

## An Overview of the Concept of Organisational Culture

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**Abstract:** Organisational culture may be considered as the shared way of being, thinking and acting in a collective of coordinated people with reciprocal expectations; it is shaped, disseminated, learned and changed over time, providing some predictability in every organisation. This study seeks to contribute to a clarification of the concept of organisational culture, so often defined in different ways and with distinct guidelines for application. Results allow concluding that this interdisciplinary concept is multidimensional and its mobilisation involves being aware of scientific implications, either theoretical or methodological, involved in its apprehension and analysis, so as to better control these complexities.

**Key words:** Organisational culture, multidimensional concept, complexity, interdisciplinarity, implications

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### INTRODUCTION

Organisational culture is a fairly established field within organisational studies and sociology of organisations. However, the mobilisation of the concept of organisational culture, even at present, some 40 years after having started to be used in a more systematic manner and with higher visibility, shows that there are still clear and sometimes large differences at distinct levels: in its definition, in its functions, in the methodology recommended for its apprehension as well as in the usefulness of researching organisational culture, among others (Alvesson, 2013; Dauber *et al.*, 2012; Martin and Frost, 2012; Schein, 2010; Torres, 2011). All this hampers the scientific legitimacy of the look focused on organisational culture in the analysis of organisations.

This is the context in which the present discussion aims at contributing, in some measure, to clarify the perspective of organisational culture. To this end, it begins by presenting a definition of culture, focusing, then, on the origin, guidelines and research scopes of organisational culture after which its content, levels of analysis, respective articulation and attainment methodologies are put forward. The analysis ends with the issue of the possibility and usefulness of studying organisational culture.

### INDETERMINACY OF THE MEANING OF CULTURE

The concept of culture reveals a certain uncertainty in its definition, although, it often seem obvious, given the social familiarity with which it is used. The concept of culture is used in various situations such as cultured person, national culture, professional culture, ethnic

culture, group culture, youth culture, cultural identity, regional culture and organisational culture. The variations in the meaning of culture according to the social contexts in which this concept is employed contribute for this uncertainty as well as those that have occurred over time (leading, sometimes to the coexistence of several meanings) (Cuche, 2006).

Even from the perspective of the humanities and social sciences there are mismatched proposals for the definition of culture as well as changes in the concept of culture over time (Cuche, 2006). Nevertheless, these sciences share the attempt to know what they perceive to be culture in a descriptive manner (as it is) as opposed to a notion of culture that is either scholarly as cultivated and literate culture, in the sense of civilizational sophistication or encyclopaedic, considered as the field of large information or regulatory as ideal precepts to attain and fulfil or even a perspective of essentialist culture as a feature that is special, unique, unchanging over time and that defines an entity.

The various proposals for the scientific definition of the concept of culture are embodied in several positions with respect to the definition of its content, to the methodology for its attainment and to the appropriateness and usefulness of its study.

Notwithstanding these disagreements, culture as an initial impulse for its further clarification, may be considered as the ways of feeling, thinking and doing, shared by a group of people that are apprehended, interpreted, produced and reproduced over time by the members of a collective and that ascribe certain patterns of regularity and predictability.

This culture predictability, translated into standards of practices and values is always relative and does not

prevent individual autonomy, given three factors: on the one hand, culture is never an harmonic whole clearly defined in a perfectly integrated and consistent whole; on the other hand, the various actors do not consider and interpret the cultural elements exactly the same way; finally, the individual is never strictly determined by culture, existing room for individual freedom. Hence, the degree of predictability needs to be verified at the empirical level in each specific situation.

Bearing in mind that these forms, more or less shared, result from contacts established between the actors, both individual and collective, it may be concluded that culture, in addition to being a state is a constantly recreated process of configuration and reconfiguration that happens in a socially located historic space-time.

These social contacts may happen either at the individual or at the group level, always integrated in a broader context, in line with Oeiras (1998), who distinguishes three analytical levels: social relationships as individual interactions that occur framed and conditioned by the level of social connections that take place between structured groups in a particular social hierarchy and these two levels fall under the social frames (the social frame of reference composed throughout history). There are mutual interpenetrations between these three levels and social relationships materialise the production and reproduction of the other levels. All this implies considering these three levels in the analysis of any social process, hence, also when it comes to studying culture.

For all that the convening and mobilisation of the concept of culture as an explicit way of envisaging the organisation implies noting that in any organisation as it is a process that is socially constructed over time, collective patterns are generated which are shared to a greater or lesser extent, of attribution of meaning and to do things in that context that may be considered culture: “any social unit that has some kind of shared history will have evolved a culture” (Schein, 2004). The cultural reading of the organisation will be addressed hereafter.

#### **ORIGIN, GUIDELINES AND RESEARCH SCOPES OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE**

Several authors have contributed to the origin, visibility, improvement and consolidation of organisational culture as a scientific concept. In addition to the fact that authors are diverse and in certain circumstances with varying contributions, it is sometimes difficult to define with precision the specific contribution of each author to the development of this concept.

When searching the origin of the concept of organisational culture and despite the fact that interest has already been noted earlier, often in not obvious ways

“the use of culture as a management tool has preceded its own conceptualisation” (Torres, 2004), the 1980s witnessed an increase in written production focusing on organisational culture.

Organisational culture began to attain scientific and social visibility, especially in the United States of America, in the early 1980s with the organisation of a number of scientific meetings and the production of numerous works which contributed to its popularisation. In this sense, highlighting some of the written productions that contributed most to this visibility of organisational culture, the journalistic article “Corporate culture: the hard-to-change values that spell success or failure” earns prominence. This research was published in 1980 in the journal *Business Week* and was followed by other publications in the management field, either in this same journal or in *Fortune* and *The New York Times* and in other journalistic publications. Similarly, in this decade references from several authors in books and scientific journals emerge such as Pettigrew (On studying organizational cultures in 1979), Hofstede (Culture’s consequences: international differences in work-related values in 1980), Pascale and Athos (The art of Japanese management in 1981), Ouchi (Theory Z: how American business can meet the Japanese challenge in 1981), Deal and Kennedy (Corporate culture. The rites and rituals of the corporate life in 1982), Peters and Waterman (In search of excellence: Lessons from America’s best-run companies in 1982) and Kanter (The change master: Innovations for productivity in the American Corporation in 1983). Also worthy of note are the special issues on organisational culture of the following journals: *Administrative Science Quarterly* and *Organizational Dynamics* in 1983, Kilmann, Saxton and Serpa (Gaining control of corporate culture in 1985), Frost, Moore, Louis, Lundberg and Martin (Organizational culture in 1985) and Schein (Coming to a new awareness of organizational culture in 1984 and Organizational culture and leadership in 1985) (Freitas, 2007). As an illustration of the spread of interest in organisational culture in this period also in the academic world, reference can be also made, for example, to the special issues on organisational culture of the following scientific journals: *The Journal of Management Studies* (1982), *Revue Française de Gestion* (1984) and *Journal of Management* (1985) (Neves, 2004).

Most of the aforementioned publications fall within the area of leadership, management and administration of companies and industries, illustrating the centrality of this area in the origin and visibility of organisational culture. However, Torres (2004) extends this perspective, emphasising the importance of works on organisational culture in schools in this attention ascribed to organisational culture without however, attaining the same popularity as the publications focused in the area of business management and leadership.

Scientific, economic and social reasons which have inter-influenced each other have underlain the interest in and the visibility of organisational culture. Scientific reasons, regarding the recognition of the limits of either the “rationalist theoretical models” or of the methodology of the time to explain the organisation which had direct consequences in the poor reliability of the proposed organisational changes (Neves, 2004). Economic reasons, in a context deeply influenced by the economic success of Japanese companies with other cultures, concurrently with the competitive difficulties of American companies (Neves, 2004). This led to the need to mobilise the concept of organisational culture in an instrumental form of management, so as to increase productivity, in a pragmatic perspective of development of a strong culture that would allow the economic success of companies and factories. Finally, social reasons, resulting in the organisational culture as a tempting answer, through organisations, to the difficulties of integration, uncertainty and social identification that have occurred in the West as a consequence of economic development (Alvesson, 2013; Freitas, 2007). Torres (2004) makes a summary of the conditions frequently reported as underlying the interest in organisational culture, stating that:

In a broader context of economic recession that hit significantly Western societies during the seventies, a number of factors that would have caused the interest in the study of organisational culture are put forward: the alleged failure of the traditional model of organisation and management and the concomitant movement of SMEs’ valuation (popularised by the expression *small is beautiful*); the development of the process of organisations’ internationalisation and the possible need to manage the resulting cultural variations; the worldwide success of the Japanese management model and the valuation of organisations’ cultural specificities (e.g., team spirit, corporate pride, workers’ morale); the consequent loss of competitiveness of the American economy when compared with the emerging Asian economies; the much-vaunted cultural disintegration caused by the increase in the size of organisations and the resulting test of new forms of control based on cultural manipulation; the expansion of the services sector, the diversification of professional activities and the increasing professionalization of workers with impact on the formation and regulation of new subcultures at the organisational level among other relevant factors

To these conditions which are more directly linked to economic administration, Torres (2004) adds factors that are specific of the school context such as: the demand for the improvement in the quality of public school, in an attempt to help overcome the economic crisis of the seventies; the turbulence created in the educational system by its mass access; the unblinding of the school’s meritocratic assumptions and the search to maximise resources for a growing effectiveness of action as conditions that had also an influence on the turn for greater attention upon the school’s meso level and particularly upon cultural and symbolic aspects.

Concerning the Portuguese reality, the interest in organisational culture emerged in the late 1980s with some visibility of organisational culture in the 1990s in works of theoretical and/or empirical nature, focusing on business or school settings but in a mitigated manner, both in terms of production and in terms of its popularisation and it did not follow the Anglo-Saxon interest where organisational culture was a “research fashion” (Torres, 2004) at the corporate and school level.

Also in the institutional consolidation of organisational culture there were differences both at the international and national level, in view of the respective specificities and in both contexts, the business/industrial and school scope was highlighted. In this establishment of organisational culture, there is a growing prominence, along with scientific developments, of social and economic factors related to the demand for an organisational culture that is prepared for the changes in an increasingly globalised world as well as to contribute to a better profitability of resources and adequacy of organisations (businesses, schools and other organisations) to their public. In Portugal, this institutional establishment happened and still happens, on a smaller scale than at the international level and is materialised predominantly on academic works that address mainly companies and public school.

Today and despite the consolidation attained by the cultural perspective as a scientific domain of organisational analysis with the spread of its application to various issues and its expansion to numerous contexts such as health organisations, public administration, government agencies and non-profit associations (Torres, 2004), there are both distinct positions within this perspective and critical positions towards organisational culture.

A review of research carried out internationally and in Portugal that selects organisational culture as a specific and explicit research object reveals variations in the guidelines, problems and research areas of these works. They are characterised by a great diversity of goals,

adopted conceptual perspectives of organisational culture and methodological processes for its apprehension as well as a great variety of studied organisations which justifies the need for clarification of organisational culture, in this “nebula of organisational culture” (Torres, 2004).

This diversity of conceptions of organisational culture with their respective implications is usually justified, on the one hand given the different theoretical and methodological perspectives adopted and on the other hand, by the various purposes of researchers and consultants of organisational culture (Neves, 2004). To these reasons may also be added those that come from the private interests of land marking in this scientific field which hinder the dialogue and enhance a plurality of looks (Martin and Frost, 2012).

Despite this diversity in the research on organisational culture present in the guidelines ascribed to research, work objectives, concept of organisational culture considered and its operationalization, types of organisation studied, methodologies implemented and consequently, results (Schein, 2010; Dauber *et al.*, 2012; Alvesson, 2013), there are generally speaking, two orientations that pervade all of these studies, both guiding the and emerging from the research on organisational culture: a more pragmatic and prescriptive guideline, focusing on improving organisations’ productivity, effectiveness and efficiency and a guideline that is more focused on the interpretation and understanding of the organisational functioning.

These two trends are reported by Costa (2003) in an analysis that summarises the cultural reading of the school organisation:

- The first, related to “corporate culture”, prescriptive, advocating management by culture, seeking to intervene in all symbolic aspects that allow identity building and organisational effectiveness
- The second, of an interpretative nature, understands cultural and symbolic manifestations on the basis of interests, differences and conflicts, enhancing, thus, cultures (subcultures and countercultures) present in the organisational arena

The first trend, more prescriptive and pragmatic, focuses its attention on the use of culture, especially by leaders, executives and managers as an instrumental variable to be manipulated to the resolution of practical problems found in organisations. This mainstream, despite internal differences, stresses the integrative function of organisational culture and its importance for increasing efficiency and productivity, being dominant in

studies of organisational culture in the area of administration and management of organisations and human resources.

This utilitarian perspective seeks to explain what happens and why things occur in the organisation through a relationship between variables, essentially with the purpose of diagnosing assessing and measuring, so as to improve the functioning of the organisation, through proposals for manipulating its culture. The very term “corporate culture” (or culture of the corporation) is used more frequently in works that emphasise the integrative function and the cohesion ascribed to the strong culture in the organisation, in a homogeneous whole, mainly but not only in a business and industrial context with a prescriptive analysis that has the instrumental purpose of culture management or manipulation and in certain circumstances, it is used as a synonym of organisational culture in this perspective. Sometimes, in this cultural reading, besides the designation of “corporate culture”, the designation of “business culture” (company culture or enterprise culture) also emerges. The prescriptive-oriented works, in the search for an increasingly efficient organisational culture are more focused on industries and companies and there is in Portugal, a growing mobilisation of these works to other universes such as school administration.

Concerning the interpretative trend, the main objective focuses on the analysis of the organisation at the level of what happens, how it happens and why it happens as a result of the interaction between all organisational actors with their inherent discontinuities. This perspective, despite internal disagreements, evidences the possibility that organisational culture does not work in such an inclusive and uniform way as seen in the prescriptive approach, being more receptive to the possibility of (co)existence of various cultures within the same organisation. In Portugal, this interpretative approach has been developed particularly in the school context, namely in academic work, notwithstanding the fact that at the international level, the managerial perspective (more prescriptive) takes precedence even in school settings (Torres, 2004, 2006).

In these guidelines of research, either managerial or interpretative, at the national and international levels, the variety of organisations studied stands out but with clear preponderance for businesses, industries and schools.

All things considered, it is clear that mobilising a look upon the organisation’s culture implies specifying aspects linked to its very definition (the respective constituent elements). This aspect will be further developed below.

## **DIVERSITIES IN THE CONTENT OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE**

The application of the cultural perspective to the study of organisations, despite being extremely plural and varied, involves a highlight of significant elements with different levels of visibility that are more or less shared by the members of the organisation and transmitted to new members through learning in time.

In the cultural perspective, one cannot speak of a widely accepted definition when it comes to organisational culture. In an illustration focused on some of the different meanings of the concept of organisational culture applied to the school context, Barroso (2006) identifies three types of connotations that are present in the approach to school culture that should be considered: the functionalist perspective which considers school culture as the dominant culture defined externally in society and transmitted by the academic institution (by school) “which is translated into the principles, goals and standards determined by the political power (social, economic, religious) as composing the substrate of the educational process and of the children and young people’s acculturation process” (p. 42); the structuralist perspective which perceives school culture as the culture produced by school (the specific culture that characterises the School Model) as “culture that pertains to school (as an educational institution) built on the long-term of the historical process that gave rise to it and which translates into values, images, symbols, norms, structures, routines, processes, produced and preserved by it” (p. 46); the school system does not just transmit the global culture (with parallels to Prosser (1999)’s “generic culture” as the cultures of organisations that have similarities such as hospitals, prisons, banks and schools or groups of schools such as private schools, public schools) and finally, the interactionist perspective, in which school culture is the organisational culture of the school, the culture of (each) school in its uniqueness and specificity, “the organisational elements and processes that identify the ethos of a particular school such as values, beliefs, ideologies, norms, behaviours, routines, habits, symbols, etc.”(p. 56) (with similarities with Prosser (1999)’s “unique culture”, considering that the members of the organisation interpret the generic culture with some freedom which causes the creation of a unique, distinctive culture of each organisation).

Adding other connotations of organisational culture in the school context, it may be stated that Prosser (1999) alludes to the “wider culture”, focusing on the relationships with the exterior such as national culture and schools’ culture as well as to the “perceived culture”, organisational culture as perceived by members and/or by individuals outside the school organisation.

Torres (2004) also highlights the importance of distinguishing different levels of analysis of organisational culture in schools; researcher identifies four axes in the study and analysis of organisational culture:

- Of exogenous cultural orientations (school culture), materialised in formal rules
- Of endogenous cultural appropriations (school organisational culture), processed on the basis of the development of plural action logics (social games), analytically represented by non-formal, informal and actually updated rules
- Of the apprehension of the relationships between the insides and the outsides of the school organisation, from the level of permeabilisation of school to the surrounding environment/community
- Consequently, of the nature of cultural manifestations encapsulated in time and that confer a distinctive cultural identity

The sedimentation of this cultural heritage through its appropriation also in its informal and non-formal dimension in a specific historic and social time is designated by Torres (2004) as organisational culture of school: “as the cultural specificities of school (organisational culture of school) were consolidated, they have led concurrently to the legitimacy and strengthening of school organisational culture”.

Thus, summing up, we have the ideal or preferred organisational culture as what must/should be the official proposed organisational culture, the generic organisational culture of similar organisations, the organisational culture declared by the actors, the organisational culture perceived by the members and/or the outside of the organisation and finally, the organisational culture as the specific culture that may be found in an organisation.

Notwithstanding these denotations, Neves (2004) systematises a set of ideas that according to him are often associated to the concept of organisational culture:

- A frame of reference that is common and shared by a significant number of people
- Socially developed, learned and transmitted in behavioural, cognitive and emotional terms
- Composed of several layers, some more peripheral and visible and some more profound and invisible
- Wherein the basic core is composed of fundamental assumptions that others also call values

- That provides people with rules and guidelines in terms of perceiving, thinking and feeling the problems of organisational functioning from the standpoint of internal integration and external adaptation
- That contributes to the definition of organisational identity
- With symbolic features, revealed by the meaning expressed in its most observable manifestations such as artefacts and patterns of organisational behaviour
- Changeable, yet not in an easy way
- Product of the organisation's history
- Assessable by qualitative and quantitative methodologies
- With direct and indirect influence on organisational performance
- A structure composed of several layers, the content of which varies in size and accessibility

In this context of diversity of content proposals and of attainment of organisational culture, Neves (2004) considers the following possible consensus in the definition of organisational culture: "a structure made up of different layers of elements (values, norms, key assumptions, patterns of behaviour, artefacts, etc.), linked by a common core that is the meaning", encompassing behavioural, cognitive, symbolic and emotional dimensions.

Thus, even with the existence of different cultural perspectives of organisation, it may be stated, in general that in the cultural reading, the look upon the organisation focuses on the culture (or cultures), considered as a set of values and practices to which the actors, in coordination ascribe a more or less shared sense through its active learning in time, resulting in a certain predictability that provides some collective cohesion, formed and changed through various causes and captured through different methodologies.

Concerning the contents embodying the definition of organisational culture, some issues emerge such as among others, the type, extent and levels of visibility of the elements proposed as constituents of organisational culture. As an example of the use of the degrees of (in)visibility, Novoa (1995) adapting a scheme by Hedley, presents as school organisational culture: the invisibility area which includes the "conceptual bases and invisible assumptions" such as values, beliefs and ideologies of the organisation's members and the visibility area which comprises the "verbal and conceptual manifestations" (organisational aims and objectives, curriculum, language, metaphors, stories, heroes, structures, organisation charts, study plans, etc.), the "visual and symbolic manifestations" (architecture and

equipment, spaces occupation, artefacts and logos, slogans and mottos, clothing, uniforms, external image, etc.) and the "behavioural manifestations" (rituals, ceremonies, teaching and learning practices, rules and regulations, operating procedures, evaluation, participation of internal and external actors, meetings, etc.).

This greater or lesser visibility of the elements considered as constituents of organisational culture is a criteria that may be used to systematise the diverse valued elements relating to the definition of this concept. In this sense, Costa (2003), who mobilising Schein (1985)'s typology and some of Ott (1989)'s improvements, presents three levels of components of organisational culture:

**Level 1 (artefacts):** This is the most visible level of culture, relatively easy to observe although more difficult to interpret, composed of a wide range of manifestations: physical space, material objects, arrangements, technologies, written and spoken language, anecdotes, metaphors, stories, myths, artistic productions, rituals, ceremonies, heroes, historical remains, traditions, symbols, habits, rules and standards, patterns of behaviour.

**Level 2 (values):** This level, less visible than the first but more aware than the third, encompasses a whole set of elements that seek to ascribe sense to and justify the organisational action, specifically values and beliefs, attitudes, organisational ethics, ideologies, justifications for action, knowledge, intentions, vision and mission, feelings.

**Level 3 (key assumptions):** Set of assumptions taken as true, invisible, internalised in individuals (at a pre-conscious or even unconscious level) that are expressed in the conceptions about the relationships with the environment (domination, submission, harmonisation), of the nature of reality (real, unreal, facts) and of the truth (revealed, discovered), of human nature (good, bad, perfection), of the nature of human activity (activity, passivity, work, leisure) and of the nature of human relationships (cooperation, competition, individualism, power, love).

These three levels of meaning, from the most to the least obvious and visible as constituents of the culture of an organisation as a whole, allow its apprehension.

However, researchers often value and focus their attention on one or some of these elements, rather than on them as a whole. Thus, without concern for completeness, we have at level one, of more visible manifestations of culture, for example, Torres (2004), who considering

“culture understood as a set of values, beliefs, ideologies triggered by actors in processes of social interaction”, works the places and the times of rules construction as “a guide or model that orients and regulates human action” (p. 245). Moreover, the author ascribing importance to the temporal dimension, proposes documentation collection, complemented by in-depth interviews as well as participant observation.

Still in level 1, several researchers have developed studies considering the patterns of the relationship forms that the members of an organisation exhibit in their relationship with organisational culture. Hargreaves (1998) and Lima (2002) are two of the authors contributing to the study of this relational dimension, working, specifically, the professional culture of the teachers in school. According to Hargreaves (1998), studying teachers’ professional culture (as well as any culture) implies considering two dimensions that are structured over time: the content as “substantive attitudes, values, beliefs, habits, assumptions and assumed forms of doing things that are shared within a particular group of teachers or in the wider teaching community and that may be observed in what teachers think, say and do” and the form, observed “in the characteristic patterns of relationship and in the forms of association between the members of these cultures”, translated into relational patterns that do not necessarily have to be shared.

Also, Lima (2002) stresses the importance of the relational dimension of culture, by stating that:

Teachers’ cultures should be envisaged, not just in terms of knowledge, values, beliefs or conceptions, but also of behaviours and practices. Making and acting is culturally as significant as feeling or thinking. We will approach more fruitfully these cultures if we regard them, not only as sets of values, representations and rules but also as modes of action and patterns of interaction that are consistent and relatively regular that teachers internalise, produce and reproduce during (and as a result of) their work experiences

In short, in this level 1, artefacts, there are several elements considered in the analysis of organisational culture but having all of them, great visibility which raises the issue of their interpretation as well as to know the degree of coherence between this level and the other dimensions of organisational culture that are less visible but more internalised.

Regarding level 2, of justification for concrete actions of each member for the organisational success through values, in the cognitive and affective dimension (Ott, 1989), there are emerging issues such as on the one hand,

the fact that practices may not necessarily correspond to values and there may be discrepancies between these levels and on the other hand, the fact that values may be the same for different organisations but materialised in different ways which raises the issue that if one only invests in this level of analysis, it appears that organisational culture is the same across different organisations.

Freitas (2007) reminds us of the importance of taboos as the unspeakable or subject to avoid as being an element of organisational culture, to the point that “the group considers as invention, impertinence, disloyalty or serious offense any mention of that past” such as secrets considered extremely negative, disastrous decisions, practices that shame, fraud, sexual harassment or humiliation:

The values refer to behaviours, ways of thinking and acting considered correct and sanctioned by the group. Equally relevant is the definition of forbidden areas that is what is beyond boundaries and should not be made accessible or even mentioned. Values and taboos are intended to guide behaviours but in reverse while the first term should be as explicit as possible, the second should be as hidden and silenced as possible (Freitas, 2007)

Concerning level 3, basic assumptions of greater invisibility and internalisation in the depth of individual consciousness, considered true and indisputable, Schein (2004) is one of the classic authors of organisational culture studies that have greatly influenced this issue and is currently, an unavoidable author. The author defines group culture as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems

According to Schein (1985), culture as a result of accumulated learning, results from the fact that any group, when having to deal with “survival, growth and adaptation in their environment and internal integration that permits daily functioning and the ability to adapt and learn” (p. 18), over time invents, discovers or develops these basic assumptions (p. 9).

Schein (2004) considers the existence of three levels of cultural elements, respectively from the most to the least visible: “artefacts” which encompasses the visible structures and processes such as architecture, language,

technology and products, clothing, routines, visible patterns of behaviour, myths, stories, rituals and ceremonies, at a more conscious level, being easier to observe but difficult to interpret; “espoused beliefs and values” which encompasses the strategies, goals and organisational philosophies and “underlying assumptions” as basic shared assumptions, considered “taken-for-granted”, truths, indisputable certainties of a pre-conscious nature that consider fundamental aspects of human life such as the nature of reality, truth, time, space, human nature, human activity and human relationships which help understanding the why of the most visible previous levels, justifying them.

According to Schein (2004), these underlying basic assumptions result from shared values and beliefs that have been, over time, empirically tested and confirmed in problem-solving of the group or tested through “social validation” with the social consensus attained by the “shared social experience of a group” in situations of values and beliefs that cannot be tested empirically such as religious and moral values.

This researcher highlights that seeking to understand organisational culture implies an analysis focused on level 3, basic assumptions as the essence of culture that underlies the other levels of organisational culture, working the aforementioned basic assumptions as seven dimensions of organisational culture that enable its decoding.

In short, in this third level of key assumptions internalised in the actors issues related to autonomy and the more or less conscious role of the subjects in the internalisation of these assumptions are to be pointed out as well as the relationship between these assumptions and the remaining levels and the same assumption may be materialised in various values and artefacts.

This explanation allows concluding that in these three levels of elements of organisational culture, there are differences in terms of their contents.

Specifically in terms of contents, on the greater or lesser visibility of the manifestations of organisational culture to be considered, several researchers have drawn attention to the need to understand the non-visible dimension of culture so as to better interpret its visible dimension. However, the less visible is the cultural element considered, the more problematic it is to find a relationship with the organisation. For example, Hofstede (2003), considering that organisational culture is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of an organisation from those of another”, envisaging this collective programming as the “patterns of thought, feelings and potential action which is the result of a continuous learning” (p. 18), distinguishes

various manifestations of culture, from the more superficial to the deeper level: symbols, e.g., words, gestures and objects only understandable in a given culture; heroes, alive or dead people, real or imagined people that function as role models; rituals, “collective activities, technically superfluous, to achieve desired ends, but considered essential in a given culture” (p. 23) such as ways of greeting and ceremonies and values which form the core of culture and are “the tendency to prefer a certain state of things over another. It is an oriented feeling with a positive and a negative side” (p. 23). According to this author, practices consist of symbols, heroes and rituals given their visibility to the outside observer.

As a result of his research, Hofstede (2003) considers that “the shared perceptions of daily practices should be considered as the centre of the organisation’s culture” and not the shared values, presenting as justification the fact that values of each member of the organisation depend more from extra-organisational factors than from those of organisational belonging which influences more directly the practices. As explained by Hofstede (2003):

If the values of the members (of the organisation) depend essentially on criteria other than the belonging of the organisation, these values enter the organisation through the admission process: a company employs people of a particular nationality, age, education and sex. The subsequent socialisation in the organisation is a factor of practices’ learning: symbols, heroes and rituals

Another problematic aspect in the cultural reading is the articulation between the various levels and the corresponding elements of organisational culture which complicates also the analysis and questioning of this concept. This problem of the relationship between the various levels considered of organisational culture emerges when in a perhaps too ambitious way there is the broadening of the theoretical framework and empirical procedures for collecting information and respective treatment of elements belonging to the three levels, in an attempt to accomplish that articulation which complicates the process of obtaining and analysing that information. However, it seems that if one wants to work organisational culture, it tends to emerge a holistic perspective that includes the three levels, given that “organizational culture consists of elements from all levels. No level of organizational culture can continue to exist without the others” (Ott, 1989).

In other words, seeking to work the concept of organisational culture implies that in the research process, there is the need to manifest an attitude of overall



apprehension, even if some element or elements as dimensions of organisational culture are favoured, so that in this way, it may be possible to also contribute to increase the heuristic capacity of this concept, addressing its advantages and limitations. Otherwise, we are working separately, for example, behaviours, rules or values of an organised collective or of a group belonging to that collective which, while being perfectly legitimate, makes it uncertain to speak of organisational culture with all the resulting implications.

### **PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE**

The variety of perspectives in the definition, apprehension and guidelines of implementation of organisational culture, both in Portugal and internationally, reflects the state of play of this study. It is an active but little cohesive field where there are very different conceptions about its potential for the study of organisations with regard to the possibility of researching organisational culture, its contributions and also the usefulness of the use of this concept.

This variety of perspectives, besides the conceptual and methodological wealth that may involve is in itself, a factor of permeability to criticism, hindering the reputation of organisational culture as a scientific concept.

Regarding the possibility of studying organisational culture, there is criticism centred on different issues. On the one hand, the specific application of culture a concept that is deeply shaped by anthropology in the study of communities with influences from other scientific disciplines such as sociology, psychology, social psychology and cybernetics to organisational analysis may be problematic, raising critical positions on the validity of the transfer of a concept originally considered for the understanding of a society or community to the specificities of an organisation that in this perspective, should not be considered as a micro-society (Freitas, 2007). On the other hand, another criticism refers to a certain totalitarian culturalism, by considering that organisational culture, by being (tendentiously) all embracing, allegedly explains everything. For example, Torres (2006) values the potential heuristic reach of the critical perspective in the analysis of organisations, in a “multi-focused and multi-perspective analysis” of apprehension of the reproduction and production that happens in the organisational context (working specifically public school), considering that at the managerial level, there are reductions in organisational complexity as a consequence of purposes of an instrumental nature. Finally, the proposed methodology

is also criticised, for example as regards the application of questionnaire surveys. These instruments provide a definition, a priori, of the issues that are sought to be known which may cause an early reduction, upstream, of the relevant subjects to study.

As contributions of the study the organisational culture for the analysis of organisations in time, the enhancement of symbolic and subjective aspects with greater or lesser depth in their theoretical justification is identified. Specifically on the diagnosis models, they have advantages but also disadvantages. Among the advantages of using diagnosis models, due to their closed and predetermined nature when defining a set of dimensions (often two, three or four) considered as the most relevant to the effective organisational functioning, one facilitates the quickness in obtaining the information, a more focused analysis and also the attainment of comparative data, either in time or between organisations and between groups within the same organisation. To that end, the study has almost always, a quantitative nature, aiming at diagnosing the organisation, in the dimensions selected a priori, frequently through questionnaire surveys with closed questions to members of the organisation in which they select one from several pre-established options, allowing the apprehension of how these pre-established dimensions are perceived by them.

This type of diagnosis studies has often the purpose of providing information to the leaders or managers for a change towards improving the performance of the organisation.

However, there are also a number of disadvantages that need to be considered:

- Involve a simplification, often excessive, of organisational culture in dimensions established a priori considered relevant by the researcher
- Invest in quantitative methodologies, often by applying a questionnaire with closed questions of the yes/no type or with choice of phrases that by focusing on synchronous moments, do not allow achieving the procedural dimension of the dynamics of formation, configuration and reconfiguration of the organisation's culture, unavoidably linked to social historicity
- The attainment of the perception of the dominant direction of organisational members through an average that may lead to the loss of the specificities of the perception of each individual and group
- The speed in organisational and social change can make these dimensions defined a priori less central in the understanding of an organisation

- Impede the implementation in organisations other than the originally studied (for the most part, industrial and business organisations) which is particularly critical in educational organisations, given their complexity

As to the usefulness of studying the culture of an organisation, it is assigned, by the supporters of the cultural perspective, a better understanding of the reasons underlying the organisational functioning, at the individual and collective level (in a more interpretative perspective) or in a different light, contribute to a more effective coordination of the organisation's members in the attainment of goals (in a more managerial perspective). On the other hand and also on the usefulness of studying organisational culture, its use in the manipulation of the organisation's members is highlighted. Several authors have critical positions towards the role that may be attributed to organisational culture through its manipulation in legitimising the exploitation of the organisation's members for their controlled integration which is subordinated to the interests of managers and administrators, creating an illusion of union of interests (Freitas, 2007). In this perspective, organisational culture would function, to a large extent as ideology of the dominant governing elements.

### CONCLUSION

The importance of explaining the concept of organisational culture mobilised in any research study is understandable given that "the concept of culture that is used to shape the discoverer's frame of reference determines what is looked for and how it is looked for and it often predetermines what is found" (Ott, 1989) which is even more important given the great diversity that characterises the universe formed by the study of organisational culture.

To convene organisational culture as a more or less shared way of being, thinking and acting of a collective of people in coordination with reciprocal expectations and that provides some predictability with certain specifics in each organisation, involves being aware of the implications of mobilising a concept that has some delicacy in scientific terms, both at the theory and methodology levels, in order to control these factors.

It may be concluded, then that the explanation of the research options, duly justified is critical in an attempt of a better control and accuracy, whether internal or external to the research during the mobilisation of this multidimensional and interdisciplinary concept organisational culture.

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