

The Cincinnati Human Relations Commission

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Introduction

Enter the phrase *human relations* into a search engine and you will get millions of hits, almost all having to do with the corporate management of employees. Check the phrase in a Merriam-Webster dictionary and the first definition is: “A study of human problems arising from organizational and interpersonal relations (*as in industry*)” (emphasis added). The *Encyclopedia Britannica* is more explicit. In entries under both *public administration* and *industrial relations*, the encyclopedia finds the origin of *human relations* in the pioneering efforts of Elton Mayo in the 1930s to develop ways to increase productivity at Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant near Chicago. That is not what this book is about.

The concept of human relations is often confused with race relations, social movements for civil rights, and international agreements guaranteeing human rights. Human relations encompasses, but is not limited to, considerations of race; for example, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, region of origin, physical and mental capacity are but a few of the other characteristics of concern in human relations. Human rights and civil rights are most often matters of local, state, and national laws as well as international agreements—violate these norms and charges may be brought, courts convened, and sanctions carried out on those convicted. Human relations does not involve accusations under the law, tribunals, or the imposition of penalties.

Let there be no doubt that the field of human relations is closely aligned with movements for human and civil rights. It is definitely a

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thread in the braided efforts for social justice among groups such as African Americans, women, Hispanics, and former felons, as well as LGBTQ, Jewish, Islamic, and indigenous people. There is clearly great overlap between human relations and the issues identified and acted upon by these and other groups. But there is a lot of confusion as well.

When the concepts of justice and rights are propounded in Western society the law is usually invoked as the arbiter of the outcomes being sought. Laws are established through political processes that distribute power in the social arena. Human relations is cognizant of, but does not directly concern itself with, the law, politics, or power.

Human relations is the endeavor to improve the social and interpersonal interactions among people, or simply put, to promote civility. It operates not in the realm of force or power or legal coercion, but in the realm of ethics, that is, the set of principles that govern a person's or a group's behavior. It operates best at the local level, from the bottom up, and complements larger-scale, top-down efforts to compel human behavior through legislation. Put bluntly, laws cannot change personal bias, prejudice, or bigotry. This is where the hard work of human relations occurs, in affecting thinking and beliefs that are often expressed in behavior. To the extent that beliefs and behaviors are changed, human relations is a secular moral endeavor to help people distinguish between socially good and bad opinions and, just as important, actions.

Beyond civility, understanding, and good will, however, lie structural problems that must also be addressed, chiefly in the areas of employment, housing, education, law enforcement, and public access (recreation, entertainment, dining, governmental programs, and so on). In his insightful essay "Whither Northern Race Relations Committees?" Robert Weaver writes, "It is often suggested that the Negro should lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is usually forgotten that his feet are set in concrete. The first steps must be aimed at breaking the concrete. If a community is taking actions to improve the status of its Negro citizens, it is making the most effective contribution toward changing attitudes and behavior patterns." These words were written in 1944, following the devastation of the Detroit race riots, just as municipal human and race relations committees were being set up in cities across the country, including Cincinnati.

This is why the Cincinnati Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee (MFRC) was founded. It brought together a large number of citizens

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with a wide spectrum of beliefs with the goal of using persuasion to get different groups in the city to interact with mutual respect. The committee itself provided the public with role models for cooperative behavior, along with research and educational projects meant to document adverse conditions affecting various groups in the city, and to show how they can be changed.

The MFRC was replaced by the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission (CHRC) in the 1960s, reflecting the rapid change in social relations that occurred during that decade. While some other municipal human-relations agencies moved into enforcement during this era, the CHRC remained true to its human-relations roots while becoming more involved in youth-oriented programs and establishing neighborhood contact through a cadre of field-workers.

Over a seventy-year history, first the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee then the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission have been emblematic of human-relations efforts across the nation. The agency has struggled to stay true to its own philosophy while adapting to social change, to use suasion in a culture that demands immediate and measurable results, and to operate effectively despite local political struggles. The history of the CHRC is a significant narrative within the larger civil rights movement and in the urban history of twentieth-century America. The CHRC's story is not one of unmitigated success but one of persistence through missteps and sometimes outright failures. Recounting the CHRC's history is not meant to valorize the commission but to document both its successes and disappointments; in doing so we acknowledge what a seemingly impossible yet necessary task improving urban human relations is. That is what this book is about.

METHOD

Throughout the volume we use the "posthole" method of historiography by focusing on themes we consider important for understanding the agency. Hundreds of boxes of archival materials spread across five libraries in three states make for some interesting reading, but we have condensed much of it for the sake of clarity and accessibility. Direct quotes from these records, reports, newsletters, speeches, memos, correspondence, and newspaper articles are presented to provide the reader with a first-person perspective; to the same end, the text includes

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portions of both archival and contemporary interviews with former MFRC and CHRC board and staff members. These methodological and format decisions are complemented by the detailed timeline provided in the appendices—history is made of many stories and the reader may find other compelling stories emerging from the timeline.

ORGANIZATION

This volume has been written and organized with the general reader in mind. A short preface in italics opens each chapter, summarizing selected local and national milestones (acts of Congress, executive orders, Supreme Court decisions, protests, and riots) that provide context for events in the nation and in Cincinnati that affected the agency's actions.

Although footnotes have not been used in the text, an extensive list of the sources consulted in developing the manuscript has been appended for scholarly use. The volume flows in chronological order, each chapter describing a decade in the work of the MFRC or the CHRC. Within each chapter, however, the narrative may reference past or future events in the agency's experience to show the interrelatedness of these circumstances. Photographs are presented to put faces on names and to highlight specific events.

The conclusion provides a broad perspective on Cincinnati's human relations efforts, placing them in the context of the American civil rights movement, relating them to similar efforts across the nation and pointing to the key role leadership played in these endeavors. In this light, the story of the CHRC becomes a case study illustrating the value of having a subtle but insistent voice for social justice within municipal government.

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