Data requirements for articles in *Human Relations*

Some very short reflections

The editorial team 'desk rejects' about half of all the articles we receive. This note comments on one reason, the nature of the data deployed. Its purpose is to contribute to the raising of standards. Work that was acceptable in the past may not be published today, and colleagues need to be aware of what we are looking for. Two preliminary remarks set the comments in context.

First, new empirical data are not required. We publish articles presenting theory development, critical and analytical reviews, and interventions in current areas of controversy (e.g. articles in 2013 by **Lindebaum and Zundel** in June and by **Nielsen** and by **Mingers and Willmott** in August). We particularly welcome articles that address the big issues.

Second, in empirical papers suitable data are a necessary but not sufficient feature to get to full peer review. We also need many other things, including a strong theoretical motivation for a study and an explanation of the importance of the contribution. Spotting a gap is not enough. Why does the gap matter, and has filling it told us anything of general importance?

Turning to the question of data, perhaps the most common reason for rejecting quantitative papers is a reliance on single-respondent cross-section designs. Such designs are not necessarily wrong. They can work well where, for example, mainly factual data are collected and where causal analysis is either not the purpose or where causal inferences can be justified. But they have well-rehearsed limitations for causal analysis, and there are now many alternatives including longitudinal and multi-level designs.

We need to say a little more about qualitative data, specifically interview data. We are aiming to move away from papers that present only a limited number of interviews without appropriate contextual or comparative information. We are certainly not saying that more is necessarily better, though it is the case that we need enough weight of evidence to sustain the points being made. Small numbers of interviews can be acceptable where there is a genuine reason for an exploratory account and where the interviews are tightly focused within an occupation or other group of interest; we can then conclude that the results reflect that group. They are less acceptable where the group is weakly defined or where the benchmark is not established.

By weakly defined, we mean studies that describe, say, how identities are created or sustained across different work contexts. Such studies may capture something of the story, but they do not tell us about the context, so that it is hard to judge why people behave in certain ways in some contexts and not others. A comparative design can often help to make the analysis much more concrete ('it is like this here for these reasons, and different there because...') and also more explanatory ('the relevant behaviour varies across contexts because...').

In relation to establishing the benchmark, we are thinking of studies that do identify a clear group and then describe what they do. But compared to what? Suppose that a study looked at the value of social capital to young professionals seeking elite jobs. If it interviewed such professionals in these jobs it would face at least three challenges: showing that their comments were more than opinion and that they reflected what really happened; establishing the importance of social capital as compared to other factors for this group; and demonstrating that such capital was a differentiating factor as compared to some other group such as the less successful. It might deal with these challenges through some combination of: the style of interview (e.g. use of critical incident techniques to identify when social capital was important); observation; repeat interviews; interviews with other actors; and a comparative design.

Human Relations aims to promote high quality social science. The above comments suggest ways in which this goal can be pursued. They are to an extent objectives rather than prescriptions: progress is likely to occur slowly, and there are many valid ways of conducting research. We hope, however, that they both indicate an overall aspiration and help to explain what we will be looking for in individual papers. One measure will be whether desk rejects on grounds of data inadequacy become rarer.