Changing ‘organizational culture’ is a major preoccupation in both the public and the private sectors. *Anthropology of Organizations* critically examines ‘the culture concept’ from an anthropological perspective. For the first time, this volume brings together anthropological studies of the complex ways people make and contest meanings in organizational settings. Covering topics across the First and Third Worlds, these studies raise theoretical issues about organizational culture, gender and power, whilst also being concerned with policy and practice.

The contributors to this book argue that in the 1990s our aim should be to build institutions which empower those hitherto excluded from decision making. Three aspects are identified. First, the concept of ‘indigenous management’ questions the appropriateness of bureaucratic models and universal management systems—seeking instead ways of connecting with indigenous styles of organizing. Second, case studies from government, private companies and a union explain the embeddedness of gender relations, and show how—despite widespread change—inequalities persist. Finally the contributors analyse attempts to reform clients’ relations with state institutions. A grasp of large scale bureaucratic structures, detailed ethnography of interactions, and analysis of symbols and conceptual processes, make these studies a powerful demonstration of the important contribution to be made by anthropologists in the field of organizational studies.

Displaying the value of the anthropological approach in evaluating exactly who is empowered by changing organizational ‘culture’, *Anthropology of Organizations* will appeal to all students and teachers of social anthropology, management and business studies, and to professional managers in many spheres.

*Susan Wright* is Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex.
## Contents

*Notes on contributors*  
vi  
*Preface and acknowledgements*  
ix  

1  
Culture in anthropology and organizational studies  
*Susan Wright*  
1  

### Part I  
**Indigenous management**

**Introduction**  
*David Marsden*  
33  

2  
Indigenous management and the management of indigenous knowledge  
*David Marsden*  
39  

3  
‘Owning’ without owners, managing with few managers: lessons from Third World irrigators  
*Donald Curtis*  
54  

4  
Institution building: examining the fit between bureaucracies and indigenous systems  
*Trish Nicholson*  
66  

### Part II  
**Gender and organizational change**

*Co-edited by Michael Roper*  

**Introduction**  
*Michael Roper*  
84  

5  
Play of power: women, men and equality initiatives in a trade union  
*Cynthia Cockburn*  
92  

6  
Office affairs  
*Rosemary Pringle*  
113
7 The gendered terrains of paternalism  
Deborah KerfootDavid Knights  
122

8 Culture, gender and organizational change in British 
welfare benefits services  
Sandra Cullen  
138

Part III Clients and empowerment

Introduction  
Susan Wright  
157

9 Community care as de-institutionalization? Continuity and 
change in the transition from hospital to community-based 
care  
Christine McCourt Perring  
164

10 Disempowerment and marginalization of clients in 
divorce court cases  
Jean Collins  
177

11 Idioms of bureaucracy and informality in a local Housing 
Aid Office  
Jeanette Edwards  
192

Name index  
206

Subject index  
209
Contributors

Cynthia Cockburn is senior research fellow in sociology at the Centre for Research in Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change, The City University, London. She is the author of several books on local government, gender and technology, and sex inequalities in youth training. The complete study from which this article is drawn is *In the Way of Women: Men’s Resistance to Sex Equality in Organizations*, Macmillan Education, 1991.

Jean Collins worked in social services for ten years before embarking on a career in social anthropology. She was awarded her doctorate at the University of Sussex in 1990, after conducting research into social support systems in an English town. She is currently engaged on research into the resettlement of people from long-stay hospitals. She has contributed extensively to the community care debate and is particularly interested in the interplay of language and power.

Sandra Cullen has a PhD in social anthropology from the University of Cambridge. This investigates policy implementation and organizational culture from an ethnographic perspective, with specific reference to Job Centres and Unemployment Benefit offices. She is currently employed by the Employment Department working on personnel policy. Her research interests include anthropological perspectives on state institutions and policy formulation and implementation. She also teaches social policy for the Open University.

Donald Curtis has sustained an interest in organizational design and development since he worked in voluntary sector organizations in both Birmingham and Botswana. Most of his professional career has been based at the Development Administration Group at the University of Birmingham where he is now Director. In this setting, issues to do with the organization of government can be studied and discussed along with forms of non-governmental and informal organization.
Jeanette Edwards is the Leach/RAI Fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester. She gained her PhD in social anthropology in 1990 for a thesis entitled “Ordinary People”: a study of factors affecting communication in the provision of services. Since then she has researched first the social and cultural implications of new reproductive technologies and, second, the work of community health and social service providers with families deemed to be ‘in need’. She is co-author of Technologies of Procreation: Kinship in the Age of Assisted Conception (Manchester University Press, 1993) and is currently working on a project within the ESCR’s Management of Personal Welfare Initiative.

Deborah Kerfoot has recently completed a doctorate at UMIST, and is now lecturer in organizational behaviour in the management division of the School of Business and Economics at the University of Leeds. She also holds a visiting fellowship at the School of Management, UMIST, and is part of a research team undertaking a two-year project on the links between human resource management and quality management in financial services companies funded by an ESRC award. Her research interests and publications are primarily in the critical study of management and organization, employment practices in UK financial services, and in gender and sexuality in organizations.

David Knights is Professor of organizational analysis at the Manchester School of Management at UMIST, where he is also Director of the Financial Services Research Centre (FSRC) and Deputy Director of the Programme on Information and Communication Technology (PICT). He holds an MA and a doctorate in management from Manchester University and has published in the fields of equal opportunity, labour process, organization theory, information technology and financial services. His most recent books are Labour Process Theory (Macmillan, 1990); Managing to Discriminate (Routledge, 1990); and Markets, Managers and Technology (Wiley, 1994).

Christine McCourt Perring’s PhD in social anthropology was a study of the closure of psychiatric hospitals and transfer of long-stay patients to community group homes. She has recently completed a Department of Health sponsored development project on residential care based at Brunel University where she continues to teach part time. Her latest publications are The Experience of Psychiatric Hospital Closure: An Anthropological Study (Avebury, 1993); and she co-authored with P.J.Youll Changing Practices in Residential Care: An Evaluation of the Caring Homes Initiative (HMSO, 1993).

David Marsden is a social anthropologist attached to the Centre for Development Studies at University College Swansea undertaking consultancy work in social development. His recent publications include a co-edited book
with Peter Oakley, *The Evaluation of Social Development Projects*, published by Oxfam in 1991. His current interests are in the field of local level organizational development and the monitoring and evaluation of social development projects.

**Trish Nicholson** is field director in the Philippines for Voluntary Service Overseas. She is an anthropologist and worked previously for the West Sepik Provincial Development Project, Papua New Guinea. She is concerned in the Asia-Pacific region with participative and gender-fair development, project evaluation and appraisal, and human resources development. She is also involved in photo-documentation and freelance writing.

**Rosemary Pringle** teaches sociology and women’s studies at Macquarie University in Sydney. She is the author of *Secretaries Talk: Sexuality, Power and Work* (Verso, 1989) and co-author of *Gender at Work* (Allen & Unwin, 1983). She is currently working on a comparative English/Australian study of gender and medicine, focusing on women doctors who, she feels, have been given an unnecessarily hard time by many feminists.

**Michael Roper** is a lecturer in the Sociology Department at the University of Essex. He is a social historian by background, but has increasingly become interested in contemporary issues concerning masculinity and emotion in organizations. He recently published *Masculinity and the British Organization Man Since 1945* (Oxford University Press, 1994), and now hopes to research the rise of management education in Britain, focusing on the application of business principles to higher education.

**Susan Wright** is lecturer in social anthropology at Sussex University. After studying people’s relations with the state in Iran and Britain, she became involved in doing participant observation in state organizations themselves. Drawing on research on rural decision making and on community development, she was recently attached to a county council to evaluate their corporate strategy for empowerment. Her most recent publications are on organizational change for empowerment, the politics and practice of participatory development, and community arts.
Preface and acknowledgements

The starting point for this book was a series of meetings organized by Mark O’Sullivan and myself for GAPP, the Group for Anthropology in Policy and Practice. GAPP was formed in 1981 as a national organization to bridge the gap between anthropologists working inside and outside the academy; to create a network among anthropologists using their discipline in policy and practice; to make their experience available to students and to help with training students in the additional skills needed for such employment. By the late 1980s meetings and conferences were held on a number of fields, raising theoretical issues of mainstream relevance to the discipline, and of importance to practitioners. GAPP has now become part of a wider organization with the same aims called Anthropology in Action.

The meetings held in 1990 brought together anthropologists working on or in organizations in both the Third World and the West. The aim was to explore how anthropological concepts were being used by researchers and practitioners in the context of rapid organizational change. These meetings culminated in a GAPP conference held at University College Swansea in January 1991. The conference was organized by Mark O’Sullivan, David Marsden and myself, with sessions also organized by Michael Roper and Ed Young. The organizers are grateful to the Overseas Development Administration for a grant towards the conference and to the Centre for Development Studies, University College Swansea for providing financial and practical support.

Turning conference papers into a volume, when contributors are not only the usual hard-pressed academics, but contract researchers and practitioners, especially when they are fax-less in far flung places, takes time. I took overall responsibility for editing and producing the volume and am grateful for the contributors’ continuing commitment and enthusiasm. Each of the three sections in the book is introduced by a specialist in the field and many thanks are due to David Marsden and Michael Roper for their contributions. In addition, Michael Roper was generous with his time and provided very helpful comments on the chapters in the section on Gender and organizational change.
In editing the volume and writing the introduction, I am very grateful for stimulating and sustaining discussions about organizational culture with Michael Roper. Earlier versions of the introduction were also read with great care by colleagues at Sussex University, Hilary Standing and Brian Street. They offered quite different but invaluable advice and I am very grateful for their support and suggestions. The Introduction also benefitted from very helpful conversations with Jennifer Platt and Liz Stanley about the early history of organization studies.

Special thanks are due to Delphine Houlton for excellent ‘sub-editing’ of the Introduction and to Rahnuna Ahmed for her help and efficiency in the last stages of turning chapters and corrections, stacked in heaps across the study floor, into a neat and final manuscript.

Susan Wright
This book concerns the contribution of anthropology to the study of government, non-government (voluntary), and private sector organizations in the Third World and the West. The 1980s and 1990s have been a time of change for organizations in all sectors. The discrediting of modernization as a western domestic policy and as the basis for Third World development has been accelerated by the international reorganization of capital. Production has become organized on an international division of labour with competition between First and Third World sites and the introduction of new management systems. Structural adjustment in the Third World and New Right policies in the West have reduced the role of the state, moving functions over to the private sector and relying more heavily on voluntary and non-government organizations. These changes have been accompanied by questions about different styles of organizing. The western model of bureaucracy is seen to have shortcomings: it is asked in the Third World, but not yet in the West, whether it is possible to build upon indigenous methods of organizing? Despite such widespread institutional change, some aspects of organizations have proved recalcitrant to alteration. Notably this concerns gender. Initially public sector organizations, and now more private sector companies have been concerned to improve opportunities for disadvantaged categories of people, especially women, and to maximize their potential in the labour market: but why have organizations proved so difficult to change? And who is benefitting? One theme running through these programmes is ‘empowerment’. But who is empowered by empowerment? Is it principally the intended beneficiaries, people in the Third World, women and customers or clients? These questions about changing ways of organizing through indigenous management, addressing gender inequalities and empowerment of clients are the focus of the three parts of this book.

In the search for new ways to manage organizations in these changing contexts, ‘the culture concept’ has become prominent. Organizational studies literature attributes the culture concept to anthropological sources (Geertz
1973, Turner 1974, Bateson 1972 and Douglas 1987). For an anthropologist reading this literature there are moments of recognition closely followed by the discovery of familiar ideas being used in disconcertingly unrecognizable ways. It is the aim of this introduction to explore the reasons for this and to clarify some of the ways the concept ‘culture’ is being used both in the organization studies literature and by anthropologists in the chapters of this book.

In organizational studies ‘the culture concept’ is used in four ways. First, it refers to problems of managing companies with production processes or service outlets distributed across the globe, each located in a different ‘national culture’. Second, it is used when management is trying to integrate people with different ethnicities into a workforce in one plant. Third, it can mean the informal ‘concepts, attitudes and values’ of a workforce; or, fourth, ‘company culture’ can refer to the formal organizational values and practices imposed by management as a ‘glue’ to hold the workforce together and to make it capable of responding as a body to fast changing and global competition (Deal and Kennedy 1982:178, 193).

A ‘strong company culture’ has been deemed the *sine qua non* of success in the private sector and now no public or voluntary organization can be without its mission statement. Even these company cultures are of different kinds: one is strengthened Fordism while the other is a turning away from that idea. In the first case, an organization’s ‘culture’ is converted from a mission statement into detailed practices, dividing each task into tiny details and specifying how each should be done. These are imposed on the workforce through training and disciplined supervision. This strengthens the Fordist management style of the modernization era whereby management was separate from the workforce which was divided according to clearly demarcated repetitive tasks. Some companies with international operations have used this system to institute a standardized way of performing tasks (the most quoted example is McDonald’s). In opposite cases a ‘culture’ of flexible organization has been introduced. The Fordist division between management and workers has been revised, the role of middle management reduced, and the workforce organized in teams, with each member able to take on a full range of tasks. Instead of being adjuncts to a machine or to a predetermined sequence of paper movements, workers are ‘empowered’ to take initiatives and ensure operations are continually improved by communicating ideas directly to management. In this way workers’ knowledge is to be harnessed in a flexible response to fast changing environments and to new or high standard demands from clients. Already it can been seen that ‘culture’ refers to diverse problems, ideas and styles of organizing.

How do these ideas connect with anthropological approaches to culture? One reason for introducing anthropological ideas about culture into organizational
studies was methodological. Organizational studies from its inception has had a close relationship to the thinking of practising managers, such that, as Calas and Smircich have pointed out (1992:223), organization researchers have played a central role in ‘making’ organizations. The institutional changes outlined above inspired a search for new methods. In place of the modernist paradigm of organizations as rational and replete with objective facts which had dominated organizational studies, anthropological studies of culture offered a more interpretive approach through which to understand organizations as sites for constructing meaning.

However the paradigm shift does not seem to have been fully achieved. For example, Schein (1991) holds both an interpretive and a positivist approach to organizations in a way that appears contradictory to an anthropologist. He takes the anthropological argument that culture resides in conceptual categories and mental models. Therefore, he argues rightly, it cannot be researched through ‘thin’ description of its surface features which miss the holistic and systematic aspect of culture, or through questionnaires with their a priori assumptions and reliance on attitudes expressed out of context. But he also hankers for a ‘real’ positivist hold on a world of slippery intangibles, constructing culture as an object capable of standing free of its context: ‘We cannot build a useful concept if we cannot agree on how to define it, “measure” it, study it, and apply it in the real world of organizations’ (Schein 1991:243).

Schein returns to an interpretive approach when he explains that culture is ‘deeper’ than its symbolic manifestations, the rites, rituals and stories of origin on which Deal and Kennedy (1982) focused. Schein’s ‘deeper’ level of culture is recognizable: it is systematic, permeating all aspects of daily life, persisting over time, and shared. However, his concluding definition of culture provokes further realization that what seemed like anthropological ideas of culture have been twisted into a different form:

If there is no consensus or if there is conflict or if things are ambiguous, then, by definition, that group does not have a culture in regard to those things...the concept of sharing or consensus is core to the definition, not something about which we have an empirical choice.

(Schein 1991:248)

‘Culture’ has become the property of a ‘group’ (both conceptualized as bounded and unitary), which ‘persists over time’ in the sense of being unchanging, and is ‘shared’ in the sense that there is consensus and no ambiguity.

This focus on consensus seems to be a key point of difference between organizational studies and anthropology. Initially, as will be explained below,
the two disciplines shared a concern with consensus. But its weakness was identified; it led the Hawthorne Bank Wiring study (see below), for example, to conclude that only management had ‘rationality’. Subsequently, the Manchester shop floor studies focused on conflict. Now, to an anthropologist influenced by Geertz’s ideas, ‘sharedness’ is more likely to imply a common repertoire of ideas which are reworked continually in imaginative ways that are systematic, explainable, but not predictable. Not only is ambiguity essential, as it provides the space for this reworking, but the process is political: meanings of concepts and symbols are not just not fixed, they are actively contested. In organizational studies literature which also uses Geertz, often only one, supposedly consensual definition of the situation is given. Culture has turned from being something an organization is into something an organization has, and from being a process embedded in context to an objectified tool of management control. The use of the term culture itself becomes ideological.

This literature provokes an anthropologist into realizing that culture has become one of the discipline’s own ‘taken for granted’ categories or working assumptions. In order to explore its meaning it is essential to understand the methodological processes by which we arrive at culture as an analytical concept. Anthropology is best known for its fieldwork by participant observation, yet this is only part of the methodology. The distinctive anthropological process of ‘problematizing’ relies on continually testing the ability of existing ideas or theories about society to explain the detail of what is experienced in the field. Out of this interplay analytical concepts like culture are generated and progressively refined. Some of the chapters in this book look to anthropology more for its fieldwork methods (indeed a few of the authors might not call themselves anthropologists) while others develop the distinctive problematizing process of anthropology in their analyses.

All of the authors contributed papers to the conference organized by GAPP (Group for Anthropology in Policy and Practice) on the anthropology of organizations held at University College Swansea in January 1991. The aim was to bring together researchers and practitioners engaging with anthropology whilst involved in the extensive contemporary organizational changes in the Third World and the West. Their work clustered around indigenous management, gender and organizational change, and empowerment of clients, the issues represented in the three parts of this book. It was found that all used various concepts of culture in their research and analysis. Anthropologists treated this in a ‘taken for granted’ fashion, but practitioners and participants from other disciplines encouraged us to subject this analytical concept to far more scrutiny. The book is therefore designed to be approached in two ways. Firstly, specialists in any of the three substantive issues covered by this book will find each part has an introduction which sets out current thinking in that
field, followed by chapters taking different approaches to the central issues. Secondly, the book is to be read for anthropological analyses of culture in organizations. The introduction is written with this in mind. By providing an historical account of the development of anthropological studies of organizations, and of the research and analytical methods used, it contextualizes the approaches to culture to be found in subsequent chapters. These historical studies of organizations are largely missing from accounts of the development of the discipline and one aim of discussing them in detail is to give this work on organizations more visibility within anthropology itself. There have however been a number of interchanges of ideas between anthropology and organization studies during their parallel histories, and the second aim is to show how anthropological approaches to culture can contribute to current developments in organization studies.

**EARLY ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF ORGANIZATIONS—THE HAWTHORNE EXPERIMENTS**

There were three periods when anthropologists made particular contributions to organizational studies. These were the 1920s, when both disciplines were in their early stages of development; the 1950s and 1960s; and the present. Each period of interaction reflected the development of the discipline’s methodology and of ideas about social organization and culture. Each raised a number of issues about participant observation, analysis of context and meaning, and refinement of analytical concepts, which continue to be relevant.

The history of organizational studies often starts with ‘Scientific Management’ (also called Taylorism, following Taylor’s paper of 1911, incorporated into his 1947 text). This took a manager-centred or top-down view of how to get right the production system within an organization. Production processes were divided into strictly demarcated tasks. The details of each task were investigated, and if physical conditions for the work were correct, the appropriate human behaviour and performance were meant to follow automatically. Between 1927 and 1932 a study of the Western Electric Hawthorne Plant in western Chicago and in Cicero, Illinois, was to test these scientific management principles. But, the story goes, with the help of anthropologists, they discredited these principles by discovering the social organization of the workplace and establishing the Human Relations school which was to dominate organizational studies for the next twenty-five years.

At first the research methods were ‘experiments’ dislocated from everyday working conditions. The Hawthorne management was testing the impact of changing physical conditions on output. They called on Harvard University for
help, where a Committee on Industrial Psychology had been set up with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. Elton Mayo, a psychologist, with a team of researchers from the university and the company, tested the effect of ten physical and incentive changes on fatigue levels of six women workers. They discovered the now disputed Hawthorne effect: the women’s output increased whatever changes were made and even when the women were returned to their original working conditions. The researchers attributed this to the effect of the experimental conditions. The women were in a special Relay Assembly Test Room which did not replicate their usual working conditions. They formed a tightly knit friendship group, with much less ‘apprehension of authority’ (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939:189) and took much more initiative in their relations with their supervisor than usual (Chapple 1953). In particular, the researchers took on a supervisory role and paid a great deal of sympathetic attention to the workers. The conclusion of the experimental work was that psychological factors were more important than physical conditions in achieving changes in output.

The second stage of the research adopted another method. To explore further the link between morale and supervision, and to provide materials for training supervisors, a large-scale interviewing programme was embarked upon. Between 1928 and 1930 a new Industrial Research Division in the company interviewed 21,126 workers (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939:204). This programme ended with the lay-offs of the Depression. Whilst the Industrial Research Division waited for an upturn, they compared the results of this large-scale programme of single interviews with individuals, which had proved difficult to analyse, with repeated interviews of a small group. This produced a finding which had escaped them before: social groups on shop floors were capable of very strong control over the work behaviour of individuals (1939:379).

To study the social organization of work groups, the team entered a third stage and introduced a further method: anthropological direct observation study. Mayo, who was a friend of leading anthropologists Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, brought in one of the latter’s students, Lloyd Warner. He had just returned from studying Aborigines in Australia and was keen to use anthropology in ‘modern’ societies. He helped the research team apply anthropological fieldwork techniques to the workplace (1939:389). The aim was to treat a shop floor as a small society in which every aspect of life was interconnected in a social system. However, because most shop floors consisted of more than a hundred workers they were too large and complex to study if ‘technical, administrative, supervisory and personal problems are all mixed up into one interacting whole’ (1939:385). Therefore three teams of three men who wired banks of switches for telephone offices, the three solderers who worked to them, and two inspectors (fifteen in all) were moved into a separate
room. In this Bank Wiring Observation Room the layout, the conditions of work, and the supervision replicated that on the shop floor. To test the impact of the experiment a base line study of output had been made in the preceding eighteen weeks.

The research was carried out by two staff from November 1931 to May 1932, although the later months were disrupted by lay-offs occasioned by the Depression. One researcher, the interviewer, remained an outsider to the group, believing this would enable the employees to talk about their attitudes. The other, the observer, stayed as unobtrusively as possible in the workroom and detailed the formal organization of the work process and the workers' informal organization, that is, their interactions, each individual's participation in groups, and expressions of solidarity. The aims were to treat the shop floor as a small society and to understand the function of the informal organization for the workers and its relation to the formal organization of the work.

Results of this research were analysed using Radcliffe-Brown’s idea of a social system; that is, actual interactions between people form a systematic whole. The three work units formed two cliques which organized spontaneous games whenever there was a lull: bets and games of chance, group candy purchases and binges. Friendships and antagonism were also sited within and between these groups, although helping each other with work (against the formal rules) was not confined to work groups or cliques and integrated all the men. Variations and discrepancies in the workers’ output were explained in terms of individual workers’ positions within the informal social organization (1939:520). All elements of the social organization had a function in a coherent informal system.

The informal system contrasted with the company’s formal system of rules and incentives which was designed to make it to the workers’ advantage to strive continually to increase output. Company records showed instead that most workers maintained Straight line’ output curves. Moreover, company records were at variance with the actual output recorded by the researchers. The workers went to great lengths to keep an even record of output, whilst carrying in their heads complicated yet accurate accounts of their under-and over-reporting. The workers had a shared idea of a standard day’s work, and thought it to their advantage to maintain a constant daily and weekly output. If the workers had a shared idea which was opposed to the assumptions of management, how did the researchers deal with the expectation, embedded in their methodology, that there would be consensus between workers and management?

In Third World societies anthropologists were concerned to demonstrate that a social system was informed by shared ideas which were logical, even if based on different premises to those of western middle-class observers. This idea was not transferred to the study. Roethlisberger and Dickson showed that
the workers had a shared idea about constant output underpinning their social organization, but they called this idea ‘sentiment’, and denied that it was rational and logical. They reported that the workers refused to respond to the company’s incentive scheme and kept to their constant output norms ‘in case something happened’. Roethlisberger and Dickson called this irrational: the workers were ‘non-logical’ and ‘not acting in accordance with their own economic interests’ (1939:533–4). Yet, from their report, it is possible to discern a logical position on the part of the workers. They were worried about short-time working and job cuts in the Depression. They feared that if they attained a higher output rate it might be set as the new target, with pay rates reduced, so they would have to work harder for the same income. This they took as further subordination by management. By resisting the company’s incentive scheme they were, as far as possible, ‘controlling’ the actions of management (1939:534). However, Roethlisberger and Dickson refer to this as non-rational ‘sentiments’: rationality remained the sole preserve of managers and researchers, reflecting the top-down stance of the analysis.

The interpretation was further confused when a social explanation of the workers’ behaviour was supplanted by an individually-based psychological one. Mayo claimed the workers’ irrational noncooperation with management was because of a frustrated urge to collaborate (Schwartzman 1993:14). Mayo concluded that the managers’ role was to create the conditions for spontaneous cooperation between workers through which their commitment to the achievements of the organization could be secured. In Hawthorne this was sought through a ‘non-directive counselling programme’ which tried to reproduce the cathartic effect of the previous mass interview programme. This blocked any further Hawthorne research into the workplace as a social system (Chapple 1953; Whyte 1991:187–8).

After the Bank Wiring Observation Room experiment there was a ten-year gap before anthropologists resumed attempts to combine analysis of workplaces as social systems with the devising of practical solutions to organizational problems. In 1943 two anthropologists, Lloyd Warner and Burleigh Gardner, established the Committee on Human Relations in Industry at Chicago University. They were joined by Whyte in 1944 and by colleagues from other departments (Whyte 1991:89). The programme was funded by six industrial companies (at the small sum of $3,600 each), later joined by Sears, Roebuck and Co (1991:89). The network of anthropologists spread. In 1946 Warner and Gardner set up a consulting company called Social Research Incorporated (Gardner 1977:172). Whyte went to the School of Industrial Relations at Cornell University. Warner’s students, Arensberg and Chapple, further developed industrial research at Harvard. In 1941 they established a professional Society for Applied Anthropology which received reports on
industrial research. In the 1940s and 1950s there were ethnographies of technological change, incentive systems and social organization of shop floor productivity. For example, Richardson and Walker (1948) identified changes to the ‘social framework’ of factory life and how these affected productivity when International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) introduced technological changes and doubled in size. Whyte (1948a) studied the restaurant industry; an attempt to increase productivity in Bundy Tubing Company (1948b); and concentrated on collective bargaining and industrial relations, including a study of a long strike (1951). This work is summarized in Baba 1986, Chapple 1953, Gardner 1977, and Holzberg and Giovannini 1981.

One of the great strengths of this Human Relations research was the application of anthropological fieldwork methods to make fine-grained ethnographies of factory units. The Bank Wiring Observation Room study remains a classic in the use of observation and interview methods. In later studies anthropologists developed other methods systematically to record the flows of interaction and communication within the spatial layout of organizations (Chapple 1953). These methods were applied with a standard of rigorousness which some feel we can learn from today.

One of the weaknesses of the Human Relations school was that the studies were top-down. That is, the agenda was derived from senior managers for whom ‘problems’ existed on the shop floor. The results were presented as a consensus, and in ways which were more suitable for managers to act upon than workers. Managers were not problematized in the same way. The studies did not examine the irrationality of managers’ ideas and actions from the point of view of workers, and did not produce results that workers could use to their advantage.

A further criticism is that the studies of social organization on the shop floor were not placed in a wider framework of social, political and economic systems. Whyte admits that they treated technology and ownership as constants rather than as capable of change (1991:90). In the modernization era, technological change and new management techniques in expanding industrial plants introduced contradictions and conflicts with which the prevailing equilibrium model of organizations could not cope. The studies did not speak to or critique these wider social processes. Both the top-down approach and the problem of conceptualizing small-scale studies in wider systems were treated differently by another school which started in Britain once Human Relations was well under way.