

A THEORETICAL REFLECTION ON HOW HUMAN BEINGS HAVE BEEN VIEWED AS WORKERS, FROM ACADEMIC AND PRAGMATIC PERCEPTIONS, SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**UNA REFLEXIÓN TEÓRICA DE CÓMO HAN SIDO VISTOS LOS SERES
HUMANOS COMO TRABAJADORES, DESDE LAS PERCEPCIONES
TEÓRICAS Y PRÁCTICAS DESDE EL INICIO DEL SIGLO XX**

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Tatiana Vélez Ángel

Negociadora Internacional de la Universidad EAFIT, Especialista en Desarrollo Humano y Magíster en Administración de la misma Universidad. Actualmente se desempeña como de la Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana y la Universidad EAFIT, Medellín - Colombia,, asesora de prácticas profesionales y como Coordinadora del Área Gerencial y Organizacional de los Postgrados de la Escuela de Ciencias Estratégicas de la misma universidad.

Correo electrónico: tatiana.velez@upb.edu.co

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Key Words

Human nature
Organization and worker

Abstract

Human beings as workers have faced a time of changes and difficult choices from the beginning of the twentieth century, as they live dilemmas that deal with their own human nature and what is being demanded from them in the established system that surrounds them. In addition to this, management as science and art has conditioned workers to what organizations have considered to be best for their own interests. This article aims to make a theoretical reflection on how human beings have been viewed as workers from academic and pragmatic perceptions since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Clasificación JEL: M10; M12; M50

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Palabras clave

Naturaleza humana
Organización
Trabajador

Resumen

Los seres humanos como trabajadores, han enfrentado tiempos de cambio y opciones difíciles desde el inicio del siglo XX, ya que viven dilemas relacionados con su propia naturaleza humana y lo que es exigido desde el sistema establecido que los rodea. Adicionalmente, la administración como ciencia y arte ha condicionado a los trabajadores a lo que ha sido establecido como más conveniente para los intereses de las organizaciones. Este artículo busca realizar una reflexión teórica de cómo han sido vistos los seres humanos como trabajadores desde las percepciones teóricas y prácticas desde el inicio del siglo XX.

Introduction

How have we become a society that has forgotten the human nature? When did economic systems replace the natural conception of the world? Would we be better off in a complete natural state without any advances or developments that interfere with our human being nature? If so, what is "human"? Infinite number of questions could be asked, and no answer would be sufficient to respond to the complexity of our reality inside and outside organizational schemes.

Humans have acquired certain titles such as: workers, employees or, in the best of the situations, associates. These titles tend to define what the people do inside the organizations and in some cases, they even define what the people are.

Another aspect that defines what people are, is management. How a person manages, determines how successful he/she is. Socrates says,

[the] management of private concerns differs from that of public concerns only in magnitude... neither can be carried on without men... and those who understand how to employ [others] are successful directors of private and public concerns, and those who do not understand, will err in the management of both (Wren, 2005, p. 18).

Keeping the aforementioned in mind, people start to lose their human nature when following the capitalist economic and social scheme and system that have been established in most parts of the world. And, human beings tend to find their way in the established system forgetting, sometimes, who they are and what their real nature is.

The following article first presents a historical review of humans as resources in which authors like Frederick Taylor, Henry Fayol and Peter Drucker are mentioned and it also shows an analysis of people as workers considering aspects like contracts, identity and environment.

Historical Review of Humans as Resources in the Organizations

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, academic and pragmatic thinkers, such as Frederick Taylor, Mary Parker Follett, Henry Fayol, Elton Mayo, Chester Barnard and Peter Drucker, among others, have studied the organizational reality and its transformations from the industrial to the information era. Their findings have shown the change of reality from the conception of man as a resource that makes part of the organizational machine, to the perception that human beings transcend the organizational objectives that are imposed, in order to obtain the organizational results based on the established efforts that every human being of the organization has to make.

In 1911, Frederick Taylor published his book *Principles of Scientific Management* which shows the core of management, "the principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee" (Taylor, 1972, p. 19). Here, the author explains that prosperity for each employee implies the adequate training to overcome its natural capacity and reach the established maximum output and its quality for the assigned task. And so, human beings begin their journey as resources assigned to certain repetitive activities that only contribute to the output of the industrial organization, regardless of their aspirations, capacities or unexplored skills.

Schmidt, a theatrical character created by Taylor (1972), was a man whose real name was Henry Noll, who used to lift four times more pig iron of what had been already established in the plants of production. Following Gabor (2000) "Schmidt [...] had just the 'ox-like' mentality needed to do the brutish physical labor that Taylor demanded on his workers" (p. 4). Thus, Taylor demonstrates how human strength is a

tool that maximizes output and economic benefits for the organization.

This situation created new nonexistent pressures in the workplace, like the establishment of quality and quantity standards by organizations and the compliance of quotas of output by workers and motion guidelines for the workers related to their task movements which did not allow them any freedom to improve or adapt the activity to their own rhythm of work; on the contrary, workers just followed what was decided by studies that indicated the best motion and timing to achieve output. Given that, Wren (2005) mentions that workers in the United States eventually got tired and frustrated about these new working conditions and expressed their disagreement and unwillingness to the legal institutions.

After Frederick Taylor, there was a more human approach stated by Mary Parker Follett, a woman living in a world of male influence and standards. According to Robinson (2005), Mary Parker Follett theorized about community, experience and how groups relate to the individual and the organization, which shows how individuals and groups have a 'human' conception. Robinson (2005) also mentions that Follett considered that

"A business [...] is a microcosm of human society. An organization is one in which people at all levels should be motivated to work and participate. They should gather their own information, define their own roles and shape their own lives. Organizations are based fundamentally on cooperation and coordination; this is the single unifying principle holding them together." (p. 30)

Robinson (2005) highlights how Follett advocated during her time 'power with' rather than hierarchical organizations that

shaped them, which showed 'power over' the workers who had no option to participate and feel part of a community. As Follett explains,

"The ramifications of modern industry are too widespread, its organization too complex, its problems too intricate for industry to be managed by commands from the top alone. You must have an organization which will permit interweaving all along the line ... [I]t is my plea above everything else that we learn how to cooperate ... The leader knows that any lasting agreement among members of the group can come only by their sharing each other's' experience." (Robinson, 2005, p. 31).

In the 1920s and 1930s, according to Harvard Business Review (2008), Elton Mayo and his assistant Fritz J. Roethlisberger began their famous research about productivity and job satisfaction in Western Electric's Hawthorne Works Plant. Their findings show how money as an incentive is insufficient to improve productivity and that organizational and human behavior could have more significant impact, also that "(...) mental attitude, proper supervision and informal social relationships were critical to boosting productivity and job satisfaction" (Harvard Business Review, 2008). Hence, workers, still as resources, relate to each other as human beings regardless of their task within the organization.

From an European viewpoint, Fayol (1916)¹ mentions that "the soundness and good working order of the body corporate depend on a certain number of conditions termed indiscriminately principles, laws, rules" (p. 19) and assures that those principles are not meant to be absolute, but flexible. The great influence of Fayol's theory is still recognized within the organizations through his fourteen principles², Fayol highlights that,

- 1 According to Robinson (2005), Fayol's work was not published in The United States until 1949. Originally, Fayol's work was published in France in 1916 which shows how the world of management has been more oriented towards an American perception.
- 2 According to Fayol (1916), the fourteen principles of management are: division of work, authority and responsibility, discipline, unity of command, unity of direction, subordination of individual interest to the general interest, remuneration of personnel, centralization, scalar chain, order, equity, stability of tenure of personnel, initiative, esprit de corps.

"(...) without principles, we are working in the dark and in chaos; without experience and without judgement we are still working under great difficulties, even with the best principles. The principle is the lighthouse, which enable us to get our bearings, but it can help only those who know the way into port" (Wren, 2005, p. 218).

However, Fayol (1916) clarifies that "(...) allowance must be made for different changing circumstances, for men just as different and changing and for many other variable elements" (p. 19). This shows how workers were considered an active part of the principles within any organization.

Following Chester Barnard³, the relation between management and the organization acquires importance in the organizational world. Barnard emphasizes on the executive as a leader,

"his analysis of the executive is truly a social-system approach in order to comprehend and analyze the executive functions. Barnard studied the main tasks within the operating system

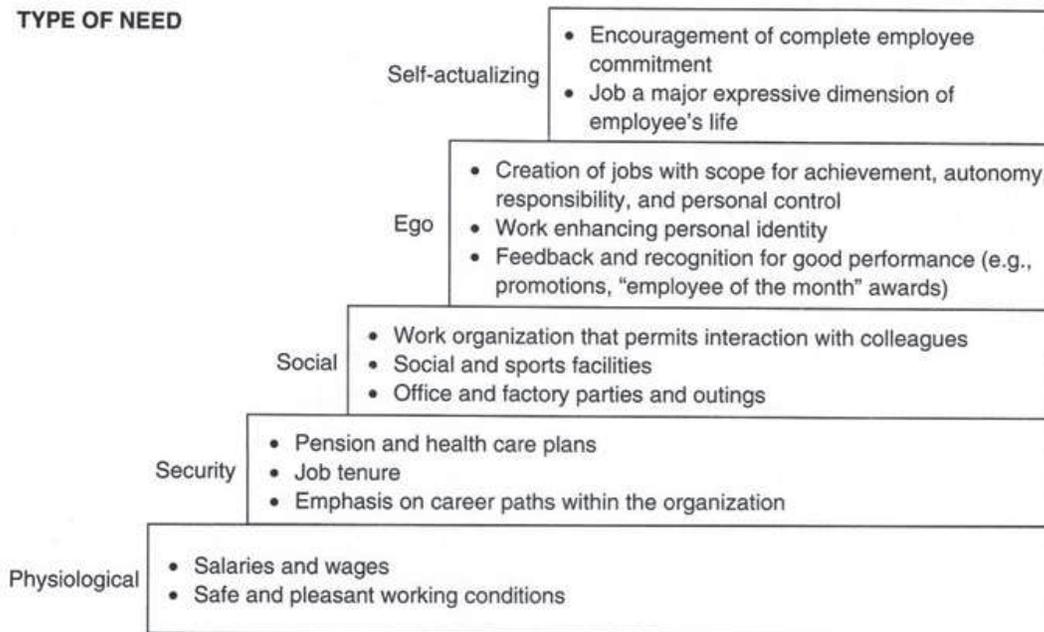
and determined that the main task of executives is to maintain a system based on cooperation within the formal organization. Barnard also talked about the reasons and nature of cooperative systems, and his theory focuses on the main elements of managerial work, decision making and leadership" (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, n.d.).

Given the aforementioned concept, Barnard conceives the organization as a system based on human cooperation and its duration tends to be short taking into account the lack of efficiency, which to Barnard is the organizational capacity to satisfy the needs of the individuals.

In 1939, Abraham Maslow began talking about the hierarchy of human needs and how the latter should be satisfied by specific and consequent organizational actions (see Figure 1) in order to become a guide to obtain the employee's commitment. Hence, Maslow says that the superior needs arise when the basic ones are satisfied and that they aim to help employees find self-realization, growth, self-esteem and motivation.

3 Chester Barnard published his book Functions of the Executive in 1938 (Harvard Business Review, 2000).

Figure 1. Organizational actions that could lead to employee's commitment. Source: Morgan, G. (2006, p. 37).



Following the line of employee motivation in the 1960s, McGregor (1967) described the way organizations and their managers could create a proper labor ambience that resulted in higher employee performance, which included the recognition of individual characteristics like knowledge and skills within the organizational and external environment as well. As Rothwell, Stavros, Sullivan and Sullivan (2009) explain,

"Theory X managers hold the assumption about human nature that people are, by nature, lazy, greedy, and self-centered and must be tightly watched and managed (controlled) from the outside in order to get the best work out of them. Theory Y managers believe that people are, by nature, predisposed to do well, to make a contribution, and to learn and grow and only need a sense of direction and support in the form of feedback and coaching to manage themselves to do their best."

The same decade faced another position from Peter Drucker who, in 1966, talked about Management by Objectives in which management concentrates on objectives and

human beings belonging to the organization and their formal relations become the means to obtain results, that is, a results-oriented organization. Following Dominguez (2008), "the Management by Objectives is a direction mechanism that allows the organization to focus on their planning, organizing and controlling efforts towards achieving organizational results taking into account the mission of the business and its possible scenarios of development" (p. 116). Nonetheless, Drucker's approach to human motivation within the organization changed towards recognizing employees as people and how the environmental influences impact employment conditions in his article *They Are Not Employees, They Are People*.

Factors that influence workers

How natural is the organizational system which people have lived in since the beginning of capitalism? Have people

abandoned their roots as human beings? Nowadays, people are called 'workers', 'employees', 'associates' or any other kind of titles that actually fit their tasks. However, those names or titles do not define what they are as human beings, on the contrary, they tend to classify and make them believe that they are meant to be what has been determined for them. Geertz (1989, cited in Serna, 2004) mentions how Weber explains that people are 'knitting' their own meaning in order to live in a certain group of people

The industrial era brought the new group of people named 'workers' to the factories that required a great amount of them to comply with their production requirements and output, thus, human effort was the center of the organization.

As the information era came along and changed the way organizations and people understood the world, 'workers' were left behind in the race for organizational benefits and 'knowledge workers' with certain type of training or education made their way into a changeable organization; as Drucker (2008) mentions "with the knowledge becoming the key resource, the educated person faces new demands, new challenges, new responsibilities" (p. 514). So, when digital and virtual times overcame the information era, as it was known and established in the 1960s, 'associates' with great flexibility changed the dependent relationship between organizations and people.

There has been an evolution that represents how environmental changes affect the way people and organizations interact and prioritize how their goals and results should be assumed. As Drucker (2002) explains,

"Not so long ago, even in the 1950s, as much as 90% of the U.S. workforce was classified as 'nonexempt'-subordinates who did as they were told. The 'exempt' were the supervisors who did the telling. Most nonexempt employees were blue-collar workers who had few skills and little education. They typically did repetitive tasks on the plant floor or in the office. Today, less than one-fifth of the workforce is blue-collar. Knowledge workers now make up two-fifths of the workforce, and while

they may have a supervisor, they are not subordinates. They are associates. Within their area of expertise, they are supposed to do the telling." (p. 5).

These 'workers' and 'associates' are conditioned by certain aspects that frame their behavior, perceptions and actions within the workplace. The first aspect is the contract, which determines timing, compensation, responsibilities and their accountability; even though the contract is simultaneously framed by laws and norms, the human impact is great when taking into account that humans acknowledge their position as 'resources' within any organization. 'Temps' or 'full time' workers face different conditions according to their contracts, is it more favourable for people to be a permanent worker or just a temporal one? Is flexibility (for people and organizations) the most important issue? Do contracts really guarantee that human needs are truly satisfied? According to Drucker (2002), "the reason usually offered for the popularity of temporary workers is that they give employers flexibility" (p. 4); so, does that mean that the labor market would only satisfy the employer's needs?

Furthermore, individuals lack negotiating power to ultimate details or conditions of their contracts, which tend to be unilateral. Perhaps, the window of opportunity could be available with collective contracts in which individuals become a negotiating group. However, such proposition could even become a threat for organizations that could perceive this as a movement towards the creation of a Union Labor that had been so criticized since Frederick Taylor's time, and as Taylor (1972) mentioned in his elements of Scientific Management, that an organization should operate under conditions of harmony and not discord.

Regarding the compensation or salary that represents the set of tasks established in any position within the organization, human beings represent money as the means for living and not the ultimate goal. However, minimum wages, so widely used to compensate non-knowledge workers, hardly satisfies the human needs that a person or his/her family could have. As Fernandez (2004) explains that,

"it is appalling that as the salaries of top executives are rising, the living wage of common workers has remained at the bottom. These living wages do not qualify as 'livable' wages. Rather, they are 'death' wages, wages that do not sustain life" (p. 92).

So, how much is sufficient to satisfy human beings? Would all human beings have access to such amount? If so, can organizations guarantee that such amount will be available in the different positions within the organization?

However, as compensation lacks influence over the workers, organizations believed that more money could motivate and commit people. As Encinas (2005) explains that,

"There was a time when organizations believed that the only way to get workers to make an additional effort was paying those more, providing more benefits, and if that was not enough, threatening the employee to be fired could become the last recourse. Nowadays, management knows that neither money nor marginal benefits result in major increases of productivity. [...] Currently, an increasing number of organizations have concluded that the safest way to obtain full collaboration from workers is through motivating their psychological needs" (p. 1)

The second aspect relates to the identity that people develop within the work tasks and responsibilities. Do people feel that they see themselves doing a job? Do they feel as if they are losing themselves each time they do a task? How can people truly identify themselves with their jobs? Reality has shown that people sometimes do not have the choice of the kind of work that they want to do, they know that their priority is to survive, and so they do. Following Cox (2006),

"Although 'What are you?' is most often another way of saying 'What do you do?' it is generally believed that what a person does by way of occupation reveals much about the kind of person they are [...]. Evidently, members of prestigious professions are far happier identifying themselves with what they do than are members of low-status professions. Seldom

do lawyers, doctors, film-producers or astronauts disclaim 'It's just a job. A job's a job.' People in less-respected employment, on the other hand, are often keen to seize upon the truth that a person is not what he does in the mode of being it. 'I am not really a toilet-cleaner', insists the young hopeful. 'That is just my job. I am really a budding author.'" (p. 105).

People aspire to better conditions, how to achieve them is a different matter. However, there is a link between identifying a person's job with his/her life and what he/she is and wants to become in the future.

The aforementioned aspect linked to the education level, experience and age of a worker determines how the labor universe could offer or restrict opportunities for the person who is trying to have a life project. The labor market has dramatically increased the standards asking workers to have more knowledge, skills and experience for an established vacancy, whose conditions do not require what has been advertised in the labor market. This market has an overwhelming offer in contrast with the requirements of the demand, and organizations take advantage of this to reduce or eliminate required training to achieve high performance.

Age also becomes an issue given the level of experience that a person should have. If an organization has an older person, this could be considered expensive or simply outdated; a young person could become the opposite, cheap and inexperienced. Andersen and Taylor (2007) explain,

"now young people face a labor market where entry-level jobs in secure corporate environments are rare and where many are trapped in low-level jobs with little opportunity for advancement. Many young people worry as a result, about whether they will be able to achieve even the same degree of economic status as their parents" (p. 88).

So, what is the ideal formula for the variables age and experience? Maybe, a formula that maximizes organizational benefits and reduces labor costs. Under

those circumstances, human beings lack liberty to make their own life decisions and opt for diversity of options in the labor market. How can a person truly find liberty within the labor market?

The pressure of labor markets and how the capitalist society works, make individuals unconsciously fit a determined scheme of personal and professional development in the organizations. This, at the same time, generates a more individualistic society that lacks concern for human matters and oblivion of human nature could become the rule.

And, the last aspect is the rapid changeable environment that both individuals and organizations have to face. Serna (2010) talks about economic, political and technological factors that could not be controlled by organizations, but that could be foreseen and planned upon. Economic factors tend to make human beings a statistic; it could be an absolute number or percentage, but at the end it is a statistic that could make the reality of human beings around the world visible or invisible. However, people look for fulfillment of their life projects, even if it is just for survival and that conditions them to face any change in the economic system that has already been established.

Political factors relate to the government as an important agent that guarantees that all conditions established by law are complied with. Following Castel (1997), "a central actor is needed in order to have the strategies directed towards what had been established, that obliges participants to accept reasonable objectives and that guarantees the respect for the determined commitments. The Social State is that actor." (p. 391). However, several authors or film directors such as Annie Leonard, Ariane Conrade and Michael Moore among others have shown their research to the world and strongly criticize the State in their books, films or documentaries, especially when they highlight that the main purpose of the State is to protect and benefit people, rather than organizations like multinationals.

Workers have been affected by technological advances. In Taylor's time, workers used to have routine jobs based on physical performance and that would not require education or special training. As computers, machines, equipment and communicational devices permeated the workplace, workers who had physical jobs began to be replaced by machines which did their job more accurately, or human beings became limited to certain movements according to the technology being used. As Daft (2009) explains,

"The common theme of new technologies in the workplace is that they in some way substitute machinery for human labor in transforming inputs into outputs. Automated teller machines (ATMs) have replaced thousands of human bank tellers, for example. Robots used in flexible manufacturing systems are replacing laborers on the production line." (p. 283).

In the case of knowledge workers, they became a new form of routine efforts that were summed up in certain tasks and used technology. As workers, people use their computers on a daily basis and their dependence upon internet and everything represents an inevitable form of slavery. Following Lingard and Ozga (2007) describe,

"the picture of empowered knowledge workers portrayed within many countries' policy statements contrasts with the view that the 'information age' will not lead to an expansion of 'high-skilled' employment opportunities but a new cohort of information slaves rather than knowledge workers" (p. 173). Thus, workers in general will continue adapting themselves to the new conditions that organizations that use technological advancement impose on them.

Final Comments

Since the twentieth century, human beings have become workers, knowledge workers or associates. Human nature has been questioned taking into account that organizations in industrial times conceived workers as extension of their

machines as Taylor and Fayol's theories could explain. However, authors like Follett, Mayo, Maslow, McGregor and Drucker have observed, analyzed and concluded that workers transcend their tasks and as human beings recreate their humanity within the workplace.

As history changes from the industrial to the information era, workers change as well in their understanding of how their role within their organizations should be like and how to face conditions, challenges and unforeseen number of changes that could transform their environments, organizations or jobs; but, it is ultimately a matter of protecting the workers' human nature.

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HUMANISMO, UNIVERSIDAD Y EMPRESA: LA RSE DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA ÉTICA

**HUMANISM, UNIVERSITY AND FIRMS: THE CORPORATE SOCIAL
RESPONSIBILITY FROM AN ETHICAL VIEWPOINT**

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Luis Alberto Castrillón López

Magister en Filosofía, Filósofo y Licenciado en Filosofía de la Universidad Pontificia. Medellín-Colombia. Doctorando en Filosofía por la misma universidad. Director de la Revista Escritos. Coordinador editorial de las revistas ETFH. Miembro del grupo Religión y cultura. Miembro del CLAFEN.

Correo electrónico: luis.castrillon@upb.edu.co

Gabriel Mauricio Alzate Liévano

Filósofo y Licenciado en Filosofía de la Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana; candidato a magister de la misma Universidad. Medellín-Colombia. Con Certificación en Negociación Avanzada y Planeación Estratégica de UC Berkely Executive Education. Asesor para el Gobierno Corporativo de la Organización Almacenes LA 14 S.A., al igual que de Inversiones LA 14 S.A. Asesor Empresarial en el Sector Industrial de Inversiones Paso del Comercio y su grupo empresarial. Así mismo, de la cadena de Centros Comerciales Calima en el país.

Correo electrónico: gmalzate@gmail.com