2006). They created smaller groups of workers using a variety of skills and allowed workers to select their team members. The Divisional Board soon shutdown the project because of concerns about publicizing the information that some pits had autonomous working groups. The same thing happened in the East Midlands. Finally, James Nimmo (a Pembroke alumnus, like Trist) agreed for them to conduct research in Durham, where they also had the support of the National Union of Mineworkers (1955; Guillén 1994; Trist 2008).

Keen to establish whether the socio-technical system would be applicable in other places, Trist agreed that he and his colleague Kenneth Rice would work for Gautam Sarabhai to resolve issues at his Ahmedabad calico mills (Trahair 2015). Trist worked on the selection of executives in London and Rice went to India to investigate whether implementing autonomous groups would improve performance. The groups involved in the study from the outset agreed to the experiment and

performance increased, but some managers in other locations and newly appointed managers refused to implement the autonomous working groups (Miller 1975).

Whether or not you agree with their findings, these studies have had a significant impact on the field of organizational psychology, introducing new research focuses on attitudes to periodicity and the relationships of people to technology.

Publicizing New Work in Organizational Psychology

As Muldoon explains elsewhere in this handbook, the academic spread of human relations was limited in the 1930s because there were very few academic jobs and journals to maintain the research (► Chap. 23, “Spontaneity is the Spice of Management: Elton Mayo’s Hunt for Cooperation” by J. Muldoon, this volume). By the late 1940s, the practitioners of human relations and organizational psychology had learned from these prewar difficulties and did all they could to publish papers on their work and establish a respectable scientific reputation among their peers as well as among the businesses and organizations who used their consultancy services.

In 1947, Tavistock Publications was founded to publicize the research of the Institute and in the same year, the TIHR and the Research Center for Group Dynamics (initially based at MIT and then at the University of Michigan) collaborated to produce *Human Relations*, which became “the leading journal in the field of organizations for almost two decades” (Guillén 1994). Eric Trist described the journal as one of the actions that the group took “to get a reputable name for the Tavistock Institute” because their articles “wouldn’t have been accepted by any of the other British psychological journals” (Trist 2008). Paul Edwards’ recent analysis of the journal’s early contents seem to bear this out, noting that the majority of articles had very few citations and only half had any discussion of research methods (Edwards 2016). Cooke and Banerjee go so far as to argue that rather than simply being an outcome of the relationship between the TIHR and the Research Center, the journal was the boundary object around which they formed their alliance (Banerjee and Cooke 2012).

Despite the existence of the journal, the psychologists still often found it difficult to publish their work because of the nature of their consultancy projects. Rice was blamed by Jaques for the discontinuation of the Glacier Project because Rice wrote about the work without clearing his publication with the trade union (Trahair 2015). Similarly, even after moving around three different coal mines to find one amenable to their work, Trist and his colleagues could not get them to agree to them publishing about the autonomous working groups (Trist 2008).

Conclusion

The path to professionalizing organizational psychology in Britain was not a smooth one. For the TIHR, which applied psychology and therefore lay beyond academia, there were numerous challenges: organizations broke off consultations, collaborators

and other psychologists blocked the publication of findings, and funding was a continual source of concern. Nonetheless, organizational psychology grew enormously in scale and influence from the 1940s to 1970. Those working in the psychological sciences today are still concerned about how to efficiently collaborate on a large scale (Diener 2006) and the consultation projects of this earlier era offer valuable insights.

The war provided opportunities for psychologists to apply their ideas on an unprecedented scale. Their scientific approach appeared to offer something new and promising when people despaired of traditional methods to solve personnel problems such as selection and leadership. As well as offering a solution to the British military's organizational challenges, wartime work drew together thinkers that had a significant impact on organizational psychology and gave them opportunities for connections and research. The Tavistock Institute was founded out of the group who created the WOSBs. Canadians Edward Bott, Brock Chisholm, and Eliot Jaques also worked on the WOSBs and went on to make substantial contributions to organizational psychology. Thousands of others were trained in psychological principles and methods to carry out psychological testing, and hundreds of thousands underwent the testing, experiencing applied psychological methods for the first time and demonstrating that people were willing to be subjected to the psychological gaze (Rose and Miller 2008).

The selection methods have also provided remarkably enduring. The Army Officer Selection Board still in place today builds upon WOSBs methods and Civil Service Selection Boards were established on the same model. Other organizations and other nations adopted WOSBs practices too. During the war, British psychologists worked with colleagues in America to share their methods with the Office for Strategic Services (Banks 1995) and WOSB methods were adopted in Commonwealth nations including Canada and India (Copp and McAndrew 1990). Organizations ranging from fire services to consumer goods firms like Unilever adopted WOSBs approaches to selecting people for management roles (Trist and Murray 1990).

CRUs transformed how people thought about the psychology of POWs and drew more psychologists and industrial leaders into organizational psychology. These and the work of the Expert Committee showcased the possibilities of organizational psychology to people in a position to commission such projects and resulted in various consultations, projects and opportunities for the TIHR specifically and for organizational psychology more broadly over the next few decades.

The resulting postwar work is perhaps not as well-known as the iconic Hawthorne Studies but has shaped management and organizational psychology thinking. Peter Drucker has called Jaques' work at Glacier "the most extensive study of actual worker behavior in large-scale industry" (Drucker 2016). The socio-technical approach which developed from the postwar projects that ran in the 1950s and early 1960s was influential in its time and had a subsequent impact on Swedish initiatives to humanize work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the Quality of Working Life approach (Yousuf 1995). It has been described as "one of the most enduring products of the human relations movement" and continues to be widely used by industry into the twenty-first century (Midgley 2001; Latham 2007).

Work to establish publishing outlets, and the nature of funding in this era, from places such as the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, the Industrial Productivity Committee, and the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research helped to support and legitimize organizational psychology (Guillén 1994) in a way that had not been possible in Mayo's era.

The development of these new theories, methods, organizations, publishing outlets, and funding opportunities from 1940 to 1970 resulted in a "golden era" for organizational psychology.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Kurt Lewin: Organizational Change](#)
- ▶ [Organizational Psychology and the Rise of Human Resource Management](#)
- ▶ [Spontaneity is the Spice of Management: Elton Mayo's Hunt for Cooperation](#)

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