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Rafael Alcadipani Da Silveira João Crubelatte

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The notion of Brazilian organizational culture

Questionable generalizations and vague concepts

Rafael Alcadipani Da Silveira
Manchester Business School, Manchester, UK, and
João Crubelatte
Universidade Estadual de Maringa, Parana, Brazil

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the Brazilian literature about national and organizational culture.

Design/methodology/approach – A postmodern epistemological perspective is taken to discuss culture, focusing first on its contribution to the analysis of culture within organizations. Then the central ideas in the articles published in Brazilian periodicals and congresses, between 1991 and 2000, which talked about Brazilian organizational culture, are presented and an attempt is made to outline their fundamental characteristics.

Findings – The majority of studies which deal with Brazilian culture, and which have been developed within the context of management, analyze the theme in a homogeneous manner and do not take into account the plurality and heterogeneity within the country and organizations.

Originality/value – Postmodern approaches to discussion of culture seem to be important in dealing with cultural contexts (national and organizational) where nuances and variations cannot be ignored without serious political and social implications.

Keywords Brazil, Organizational culture, Postmodernism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Brazil is a cultural kaleidoscope. It has been officially colonized by the Portuguese and, at the same time, it had distinctive African and indigenous influences. This is not to mention Italians, French, Dutch, Arabs, Japanese and others – who throughout history moved to Brazil. For instance, the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo has the largest Italian, Lebanese and Japanese communities living outside their respective countries. In some cities in the south of Brazil people still speak German, instead of Portuguese, as their day-to-day language. In addition, Brazil has witnessed considerable internal migration that has significantly affected workforce patterns in the country. The socio-cultural origins of Brazil are diverse and plural. Different from countries like the UK, where immigrant communities are barely integrated into the local society, Brazil is a true cultural melting pot and it is impossible to define a prevalent ethnical Brazilian type. In fact, it is not possible to talk about a singular Brazil, but only about heterogeneous and plural Brazils (Ribeiro, 1995).



Within Brazilian national frontiers, the Federal Police still arrest farmers who use illegal slave work in their properties, at the same time that in skyscrapers all around Brazil are located high technology companies like IBM, Lucent Technologies and Motorola. In addition, Brazilian exports range from soya and orange juice to cars and airplanes.

Although there are hardly any in-depth empirical studies about national culture in Brazilian organizations, the plurality and diversity of Brazil and Brazilian organizations makes them impossible to be explained via cause-effect models, or simple graphical descriptions. The Brazil which is the focus of this paper has continental dimensions. Quite often, Brazilian organizations have workers from different regions and social classes, and with diverse cultural, religious and social backgrounds. To carry out analysis, taking into account all this diversity and, at the same time, recognising all manifestations of all different Brazils, is quite often challenging and complex.

Furthermore, it is impossible to talk about Brazil without mentioning social exclusion. It has the fourth worst Gini Index in the world, in a country where expensive cars are found side-by-side with carriages. Although a highly miscegenated country, black and indigenous people's descendents still face strong constraints on access to education and, consequently, the labour market. However, social exclusion and its implications to organisations located in Brazil is another missing subject among Brazilian organisational scholars' analysis.

All those aspects exemplify the existence of a multiple, heterogeneous and complex Brazil, indicating to the peculiarities of Brazilian culture and social organization. These clearly provide challenges to organizations located in the Brazilian territory and to scholars trying to understand its complexities and differences.

Faced with this social, ethnic and cultural kaleidoscope, do Brazilian organizations have a clearly understandable culture, with characteristics that can be clearly demonstrated, merely because they are to be found within the geographic frontiers of the country? If we analyze the majority of research and studies on organizational analysis, that try to explore the supposed influence of Brazilian culture within the culture of local organizations from a postmodern perspective, the reply seems to be negative.

The postmodern perspective has gained strength and prominence in the analysis of organizations (Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Calás and Smircich, 1999) and has been used as the epistemological matrix for discussing culture, both in organizational anthropology (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Rabinow, 1999; Gonçalves da Silva, 2001) and organization theory (Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Martin, 1992; Prasad, 1995; Martin and Frost, 1996; Prasad and Prasad, 2001).

Given this, the aim of this article is to analyze what has been written that deals with Brazilian organizational culture in management and, using a post-modernist analytical spirit, to try to cast doubt on the supposition that there is an understandable, unique Brazilian organizational culture, arising out of the influence of supposed Brazilian cultural traits on organizations. In order to do this, in the first part, we look at the main principles of the postmodernist epistemological perspective, its influence on organizational analysis in its broadest form and on organizational culture in particular. In the second part, we present the main studies and research that deal with the influence of "Brazilian culture" on the culture of organizations and seek to define

their main characteristics. In the third part, we shall try to analyze the studies mentioned in the light of the postmodern perspective. Finally, we offer our concluding considerations. The case of Brazil can be an example to address how mainstream International Business follows a rather simplistic notion of culture, which has severe impacts on how the Other is represented.

Postmodernism and organizational culture

The classification categories, “postmodern” and “postmodernism” can be seen as having different meanings. For example, they can be looked at as: an artistic movement and a new epistemological matrix (Hassard, 1993), characteristics of a new type of society (Bauman, 1988a, 1988b), and a new type of organization (Clegg, 1990). They represent a fairly broad category that lacks conceptual unity and that tries to be many things at the same time. Trying to make its meaning a little clearer, Parker (1992) discusses the difference between postmodernism and postmodernity in the specific field of organizational analysis. The author suggests that the prefix “post” is related to a universe of concepts, such as post-industrial, post-Fordism, post-capitalism, etc. Such concepts reflect the characteristic features of postmodernity, understood as a new historical period. In this sense, to Parker, postmodernity means the age that comes after modernity: that is, it is the expression of a new historical period that can be analyzed starting from the “modernist” sciences. According to Parker (1992), the notion of postmodernity also refers to an epistemology that represents a different form of modernism and of scientific tendencies for thinking about and researching society, and consequently organizations. The focus of this article is centered on the second notion, that is, on postmodernity in epistemological terms. This is what we shall discuss.

The ideas of authors like Baudrillard, Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault, who are considered by others as postmodern, have been used since the end of the 80 s in social sciences because they represent a different way of thinking about and reflecting on society (Bauman, 1988a, 1988b; Featherstone, 1988). More specifically, postmodernism is made up of a plurality of concepts looked at by authors who present different and complex ideas. Nevertheless there are some general features in this way of reflecting on social “reality”.

Basically, the postmodern thinkers; and this is the epistemological and ontological instance we assume in this paper; do not believe in the superiority of human reason and in rational man, or intellectual progress. They do not consider man to be the center of the world, or his reason absolute. Reality itself has its ontological status questioned. It is seen as multi-faceted and ambiguous and cannot be explained by totalities or models. For this reason, they do not agree with totalizing or systemic thoughts to explain reality, that is input/output matrices that follow a certain logic, which implies the commensurability of the elements and the determination of everything (Lyotard, 1989). Thoughts of this type are seen as metanarratives for truth and over-simplified generalizations. On the other hand, diversity, ambiguity and plurality are treated as fundamental elements of the social world.

Within this context, these writers cast doubt on the notion of truth. It is seen as dependent on the specific circumstances of each historic period and on the power relationships involved in the context of its generation; such relationships are necessary for maintaining the truth. That is, regimes of truth are seen as the props of power relationships, at the same time as being sustained by them (Foucault, 1966, 1987).

Truth is not seen as certain or wrong, good or bad; that is, there is no concern with enhancing moral values that are seen as precarious and uncertain. From the postmodernist perspective, the individual is not presented as an absolute and as having a real essence that is “hidden” or “repressed”. He is seen as constructed and reconstructed within the power relationships and the social context to which he is submitted (Foucault, 1987). Power, in its turn, is not seen as something easily located, or which someone possesses and uses to their heart’s content. It is seen as a feature of anonymous strategies, without owners, whose relationships are formed and reformulated continually (Foucault, 1987). Simplifying this to the maximum, postmodernism is understood to be disbelief with regard to metanarratives and totalizing generalizations (Lyotard, 1989).

It is worth underlining that this perspective has received criticism from various social science and science philosophy authors generally (see: Habermas, 1981; Sokal and Bricmont, 1999) and in organizational administrative studies in particular, (see Thompson, 1993). The most relevant are that: postmodernist theoreticians, when they criticize generalizations and metanarratives, end up doing precisely what they criticize; and, the postmodernist perspective lacks foundation and shows itself to be a series of ideas without the least scientific basis.

In terms of organizational analysis, the use of postmodern ideas from the end of the 80 s increased significantly both the epistemological and methodological debate in the area (Calás and Smircich, 1999).

In the specific case of the analysis of organizational culture, postmodernism reveals itself as the movement that questions and casts doubt on the theories and studies carried out on this particular theme (Martin and Frost, 1996; Alvesson and Berg, 1992). For defenders of the postmodern perspective, modern cultural studies, even those that adopt an anthropological or critical analytical angle, try to offer coherent arguments for interpreting organizational life and have a marked tendency to look for interpretations that can be generalized. In trying to do this, they end up brushing aside the peculiarities, nuances and specific aspects of the thing they are analyzing (Martin and Frost, 1996). The postmodern perspective, generally speaking and as applied to the culture of organizations in particular, tries to clearly show the problems related to generalizing interpretations; to the “dictator-like” attitude of the author and the imposition of presumptions that are assumed to be true on the social phenomenon. It is intended, therefore, to explore the paradoxes and ambiguities that are present in the rhetoric by denaturalizing its reality (Alvesson and Berg, 1992).

Furthermore, the postmodernists question the existence of “obscure” and “deep” structured meanings, arguing that it is impossible to find them. Such meanings, in this perspective, have no connections, or at least a slight connection with the meaning that, supposedly, they ought to represent. This implies the denial of an aesthetic and a morality, of presumed social structures and of secondary interpretative schemes such as corporate cultural (Alvesson and Berg, 1992). Organizational culture is seen as fragmentation (Hatch, 1997); that is, a weak and sporadically connected web of individuals, linked by their ever-changing positions by a variety of subjects and circumstances. Their involvement, their sub-cultural identities and their individual self-definitions fluctuate and depend on the subject matter they are dealing with at any given moment and the specific context in which they find themselves (Martin, 1992). Culture, therefore, depends on the context of the moment. Furthermore, ambiguity is

seen as the fundamental characteristic of organizational culture. Sub-culture frontiers are seen as highly permeable and fluctuating. Culture's manifestations are seen as multi-faceted and their meanings open, of necessity, to multiple interpretations. Therefore, cultural reality is formed from complexity, multiplicity and continual and ever-changing flows, and is not clearly defined *a priori* (Martin, 1992; Alvesson, 1995; Hatch, 1997).

A point that needs underlining within this perspective is that it does not present the individual as being in possession of an identity supplied by culture and from which it is very difficult to escape; that is, it is not because the individual works in a given organization, in a specific department, or because he comes from a specific group within the company that he must behave like the others – because he belongs to a “given culture”. According to this perspective, culture does not define an individual or predetermine his actions and attitudes (Martin, 1992; Alvesson, 1995; Hatch, 1997).

A trend that has been gaining momentum within postmodernist organizational culture is that of a post-colonialism that denounces epistemology and many Western practices, as systems that exclude other realities and other forms of knowledge (Calás and Smircich, 1999; Prasad and Prasad, 2001). A frequently recurring theme in this trend is criticism of the notion of “progress” and “modernness” as conceived by theoreticians in developed countries. According to the post-colonialists, these notions, as a rule, focus on economic aspects, and show access to and the progress of science and technology as justification for the “development” of some countries and for the non-development of others. Development within the parameters of the Western culture of the rich countries ends up categorizing the people and cultures of “emerging” countries as being “not developed”, or “primitive”, thereby excluding their knowledge, values and cultures. There is also a criticism of third world researchers who use their time repeating the theory generated in the developed world. Taking as an analytical focus the denunciation of post-colonial strategies, popular culture and social movements, critical analysts try to provide a sounding-board for those voices that have been excluded until now (Calás and Smircich, 1999; Gopal *et al.*, 1999).

From what has been said, we can see the precarious way in which the notion of organizational culture is regarded within the post-modernist perspective. Therefore, we shall use the aspects of this perspective we have here presented to analyze the studies that describe “Brazilian organizational culture”. This is the subject of the next section. Furthermore, we shall also use authors that deal with the reality of “our culture” to discuss and cast doubt on some aspects that we shall now bring up.

Research and studies on Brazilian organizational culture in management

In this section, we present the studies and research that deal with the influence of “Brazilian culture” on the culture of organizations. To facilitate the arrangement of the text, we first focus on the procedures for data collection. Then we show the data from our research, in topic order: first, we look at texts that deal with the notion of Brazilian organizational culture in its broadest form and then, we look at the texts that suggest the influence of specific features of national culture on the culture of organizations. Finally, we look at the fundamental characteristics of these studies.

Procedure for collecting data

As the focus of the article is Administration we analyzed articles published between 1990 and 2000 in *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, *Revista de Administração*, *Revista de Administração Pública*, *Organizações & Sociedade*, *Revista de Administração Contemporânea* magazines, in addition to annals from Enanpad (Brazilian Academy of Management Meeting) and the 1st National Meeting on Organizational Studies. In a prior analysis of these magazines and congress annals, we had already noticed that the majority of the publications on this subject were from the 1990s. This had an influence on our choosing that period as the sample resource. We also chose to analyze the articles in the Prestes Motta and Caldas (1997) book and the books of Hofstede (1991) and Barros and Prates (1996), because they are fundamental works of reference on the subject in question. Since the focus of the analysis is to discuss and question the notion of Brazilian organizational culture from a postmodern perspective, we chose also not to carry out a quantitative analysis of themes or mentions, but only an analysis of the content (Bardin, 1977), in order to discover the main arguments used by the various authors of those texts that relate to the fundamental question here discussed. These are the arguments we subsequently question.

The notion of a Brazilian organizational culture

One of the pioneers in the discussion on the influence of national cultures on the culture of organizations was Hofstede (1991) who, despite restricting himself to the context of a large organization (IBM) included 50 countries. For Hofstede, culture is “the collective program of the mind that distinguishes the members of groups or categories of people” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). Starting with this assumption and from the quantitative study of the employees of IBM subsidiaries around the world, he tried “to identify differences in the national systems of values” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 13), by characterizing national cultures in five dimensions: power distance, collectivism v. individualism, femininity v. masculinity, aversion to uncertainty, and a short or long term orientation. Countries were plotted on graphs that identified their position relative to each dimension. Brazil was identified as a country with a culture that had a tendency to establish relationships of dependency, or radical criticism, in relation to the power-bases; that is, a high level of power distance, with predominant attitudes that avoid uncertainty (highly averse to uncertainty); and also with a clear leaning towards long-term behavior. Besides these dimensions, the Brazilian cultural pattern was also identified as being more collectivist than individualist and, furthermore, there was a slight predominance of characteristics that are typical of femininity.

The Hofstede study was fully reported and referred to in Brazilian articles and it had a strong influence on the concept of Brazilian culture as developed in our organizational and administrative theory. Generally, these articles propose analyzing the differences in managerial style and explaining them from the point of view of the national cultural characteristics, as pointed out by Hofstede (e.g. Urdan and Urdan, 2001; Prates and Barros, 1997). It is worth emphasizing that the Brazilian cultural aspects mentioned by Hofstede are generally accepted without question.

In the research we are talking about, one piece of work that stands out most was done by Prates and Barros (1996, 1997). With the aim of identifying the elements and parameters of Brazilian culture that should be considered both by directors, when taking decisions about implementing modern ways of managing developed in other countries,

and by directors of multinationals looking to come into line with our culture, the authors used Hofstede and other authors; mainly Roberto DaMatta and Livia Barbosa; as points of reference to try and reveal “The Brazilian Style of Managing”. They actually constructed a proposal as to what they think “a model of Brazilian cultural action in corporate management” is (Prates and Barros, 1997, p. 55). To do this, they carried out quantitative research by questionnaire, with 2,500 directors and executives in 520 large and medium-sized companies from the south and south-east of the country.

These authors characterize the Brazilian style of managing as unique and original. For them, the model of Brazilian cultural action corresponds to a system that is made up of four sub-systems. These are: institutional (or formal), personal (or informal), leaders, and the led. These sub-systems overlap, and at the overlap points, the common cultural traits that go to make up the Brazilian style of managing are to be found. These traits are:

- a concentration of power, at the overlap between the leader and institutional sub-systems;
- the posture of a spectator, at the overlap between the led and institutional sub-systems;
- personalism, at the overlap between the leader and personal sub-systems; and
- avoiding conflicts, at the overlap between the led and personal sub-systems.

Such special cultural traits, in the final analysis, are responsible for the system as a whole not breaking down, and they are what should be altered in degree or nature by any effective culture change (Barros and Prates, 1996, 1997). In short, the critical points of the Brazilian culture are formalism, flexibility, loyalty to people and paternalism. What guarantees that this system functions as a whole is impunity. Therefore, altering this model would include changing or breaking down these aspects.

In order to discuss the Brazilian organizational culture, Aidar *et al.* (1995) carried out a test, the aim of which was to analyze historically the formation of the national culture and how it relates to the values and patterns of behavior found in our organizations. The authors came to the conclusion that the Brazilian social system is divided and balanced by entities and bodies created according to our peculiarity, and that they end up making it possible to support living with paradoxes, while at the same time making it difficult for a more profound transformation. They also noted that plurality is one of the essential aspects of Brazilian culture and in the world of local organizations. Within this context, Prestes Motta (1997) analyzes those authors who deal with national cultures and classic authors who write on the formation of the Brazilian culture; Gilberto Freire, Roberto DaMatta, Caio Prado Jr, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Darcy Ribeiro, and the psychoanalysts (Calligaris, 1993), who carried out investigations into Brazil and concluded that our country is a land of contrasts and that our culture is marked by heterogeneity and complexity. This characterizes it as multi-faceted. Both articles are examinations based on bibliographic research.

With the idea of “creating instrumental support for the analysis of organizational cultures within the context of Brazilian culture”, Alexandre Borges de Freitas (1997) tried to explain Brazilian cultural traits for organizational analysis. His contribution was made from reading the classic works that portray how Brazil developed, written by Gilberto Freire, Sergio Buarque de Holanda and Caio Prado Jr, as well as by

anthropologists like Roberto DaMatta. Borges de Freitas (1997) bases his analysis merely on bibliographic research. Although he recognizes the diverse and heterogeneous character of the culture in our country, Borges de Freitas concludes that the national traits to be used in any organizational analysis are: hierarchy, personalism, trickery, sensuality and the spirit of adventure.

Trying to produce a methodology for managing the culture of organizations in the public sector in Brazil, and based on the works of Hofstede and Roberto DaMatta, Carbone (2000) points out that the Brazilian culture has certain traits that might make it difficult to change the culture of public organizations, in the light of the paradigm of globalization. Such traits are: bureaucracy, authoritarianism, paternalism, aversion to entrepreneurs, “taking advantage” and reformism. Along these same lines of culture as an obstacle to change, Campos (2000), based on Roberto DaMatta and the traits of national culture mentioned by Freitas (1997), infers that these typical cultural traits of Brazilian organizational culture constitute an obstacle to competition and learning as far as local organizations are concerned. Baiardi (1996) discusses the historical origins of the cultural patterns and of resistance to change in our country, and characterizes such patterns as obstacles to democracy and national development. It is worth mentioning that both studies are theoretical essays. Cavedon (1998) tried to investigate the types of culture present in organizations in Rio Grande do Sul and discovered an emphasis on traditional structures. Because of this, he states that we are far from what is preached as being the tendencies for the future.

Some case studies were also carried out with the idea of analyzing the influence, or rather the peculiarity of typically Brazilian organizations. Lucirton Costa (1997) analyzed an organization that he believes is possible and recurring in our country thanks to our peculiarities: the friendly organization. While he recognizes the heterogeneity of the national culture, he tries to identify typical cultural features and attitudes for building a model of national management. The analysis of an organized soccer fan club allowed Costa to develop the notion of the friendly organization; that is, a type of organization in which an emotive basic logic is predominantly present when it comes to deciding the main actions carried out within its context. The article is based on bibliographic research and on interviews with the “Sparrow-hawks” (Translator’s note: organized fan-club of the Corinthians soccer team). Another case study was carried out by Vergara *et al.* (1997). In this article the authors tried to unravel the administrative aspects of a typically Brazilian organization (a samba school) and to identify its national cultural aspects. They discovered, in the samba school training patio, a characteristic they believe is national, which is: the combination of contradictory elements, related to a constant relationship between the ancient and modern. Furthermore, they observed that the “house” (the place of personalism) is said to be the ideal and recurring place. Santos (1996) analyzes the model of the organization of a *jogo de bicho* (Translator’s note: literally, the “animal game”. This is an illegal, but openly practiced gambling game.) in Bahia and says he found there a Brazilian form of an effective organization, without any imported management models and technologies, and which includes paternalism, protectionism, vices, family, formalism, rules, morality, perversity, favor, commitment, a typically Brazilian way of doing things, etc. Santos points out that the ability to deal with diversity is the fundamental element for the success of this organization.

Barros (2001), on the other hand, compares community organizations in Bahia and Quebec (Canada). In terms of Brazilian cultural features, he follows the traditional pattern of a highly negative opinion as far as national cultural characteristics are concerned. Aspects such as a pattern of affectionate relationships, instead of impersonal ones, paternalism, patriarchalism and the consequent authoritarianism in professional relationships, the absence of pride and an inferiority complex, tolerance and flexibility of customs, moral laxity, social and ecological irresponsibility, work aversion, etc. are all emphasized.

Typically national features and organizational culture

Besides these studies, experiments were carried out on the influence of specific cultural and typically Brazilian traits in organizations. As these studies suggest, the search for the cause of their existence refers back to the origins of our national development. In this vein, Caldas (1997) discusses the, “a prophet is not without honor save in his own country” syndrome, pointing out the supposedly “Brazilian fixation” with the foreigner. Caldas tries to trace the origins and conditioners of this cult of the foreigner and its influence in Brazilian organizations, and points out that this trait is “institutionalized” in our country. It is suggested that we have a fixation with what comes from other people. He traces the origins of this supposed fixation by analyzing what he believes to be the local and national aspects that have been responsible for conditioning it. Analyzing the consequences of this trait Caldas evaluates it as something negative, something “not good” for local organizations. Analyzing the same cultural trait and its influence in organizations, Prestes Motta *et al.* (2000) look for its historical origins and discuss how it is related to the way in which people are perceived, managed, administered and controlled in Brazil. It is worth underlining that both articles are essays based on the historians and anthropologists who have already been mentioned here, and who discuss national development.

Davel and Vasconcelos (1997), in turn, identify a certain paternal dimension in Brazilian organizations, pointing out the historical recurrence of this characteristic. They demonstrate how the function of the father is present in the ethos of a Brazilian family organization. They also argue that the father figure and paternalism are recurring features in companies that are strongly paternalistic in their culture. Along the same lines of analysis, Bresler (2000) examines the image of the father in the Brazilian reality, pointing out that this is one of the ways in which domination is exercised within organizations that operate in our country. Capelão (2000) also analyzes the same cultural characteristics in a Brazilian family company and tries to get to the bottom of the “genealogy” of this trait, and the way it manifests itself in the company he looked at. It is worth emphasizing that these articles discuss the historical origins of this trait in the context of our culture.

Finally, Prestes Motta and Alcadipani (1999) discuss the “Brazilian way of doing things” in national organizations, indicating its historical origins and the cultural influences as well as its consequences. They do this by bibliographic research.

Characteristics of Brazilian organizational culture studies

And so, we have to recognize that the articles that deal with a Brazilian organizational culture differ in terms of their methodology and the focus of their analysis, as well as in

their theoretical and conceptual support. However, these same articles have some characteristics that are recurrent in the majority of them, albeit to varying degrees.

The first is that these studies have been influenced in a very marked way by the research of Hofstede, whose arguments are, by and large, accepted without question. The second consideration is that a significant majority of theoretical studies resort to the analysis of national cultural traits from their historical origins, by reading authors who are national icons, like Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Caio Prado Jr, Gilberto Freire, Raymundo Faoro, Darcy Ribeiro and Roberto DaMatta. The latter is found in all the research and studies, and his methodological perspective is not given any importance. The articles try to discover the origins of the cultural traits from the birth of Brazil to today by analyzing these characteristics, as a general rule and without due regard to their nuances. Case studies are based on organizations that are presented as being more peculiar to our own reality, such as the organized soccer fan club, samba schools and family companies. There are few comparative studies, and when they are carried out, in the vast majority of cases they use Hofstede's perspective and methodology.

The third consideration is that, to a greater or lesser extent, the cultural traits appear as all-embracing and as characteristics of a single aspect called "Brazilian culture". It is worth stating that Aida *et al.* (1995) and Presets Motta (1997) recognize the plurality of the national culture and take this into consideration when constructing the argument in their articles. The other authors seem to recognize the heterogeneity, but end up by ignoring it and speaking of cultural traits that are valid for the whole of Brazil, and that arose within a given historical context and have survived until today without major changes or nuances. This is the case of the Brazilian management style, the traits for organizational analysis, the cult of the foreigner, and the paternalism, previously discussed. There is a clear suggestion of cultural causation, either implicitly or explicitly, in the following sense: Brazil has clear and understandable cultural traits that affect organizations, thus forming a Brazilian organizational culture. The fourth consideration is that value judgments are applied to supposedly national, cultural traits that are seen as "underdeveloped" and causing national backwardness relative to the developed countries of the industrialized Western world. Prates and Barros (1996, 1997) even propose altering these traits by intervening in the "Brazilian management style".

Postmodernism and the notion of Brazilian organizational culture

In this part, we cast doubts on the main characteristics of the research and studies on the existence of a Brazilian organizational culture, by looking at it from the perspective of postmodernism. We do this by trying to show the contradictions inherent in these characteristics. It is worth emphasizing that, in doing this, we do not intend to invalidate, or point to the postmodern perspective as better than the others for analyzing the Brazilian organizational culture issue. Neither do we intend to propose analyzing Brazilian organizational culture using postmodernism. Our aim is to use it to question existing studies on Brazilian organizational culture, with the idea of contributing to the discussion on this notion, which is so important for affirming the organizational research and studies that are being done within this context.

We saw previously that, although the articles analyzed diverge in terms of the methodologies used and the focus of their analysis and theoretical and conceptual support, they have some recurring characteristics. As we have pointed out, the first is

that these studies are influenced in a very marked way by the research of Hofstede, whose arguments are, by and large, accepted without question. The second consideration is that a significant majority of the theoretical studies resort to the analysis of national cultural traits from their historical origins, by trying to trace the origins of the cultural traits considered to be Brazilian from the time of the birth of Brazil until today, without describing their nuances or variations. But at the same time, to a greater or lesser extent, the cultural traits appear as all-embracing and are described as being characteristics of a unity called “Brazilian culture”, with exclusive and typical traits; their heterogeneity is ignored and it is suggested, either implicitly or explicitly, that there is cultural causality, in the sense that these traits create typical organizational cultures in our country. The third characteristic is that value judgments are applied to supposedly national, cultural traits, seen as “underdeveloped” and causing national backwardness.

Subsequently, in this part of the article we question each of the aspects considered, from the teachings of the postmodern perspective. First, we discuss the appropriateness of the non-critical use of Hofstede for analyzing the supposed Brazilian organizational culture, and then we question the notion of general cultural traits that generate a single aspect called Brazilian organizational culture, and finally, we discuss value judgments when our culture is being analyzed.

The appropriateness of using Hofstede

It is obvious that the research of Hofstede was important in a particular historic context of organizational analysis; however within the context of our country, is it valid to accept the considerations of this author without due questioning?

We support the opinions of McSweeney (2002) and Palmade (1993), for whom the Hofstede model starts out from fallacious assumptions and ignores the plurality and diversity of the countries it analyses. Dividing different cultures into dimensions such as aversion to uncertainty, masculinity and femininity, power distance, and individualism and collectivism seems to us questionable. By trying to analyze various cultures in the world along these lines, Hofstede is imposing on them his vision of the world and the dimensions he considers important, as a way of analyzing them and as a matrix for explaining them. Not that we believe that all science is totally free from value judgments and related aspects, however this is a clear case of generalization that tries to deal with an extremely broad and diverse plurality from a specific viewpoint, and in doing so, pushes to one side its ambiguities and nuances. This becomes even clearer when we remember the author’s vision of culture. For him, culture is “the collective program of the mind that distinguishes the members of groups and categories of people” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). This supposed mental program is the result of various social dimensions of influence, or in his terms, different levels of culture that form in each individual different layers of cultural influence or programming. In other words, culture is a mental program that leads individuals to behave absolutely in accordance with group patterns – action, if it can be called that, is determined by the fact that you belong to a particular social group.

The postmodern perspective for analyzing the culture of organizations (Martin, 1992; Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Alvesson, 1995) understands this issue in precisely the opposite way. The supposition that culture means that people act in accordance with something that is predetermined is seen as yet another simplification of reality, since

ambiguities, plurality and individual peculiarities are once more swept to one side. Furthermore, the definition of culture ends up imposing an identity on the individual who is a part of it, that is, he is imprisoned within the limits of the culture, a point that is questioned by the postmodern perspective (Martin, 1992).

Furthermore, Hofstede analyzes the different countries in accordance with the dimensions mentioned and classifies them under each of the latter. Therefore a country might have a high or low aversion to uncertainty, etc. In this aspect there is a clear classification, with a value judgment, of the different cultures, that suggests the idea of “better” or “worse” cultures. This is a simplistic model given the plurality of the chosen subject. There is a clear homogenization of different things that are passed over and analyzed by the fine toothcomb of an author who was born in a particular country, explains reality in accordance with his vision of it, and imposes it on other countries and realities. Here, we are using a neo-colonial spirit that questions the creation and definition of values generated within the context of developed countries and that are imposed on others, especially those that are economically under-developed (Prasad and Prasad, 2001). This does not mean we think his study is invalid, but we wish to point out that the homogenization that is used by Brazilian authors in a non-questioning way simplifies the perception of our alleged Brazilian organizational culture, and leads to the analysis of our complex and heterogeneous peculiarities from a point of view generated elsewhere that imposes these values on our reality.

General features of Brazilian organizational culture?

The second aspect that we would emphasize is an analysis of national cultural traits from the point of view of their historical origins, by showing that since the founding of Brazil they have remained in our society almost unchanged. As we said, the works of authors like Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Caio Prado Jr and Gilberto Freire and Robert DaMatta are used to justify the existence of a Brazilian style of managing, of traits for organizational analysis, the cult of the foreigner and of paternalism, etc. When we take the postmodernist perspective; which considers culture as an ambiguous and complex phenomenon, full of paradoxes and dependent on specific contexts; as a basis for analyzing culture (Rabinow, 1999) and the culture in organizations (Martin, 1992; Alvesson and Berg, 1992), it becomes necessary to oppose those generalizations and analyses that seek to find historical coherence in cultural traits. The first question that arises is if these traits are nowadays the same as those of 500 years ago? In other words, is the paternalism present in the Brazilian family company the same as that which was present in the sugar-mill? Is the sensuality the same as the one present in the relationships between the master’s house and the slave quarters? And is the adoration of all things foreign the same as at the beginning of the century? In other words, can it be that, since 1500 or 1900, these traits have not changed, despite the significant changes in the context of our country during all these years? Or, are these the typical characteristics of the Brazilian, and should they be taken into consideration even within the current context and specific circumstances?

To presuppose an almost absolute continuity within these terms is to assume that reality has not altered, or that it has altered within the particular conditions and restrictions imposed on it by Brazilian culture. In other words, the notion of culture functioning as an infrastructure that conditions all that it has within its domain. Furthermore, this assumption implies that, from north to south in the country, these

traits continued to exist and influence all the organizations, thereby creating a Brazilian organizational culture. This implies acceptance of the principle of simple causality.

As we have previously seen, the vast majority of texts that analyze Brazilian organizational culture (although some express reservations about our diversity) suggest that all Brazilians share those cultural traits that are, therefore, the source of our condition as a Brazilian Being.

As we have emphasized, this notion of culture is rejected by the postmodernists, since they consider it to be ambiguous by nature. It is vehemently pointed out that culture does not condition individuals to be how it has supposedly designed them to be. The notion of Brazilian cultural traits or a Brazilian style of managing is also, therefore, an example of a totalizing narrative from which no one can escape. The following idea seems to be implied in these constructions: if it is Brazilian, in large measure, that's the way it's going to be. Once again nuances, complexities and ambiguities are discarded and culture is understood as imposing the role that the individual should assume.

Besides this, the supposition that artificially formed human groupings, included within the geographic frontiers, develop cultural traits that can be shared to such a degree that they constitute a culture, is maybe not appropriate. Perceiving the contradiction in this perspective, Hofstede (1991, p. 12) himself recognizes that: "Nations should not be put on the same level as societies. Historically societies are organically developed forms of social organization and, strictly speaking, the concept of a common culture applies more to societies than to nations". This seems to us to be even more questionable when we are talking about social systems such as organizations and pluralist countries like Brazil.

With regard to this aspect, if we take as a point of reference anthropologists like Darcy Ribeiro (1995); an author used by those who are researching and studying Brazilian organizational culture; Brazil – not without reason – has to be recognized as culturally multiple, which is a fact that enriches our nationality. Along the same lines, Bosi points out that:

In relation to Brazilian culture there have been those who have judged it or who wanted it to be a single, cohesive unit, clearly defined by this or that master quality (...) it just so happens however that a homogenous Brazilian culture, a matrix for our behavior and our discourse does not exist. On the contrary: the admission of its plural character is a decisive step to understanding it as an effect of the senses, the result of a process of multiple interactions and oppositions in time and space (...) The culture of the popular classes for example, is to be found in certain situations with the culture of the masses; it is with the erudite culture and vice versa. There are overlaps of old Iberian, indigenous and African cultures, all of them polymorphous, because they brought with them a considerable degree of fusion (Bosi, 1992, p. 1).

It is worth emphasizing, also, that the notion of characteristic traits of our culture, which have historically clear origins, implies recognizing that they are ours, that they are Brazilian. But, in the terms as defended by the analysts of Brazilian organizational culture, are not Venezuelans, Argentineans, Chilean, Angolans and South African, for example, paternalistic? Do they not like foreigners, too? Are they not sentimentalists?

In fact, it does not seem clear in Brazilian organizational theory that any "theorizing" about the origins and characteristics of a people, as far as the source of its identity is concerned, has a significant political importance. This has already been

much emphasized by Guerreiro Ramos, when he proposed the sociological reduction of the explanations coming from other contexts for understanding the national reality. In putting together his proposal for a cultural study based on the philosophy of Heidegger, Ramos (1996, pp. 86-7) defends the position that “a cultural object is comprised not only of its objective elements, but also by the function that it exercises in the system of objects of which it is a part. For the purposes of sociological reduction, the function of the objects is understood in terms of meaning, in accordance with the intentionality that they have within a referential structure”. The supposed general traits of Brazilian culture can, for example, have different meanings, be the product of different intentions and occupy different functions in different groups within the culture. Its supposed generalized manifestation can, in accordance with this perspective, be no more than the product of superficial analyses that highlight the appearance in detriment to the local meaning of the manifestation.

The generalization of cultural patterns, therefore, when we analyze it inspired by the post-modern perspective, constitutes an artifice of power, because it implies the silence, or even the exclusion of individuals and groups not represented in the “official culture”, or whose traits do not correspond to those officially taken as the mark of the group or the country. It should not be thought strange that in the Prates and Barros (1996, 1997), study, the authors point to the posture of spectator as a trait of Brazilian workers, when you observe that in their research they only interviewed “executives” from the south and southeast of Brazil. In other words, the Brazilian style is not Brazilian, but that of a specific group from two specific geographic regions. The notion that the Brazilian worker has the posture of a spectator clashes head on with those studies that portray popular culture, especially that of workers as a *locus* of resistance and veiled questioning (Chauí, 1986).

From what we have just seen, the postmodern perspective shows us the contradictions inherent in studies on the culture of Brazilian organizations and, by using modern references that discuss Brazilian culture, allows us to probe and question the validity of statements that suggest generalizations and truths about a plural country, with such a diverse and heterogeneous formation as ours.

The organizational culture that is good for nothing

The last trait that we would highlight in the Brazilian organizational studies is that they have a predominately negative vision of the supposed Brazilian culture in relation to other cultures, principally the North-American culture, or that of countries considered to be developed (Japan, for example, is a recurring example). We can clearly identify in these analyses the strong influence of the first cultural studies developed in Brazil, especially by Buarque de Holanda and his proposal of the friendly nature of the typical Brazilian. But as Souza (1999) points out, the theoretical construction of Holanda, based on Weber’s theory of Western rationality, aims to construct an absolutely negative type of personality, the friendly Brazilian man, in comparison with the totally positive type of ascetic, North-American Protestant, as taken from the work of Weber. The characteristics resulting from this typical/ideal analytical effort are personalist individualism, the search for instant pleasure and indifference to community ideals and the long-term.

This would explain, therefore, the backwardness of the Brazilians in relation to the North-America’s economic development. It is the result of the cultural tradition in the

development of the Brazilian people. “Only the friendly man is seen as pure negativity, an amorphous individual dominated by the immediate emotive content and by the unmeasured necessity for the recognition of others. As a result – here we have neither the modern capitalist market nor a democracy worthy of its name” (Souza, 1999, p. 35). The theoretical construction here, it should be again underlined, has the character of the ideal type and refers to the attempt by Buarque de Holanda to reveal an ideal personality in opposition to Weber’s ascetic Protestant, and thus, to supply an explanation for the economic superiority of Protestant values. In other words, it is a search for the representation of cultural tendencies or heritage, but not for cultural characteristics that are empirically observable in their entirety.

This is what Vianna Moog (1974) states in a study that departs from the tradition started by Buarque de Holanda. Moog (1974) is more emphatic when he highlights the objectives of this analytical approach; that is, the comparison of personality types or cultural types – Brazilians v. ascetic North-American Protestants – but limited to the economic dimension and to its adaptation to parameters relating to the characteristics of Western modernness.

We need, therefore, to put this criticism into the context of the economic aspect; that is, we should have it clearly in our minds that it is in relation to the modern context of capitalist competition that this supposed cultural heritage presents disadvantages, but not in a general way. Besides this, the capitalist structure of society has to be accepted as legitimate so that this superiority can also be considered as legitimate. And that is where we find the character of unique truth, in large part disguised as culturalist analyses of Brazilian society and that have been constructed within the context of our organizational theory. As Werneck Vianna points out: “Today’s hegemonic version of Weber in social sciences and in public opinion on the interpretation of Brazil has been that of those who point out our backwardness as a result of a defect of origin, because of the type of colonization to which we were submitted – the so-called Iberian paternalistic heritage...”. (Vianna, 1999, p. 175).

Therefore, in organizational studies it is a recurring theme to point out the personalist nature of social relationships in Brazil as being a negative aspect for professional and organizational development. It is frequently suggested that cooperation between us is always the product of affectionate relationships, seeking personal favors in detriment to the society or wider group and in detriment to relationships based on impersonality. However, the consequences of this confidence based on impersonality, or confidence in abstract systems, are not discussed: the need for compulsory acceptance – that is, without alternatives – and for specialist knowledge, the loss of value of local knowledge, the dissemination, universalization and institutionalization of risk, among other things (Giddens, 1991; Giddens *et al.*, 1997). The personalism that is typical of Brazilian people is confused with the desire “to gain advantage in everything”, as if personal appropriation of profit and of the advantages of the production system was not in itself characteristic of capitalism. In short, impersonality in relationships is considered beneficial and superior in absolute terms. It is interesting that, in seeking to identify Brazilian cultural traits and, therefore, to promote models of management that are adapted to the national reality, you end up making value judgments that come from other realities; that is, our supposed culture is judged by looking at it from a view point that is foreign to our reality. The neo-colonial perspective helps us see how we ourselves create our own

exclusion with concepts that do not take into consideration our reality and excludes dissenting voices and complexities (Prasad and Prasad, 2001).

Returning to Darcy Ribeiro, for whom the cultural nuclei that form our country (the “Brasis”) were at one and the same time very much the same and very different: “history, in the truth of things, takes place in the local places, as events that people remember and explain in their own way. And it is there, in the line of co-shared beliefs, of collective wills abruptly ruffled, that things happen” (Ribeiro, 1995, p. 269). We can admit, by means of the perspective of post-modern analysis, that to emphasize the things that are the same and silence the differences is in itself an option that decontextualizes and brushes aside the ambiguities and complexities that are inherent in any culture. To emphasize only some of those aspects is, at the very least, to generalize a characterization that normally discharacterizes, even though it may only be, in some way, to lend order to a comprehension or interpretation of our national reality.

Conclusions

In this article we have tried to question the academic work that analyzes what is called “Brazilian organizational culture” in the area of organizational and management studies. We have seen that, in general terms, this work has some recurring characteristics. The first is that this work was influenced in a very marked way by the research of Hofstede, whose arguments have been, by and large, accepted without question in the vast majority of the studies we analyzed. The second consideration is that, in the vast majority of cases, the texts analyzed look at national cultural traits from their historic origins, trying to describe their continuity since Brazil began as a country until today, without pointing out nuances or variations. The third consideration is that, to a greater or lesser extent, cultural features appear as all-embracing and as characteristics of a unit called “Brazilian culture”. Therefore, the heterogeneity of Brazilian culture is pushed back into second place. The third consideration is that value judgments are applied to supposedly national, cultural features, which are seen as “under-developed” and causing “national backwardness”.

Questioning these points we have just raised from the postmodern perspective, we have discussed the inadequacy of using Hofstede directly as a point of reference, along with the problems associated with the notion of Brazilian organizational culture, since such a notion ignores specific nuances and regional, local and individual peculiarities. Finally, we discussed the value judgment present in a good part of the studies that analyze Brazilian organizational culture.

The result of the analyses that were carried out in this article point to the possibility that cultural studies, in the context of organizational theory, should be more specific, local and refer to cultural groups. A perspective like this implies recognizing the basis for, and the political consequences of cultural analysis, at the same time as implying that there should be a more descriptive analysis of the cultural phenomenon. In fact, approaches to the cultural phenomenon, and to the interpretation of organizational culture reveal that, in the vast majority of cases, strongly managerial leanings and social engineering pretensions still predominate in our Administration, thereby constituting an instrument that in some way favors dominant or privileged groups.

Even though discussion on the notion of national cultures is of fundamental importance the development of analyses that make more sense within specific peculiarities; concern with specific issues and contexts that are highly pluralistic; is of fundamental importance for taking into consideration what is most important in Brazilian society, its heterogeneity. When this is not considered in an appropriate way, or is silenced, we end up analyzing our country and organizations in a superficial way, at the same time that we are developing studies and carrying out research that functions like an effort of rhetoric for affirming a fallacious, unique national identity.

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Further reading

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About the authors

Rafael Alcadipani is lecturer of Organisational Theory at FGV-EAESP, Brazil and PhD student at Manchester Business School, UK. His research interests are ethnography and post-structuralist approaches in Organisation Studies. He is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: rafael.silveira-2@manchester.ac.uk

João Crubellate is Lecturer of Organization Theory at Maringá State University (Brazil), Department of Management. His research interests include institutional theory and educational systems.

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