

# INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

C M TUSTIN

J FLOWERS

*Department of Industrial Psychology  
University of South Africa*

## ABSTRACT

Given the potential value of industrial psychology's contribution to the inter-disciplinary field of industrial relations, and given its rather indifferent past record in this respect, the purpose of this study is to clarify the role of industrial psychology in industrial relations. The opinions of registered industrial psychologists in South Africa were surveyed about those issues in which industrial psychology does have a role to play. Respondents confirmed an ongoing mutual indifference between the two fields but nevertheless supported the idea that industrial psychology has an important role to play in many industrial relations issues.

## OPSOMMING

Gegewe die potensiele waarde van die bedryfsielkunde se bydrae tot die interdisiplinêre studieveld van die arbeidsverhoudinge, en ook bedryfsielkunde se ietwat afsydige rekord hieromtrent in die verlede, is dit die doel van hierdie studie om die rol van die bedryfsielkunde in arbeidsverhoudinge toe te lig. Die menings van geregistreeerde bedryfsielkundiges in Suid-Afrika met betrekking tot daardie areas waar die bedryfsielkunde wel 'n rol te speel het, is ingewin. Respondente het bevestig dat die onderling afsydige verhouding tussen die twee dissiplines voortgesit word, maar het nietemin die gedagte ondersteun dat die bedryfsielkunde 'n belangrike rol in baie areas van die arbeidsverhoudinge te speel het.

The industrial relations field in South Africa is one of the most dynamic subsystems influencing the organisation (Schutte & Pieterse, 1989) due to the constant changes occurring in the macro-environment within which the state, employees and employers function. In addition to presenting many opportunities in the organisational arena (Kochan, 1991), such changes also demand responses from the actors involved in the industrial process in order to ensure healthy and harmonious industrial relations. Apart from being the fundamental aim of the field of industrial relations (Slabbert & Matthews, 1990), labour peace is also very important if a country's economy is to ever reach its full potential (Louw, 1990).

Of course, it is naive to expect that peace and harmony will always prevail as there is an inherent conflict of interest between employees and employers (Kochan, 1980). It is therefore essential to consider both conflict generation and resolution (Margerison, 1969) if ways are to be found to achieve a workable and equitable balance among the interests of all parties participating in the industrial relations process ("peaceful coexistence"). Labour peace or reconciliation is a function of the interdependent relationship between the employer and the employee, with the goals, interests and needs of both parties being constantly addressed.

In a changing South Africa, the employer-employee relationship aspect of industrial relations is crucial. There seems to be a growing realisation that the traditional collective bargaining process on its own is inadequate for nation-building but that it "will require a capacity for labour-management parties to move beyond the adversarialism inherent in their relationship, to a more open acknowledgement of their interdependence and the creative development of co-operative endeavour as well" (Anstey, 1990, p.9). In similar vein, Fourie, Moropodi, Backer and Innes (1990, p.37) state that "Unfortunately, industrial relations have over the past decade been practised in a very legalistic, cold fashion which has caused personnel management to become almost dehumanised. A decisive attempt will have to be made to bring a more human approach into industrial relations."

## INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

In spite of industrial relations being concerned with "rela-

tions" as such, industrial relations research has been dominated by economic, sociological, historical and legal analyses (Bluen, 1990), making it an extremely complex and often controversial subject. In this sense, Nicholson and Wall (1976) characterise industrial relations as a "muddy" ideological and moral philosophical field dominated by structural and political features with many rules.

Although industrial relations has been characterised as an interdisciplinary field of study involving professionals from such areas as the law, business economics, economics, sociology, personnel management and psychology, it cannot be confined into a single, narrow discipline (Bendix, 1989). All of these disciplines are relevant and have particular roles to play (Bain & Clegg, 1974). Arguing for the case of psychology as a discipline contributing to industrial relations, Bluen (1990) believes that psychology does not compete with the other social sciences in this respect but rather that it complements the work of the other disciplines involved in studying industrial relations.

Accepting in principle that psychology is an important discipline (with vast potential) contributing to the study of industrial relations, in practice it has been woefully neglected (Stephenson & Brotherton, 1979; Hartley & Kelly, 1986) and the one relevant discipline which is conspicuously absent (Bain & Clegg, 1974). This is particularly the case in South Africa, a fact reflected in the lack of research in labour-management relations and the general indifference of textbooks, journals and psychologists to labour issues (Fullagar, 1984). Although there has been a resurgence of psychological interest in industrial relations during the 1980's (Hartley, 1988), Barling (1988) finds that there is nevertheless a continuing neglect between the two disciplines.

Given that industrial psychology can be of value to the interdisciplinary field of industrial relations, and given its rather neglectful past in this respect, the necessity of researching the role of industrial psychology in industrial relations is apparent. Hartley and Kelly (1986) suggest that it is important to not simply exhort psychologists to engage in industrial relations research because this has been tried repeatedly and has failed. They recommend rather that the blind spots of psychology and industrial relations should be explored with the view to, firstly, establishing the reasons therefore

and, secondly, arguing that each discipline can contribute to the other. It is important therefore that what is distinctively psychological in the area of industrial relations is recognised as such and is clearly distinguishable from other disciplinary approaches.

Given the above background, clarification of the industrial psychologist's role in industrial relations is deemed extremely important and urgent in the development of a psychology of industrial relations for a number of reasons:

- to assist industrial psychologists in their efforts to facilitate and develop sound and healthy employer-employee relations
- to suggest future research projects regarding the psychological factors which influence the industrial relations system
- to assist with the education and training of students in the psychology of industrial relations.

## METHOD

As an initial attempt to assist with the clarification of the industrial psychologist's role, a questionnaire was developed and sent on 1 August 1990 to all 519 industrial psychologists registered with the South African Medical and Dental Council. On 20 August 1990, a follow-up letter was mailed to remind potential respondents about the questionnaire and again urged them to participate. A total of 257 completed questionnaires were received, representing a response rate of 49,52 percent. Only two questionnaires could not be used for further analyses.

### The questionnaire

The general aim of the questionnaire was to obtain the opinions of industrial psychologists in South Africa about the role of industrial psychology in industrial relations. Given that industrial psychologists are involved in a variety of specialities across all industries in South Africa and, by nature of their jobs, have a good understanding of the labour situation in the country, their participation in this study was deemed especially appropriate.

In developing and designing the questionnaire, the following aims were borne in mind, namely:

- to obtain information regarding the extent to which industrial relations currently constitutes a part of the total function of industrial psychologists
- to obtain opinions about the overall and specific roles of industrial psychology in industrial relations
- to establish the extent of industrial psychology's indifference towards:
  - *trade unions* by ascertaining how much work of an industrial psychological nature is performed specifically on behalf of trade unions by industrial psychologists
  - *industrial relations in general* by obtaining information about the number of publications by industrial psychologists of an industrial relations nature but having a distinctly psychological approach
- to ascertain opinions about the nature of training in industrial relations received by industrial psychologists

Given the initially investigative nature of the research, the major purpose of this article is merely to report on the findings of the survey and not to evaluate or discuss the results.

## RESULTS

### Industrial relations as a part of the industrial psychologist's job

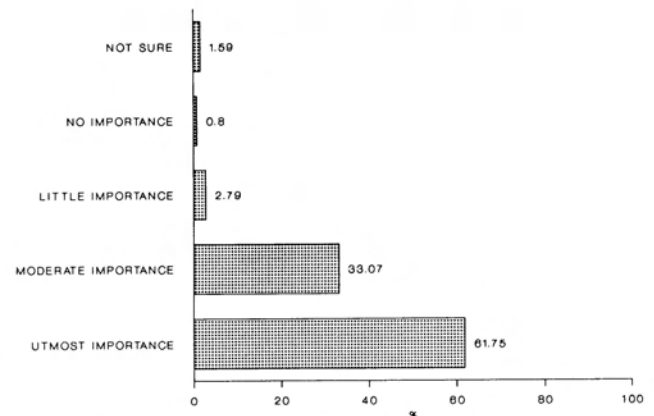
Respondents were asked to what extent industrial relations as a job descriptive category constituted a part of their present total function. Only 27,23 percent of respondents indicated that it formed a *large part* of their jobs, 11,49 percent a *moderate part*, 20,43 a *little part* and 40,85 *no part at all*. These figures possibly suggest that industrial relations is a more

specialised and limited field within industrial psychology. However, although only just more than one third (38,72 percent) are directly involved in it to a moderate or large extent, it is nevertheless important to note that most industrial psychologists are deeply involved with other important issues (such as human resource development, organisational planning and development, performance appraisal, and recruitment and selection) which have a considerable influence on the industrial relations scenario in organisations.

### Role of industrial psychology

Respondents were first asked how important they considered the *overall* role of the industrial psychologist in industrial relations to be. The results are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Importance of overall role of industrial psychology in industrial relations



In spite of the fact that only just over a quarter of industrial psychologists report that industrial relations constitutes a large part of their jobs, it is clearly evident from Figure 1 that there is nevertheless strong support for industrial psychology's overall role in industrial relations with 94,82 percent of respondents indicating that it is of moderate or of utmost importance. However, it should also be noted that there are still some respondents, albeit it a minority, who disagree or are not sure. This is perhaps a function of the mutual neglect of industrial psychology and industrial relations as mentioned earlier.

Given these generally very positive sentiments, how important do industrial psychologists in South Africa consider their role to be in *specific* industrial relations issues? To investigate this matter, respondents were asked how important they considered the industrial psychologist's role in each of 27 different industrial relations issues to be. These results are illustrated in Table 1. The industrial relations issues in this table have been arranged in rank order beginning with those which *most* respondents considered either of moderate or of utmost importance for the industrial psychologist and ending with those which the *least* respondents considered either of moderate or of utmost importance.

The only industrial relations issues which less than 50 percent of respondents considered to be either of *moderate* or of *utmost* importance for the industrial psychologist were the following:

- Safety (47,56 percent)
- Contract administration (28 percent)

In other words, the majority of respondents consider most of the industrial relations issues (25 of the 27 issues) to be of more than just a little importance for industrial psychology. The first 12 issues in Table 1 (beginning with "management-labour communication" and ending with "IR training-middle management") were particularly well supported with more than 80 percent of respondents considering these issues to be of *moderate* or of *utmost* importance.

**TABLE 1**  
**IMPORTANCE OF THE ROLE OF INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ISSUES**

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ISSUE	IMPORTANCE					TOTAL
	Not sure	Of no importance	Of little importance	Of moderate importance	Of utmost importance	
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Management-labour communication	1,19	0,40	4,37	30,56	63,49	100,00
Conflict resolution & management	0,00	0,40	5,60	24,40	69,60	100,00
Quality of work life	1,19	1,59	6,35	36,11	54,76	100,00
Strike behaviour, causes & handling	1,20	1,60	8,00	33,60	55,60	100,00
Productivity improvement	0,40	2,38	10,71	34,52	51,98	100,00
Negotiation/collective bargaining	2,79	2,39	8,76	37,05	49,00	100,00
IR training – top management	1,59	3,17	9,92	34,13	51,19	100,00
Mediation	1,60	2,80	11,20	42,40	42,00	100,00
Union-worker dynamics	1,98	4,76	9,52	29,37	54,37	100,00
IR research	1,19	4,76	12,30	38,10	43,56	100,00
Equal opportunity programmes	1,59	3,17	13,49	36,90	44,84	100,00
IR training – middle management	1,98	3,17	14,29	40,48	40,08	100,00
Grievance handling	2,40	4,80	15,60	44,40	32,80	100,00
IR policy & procedures	3,98	7,17	15,14	37,45	36,25	100,00
Management-labour meetings	2,38	7,14	17,46	40,08	32,94	100,00
IR training – lower management	2,38	5,95	19,84	39,29	32,54	100,00
Employee participation schemes	3,61	6,83	18,88	46,99	23,69	100,00
Disciplinary action	3,59	4,78	23,90	45,42	22,31	100,00
IR training – shop stewards	3,97	6,75	21,83	41,67	25,79	100,00
Arbitration	3,98	7,57	21,91	40,24	26,29	100,00
IR training – union officials	3,97	10,71	19,44	34,92	30,95	100,00
Absenteeism programmes	2,02	8,06	30,65	39,92	19,35	100,00
Health & welfare	3,61	11,65	29,72	36,95	18,07	100,00
Labour legislation	4,42	14,86	29,32	30,52	20,88	100,00
Minimum wage levels	4,76	14,68	30,16	35,32	15,08	100,00
Safety	6,10	15,45	30,89	36,99	10,57	100,00
Contract administration	6,40	27,60	38,00	22,40	5,60	100,00

The percentage of respondents who felt that industrial psychologists had *no role* to play in the various issues remained constantly low (all below 16 percent) except for one issue ("contract administration") which recorded a higher percentage (27.6).

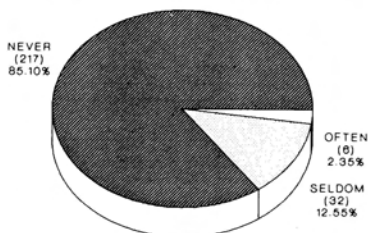
These results indicate quite clearly that industrial psychology should be concerned with a broad spectrum of industrial relations issues ranging from the dynamics of strikes to quality of work life, from conflict resolution and management to industrial relations training, from arbitration to industrial relations research.

In addition, only ten of the respondents (3,92 percent) listed additional industrial relations issues not included in the questionnaire, indicating that the list of issues provided in the questionnaire was fairly exhaustive. These additional issues, which were considered by the ten respondents to be of varying degrees of importance for the industrial psychologist, included psychological testing, analysis of external influences, remuneration structures and personnel reduction.

**Industrial psychology's indifference towards industrial relations**

To establish some idea of industrial psychology's neglect of trade unions, a question was included which asked the respondent directly to what extent he/she performed work of an industrial psychological nature specifically on behalf of trade unions. These results are illustrated in Figure 2.

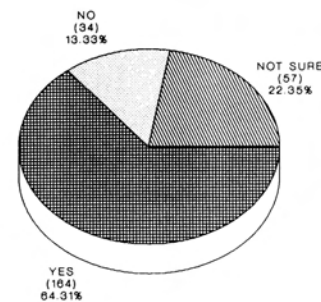
**Figure 2: Extent of industrial psychological work performed on behalf of trade unions**



The vast majority of respondents (85,1 percent) have never performed any such work for trade unions. For various reasons beyond the scope of this article, the blame for this state of affairs cannot only be placed on industrial psychology's doorstep but also on that of the trade unions.

As a follow-up to the fore-going question, the following question was asked: *Do you feel that the South African industrial psychologist should perform more work of an industrial psychological nature specifically on behalf of trade unions?* The results are presented diagrammatically in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Should more industrial psychological work be performed on behalf of trade unions?**

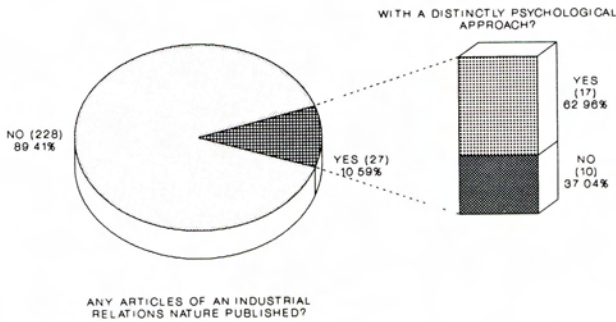


Here the results were not quite as clear-cut but nevertheless more affirmative than negative, with 64,31 percent of respondents answering positively. This suggests that there is room and support for industrial psychology to expand its horizons to include trade unions in its arena of activities. The reason for the relatively large percentage of respondents (22,35 percent) indicating that they were "not sure" could possibly be

due to their not being familiar with possible areas where they could be of assistance to trade unions

To establish industrial psychology's indifference towards industrial relations in general, information was obtained from respondents about whether they, firstly, had ever personally had any articles of an industrial relations nature published in a scientific journal and, secondly, if so, whether such articles provided a distinctly psychological approach to the particular topics discussed. Figure 4 provides these results.

**Figure 4: Articles of an industrial relations nature published in scientific journals**



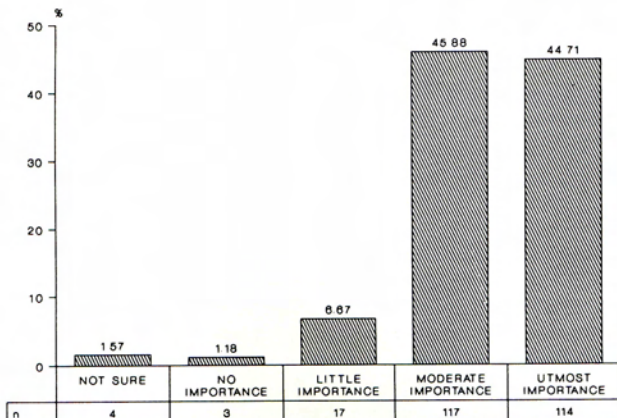
In keeping with the fact reported earlier that few industrial psychologists are involved to a large extent with industrial relations, it is not surprising that only 10,59 percent of respondents have published articles of an industrial relations nature. What is particularly disconcerting is that of these published articles, 37,04 percent did not provide a distinctly psychological approach to the topic under discussion.

In general, the results reported above confirm a relatively extensive neglect of industrial relations by industrial psychologists in South Africa.

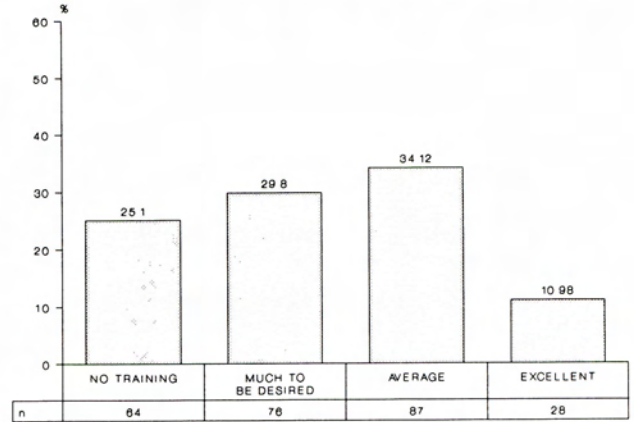
**Nature of training in industrial relations**

To ascertain opinions about the nature and adequacy of training and educational programmes in industrial relations received by industrial psychologists in South Africa (in order to identify areas of future focus for training purposes), four questions were asked. The first two questions concentrated on industrial relations systems, structures, processes and procedures (the "mechanics" of industrial relations) while the other two questions focussed on the application of psychological theory and knowledge to industrial relations issues. The results of these four questions are presented in Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8.

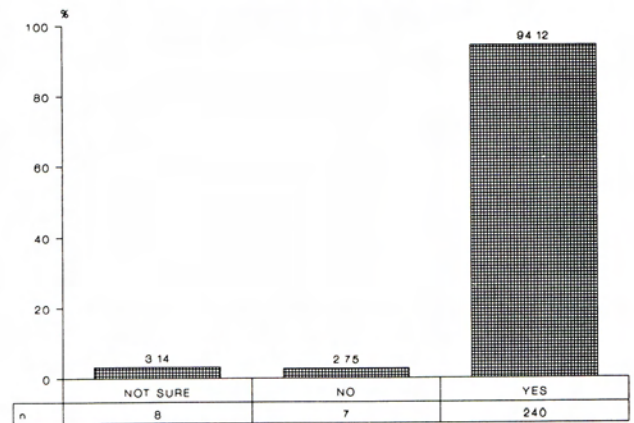
**Figure 5: Importance of training in the "mechanics" of industrial relations**



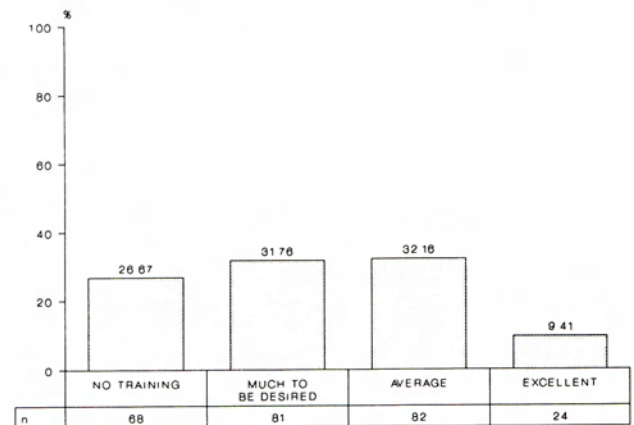
**Figure 6: Adequacy of formal training in the "mechanics" of industrial relations**



**Figure 7: Should psychological aspects of industrial relations be included in training?**



**Figure 8: Adequacy of formal training in psychological aspects of industrial relations**



From these figures, it is evident that training and education for industrial psychologists in the field of industrial relations should include both the "mechanics" of industrial relations and the application of psychological theory and knowledge to industrial relations issues. The adequacy of formal training received by respondents in these two areas appears to be dismal, as 54,9 percent of respondents declared that the training that they had personally received in the "mechanics" of industrial relations left much to be desired or was non-existent. Likewise, 58,43 percent felt the same about their training received in the application of psychological theory and knowledge to industrial relations issues.

Very few felt that their training had been excellent in these two areas (10,98 percent and 9,41 percent respectively). This

further substantiates the indifference displayed by industrial psychology towards industrial relations, which requires further attention in both areas. It is important to bear in mind that some universities currently training industrial psychologists do include or are considering including industrial relations in their training programmes, but the above results do suggest that a definite urgency is required in this respect.

### CONCLUSION

The research described above had its origins in the continuing evidence of mutual indifference which industrial psychology and industrial relations, as two separate yet interrelated fields of study, have displayed towards each other. Despite this indifference, the results described here support the notion that industrial psychology does have a meaningful role to play in many industrial relations issues. It is probable that, in the years ahead, more, rather than less, such involvement will occur in South Africa as our society develops a keener appreciation of the worth, dignity and self-respect that the worker deserves as a human being. Now, more than ever, industrial psychology is provided with the ideal opportunity to show its true mettle.

### REFERENCES

- Anstey, M. (1990). Worker participation: concepts and issues. In Anstey, M. (ed.), *Worker participation*. Kenwyn: Juta.
- Bain, G.S. & Clegg, H.A. (1974). A strategy for industrial relations research in Great Britain. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 12, 91-113.
- Barling, J. (1988). Industrial relations – a “blind spot” in the teaching, research and practice of industrial/organizational psychology. *Canadian Psychology*, 29(1), 103-108.
- Bendix, S. (1989). *Industrial relations in South Africa*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Bluen, S.D. (1990). *Industrial relations and psychology – a research perspective*. Paper presented at the Eighth Annual Congress of the Psychological Association of South Africa.
- Fourie, G.F., Moropodi, M.J., Backer, W. & Innes, D. (1990). Training in industrial relations. In Slabbert, J.A., Prinsloo, J.J. & Backer, W. (eds.), *Managing industrial relations in South Africa*. Pretoria: Digma.
- Fullagar, C. (1984). Psychology and labour: a relationship of neglect. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 14, 95-100.
- Hartley, J. (1988). Psychology and industrial relations: social processes in organisations. *International Journal of Comparative Labour Law and Industrial Relations*, 4, 53-60.
- Hartley, J. & Kelly, J. (1986). Psychology and industrial relations: from conflict to cooperation? *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 59(3), 161-176.
- Kochan, T.A. (1980). *Collective bargaining and industrial relations*. Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc.
- Kochan, T.A. (1991). Interview with Prof. Kochan. *IPM Journal*, 9(6), 4-8.
- Louw, E. (1990). Labour peace top priority with Minister Louw. *Human Resource Management*, January, 4-6.
- Margerison, C.J. (1969). What do we mean by industrial relations? A behavioural science approach. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 7, 272-286.
- Nicholson, N. & Wall, T. (1976). Psychology's place in industrial relations. *Personnel Management*, 8, 22-25.
- Schutte, P.C. & Pieterse, D.J.C. (1989). Challenges facing the IR practitioner in South Africa of the future. *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, 13(3), 45-56.
- Slabbert, J.A. & Matthews, P.J. (1990). The field of study of industrial relations. In Slabbert, J.A., Prinsloo, J.J. & Backer, W. (eds.), *Managing industrial relations in South Africa*. Pretoria: Digma.
- Stephenson, G.M. & Brotherton, C.J. (1979). *Industrial relations: a social psychological approach*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Tustin, C.M. (1991). *The role of industrial psychology in industrial relations: a South African perspective*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Pretoria: University of South Africa.