



## Adopting or adapting? The tension between local and international mindsets in Portuguese management

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### Abstract

One of the effects of the globalization process has been the diffusion of international management mindsets. Such a process of diffusion may be contributing to an increasing homogeneity of managerial practice around the world, but important differences still remain. The research reported in this article analyzes management as a process in the making, i.e., as a dynamic interplay between local culture, history and conditions, and the diffusion/adoption of international managerial techniques. The topic is approached inductively, through interviews with 71 managers based in Portugal. The article makes two main contributions: it analyzes management as a dialectical interplay between local factors and imported management knowledge, and helps to describe management practice in this Latin European country. Results suggest that the change process occurring in managerial practice in Portugal derives from the tension between a parochial mindset, inherited from almost five decades of dictatorship and its confrontation with a new international mindset. Some managers may be approaching this tension dialectically, through the enactment of a synthesis, which some informants interpret as potentially leading to a new “Latin managerial touch”.

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One of the main features of contemporary social and organizational life is the process of globalization, which is the subject of heated debates regarding its pros and cons, the shape it is taking and the form it should take (Osland, 2003). In parallel, in a somewhat paradoxical movement, there is continuing research on national characteristics and cross-cultural differences. In the case of management, the diffusion of an international model is accompanied by the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages associated with

its adoption. In the case of Europe, some authors have explored the diversity of European management and how it fits with such an international model. Topics covered in the debate include diversity as a main feature of European management (Calori & De Woot, 1994; Goffee & Jones, 1995), the distinct professional identities of managers in different European countries (Watson & Bargiella-Chiappini, 1998), and so forth. Other authors have explored, instead, similarities inside cultural clusters: Engwall (1996) contrasted “Vikings versus the world” and Calori and Dufour (1995) explored the major features of a common international European management model.

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In this paper, a space between diversity and homogeneity will be explored. It analyzes the way a sample of Portuguese and non-Portuguese managers working in Portugal interpret the Portuguese style of management.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the research deals with particularism and uniqueness. However, it also explores the possible similarities with other Latin European countries in order to develop a fine-grained understanding of some common traits among the Latin European countries. The Latin European cultural cluster, according to previous research (Jesuino, 2002) shares a number of characteristics, including a strong Catholic heritage and a Mediterranean culture. Diverse studies have previously addressed management practices in particular European cultural clusters. For example, Czarniawska and Sevón's (2003) volume was devoted to the study of the Nordic countries. Less is known, however, about management in Latin European countries.

This paper offers an attempt to unravel the practice of management in one Latin European country: Portugal. As observed by Aram and Walochik (1996), only a few studies have taken a polycentric approach to understanding culture-specific management attitudes and practices. With the above goals in mind, the paper proceeds from the macro to the micro level. It starts with an analysis of management in the Latin European cultural cluster, in order to provide a general overview of common traits of managing in this region. Then it moves to the Portuguese case. An analysis of the Portuguese national culture will be provided, aiming to present the cultural context of management practice. Finally, the discussion focuses on management practice. On the basis of data collected from 71 respondents, Portuguese management is studied in order to contribute to the under-

standing of how local and global factors influence the practice of management.

This is a qualitative exploratory approach to management in Portugal. Given the scarce research on the Portuguese management case, the research aims to acquire specific country knowledge. The paper deals with the individual level of analysis: it is the personal representation of management in Portugal that I am trying to illuminate. Some macro theory, however, will be presented in order to allow readers to gain a better understanding of the context. Macro and micro levels, of course, are not unarticulated: macro-structures are created, reinforced, sustained and changed by individual agents acting collectively (Ford, 1996). In this study, however, I am not trying to uncover this dynamic: I am pursuing, instead, individual interpretations of the management process.

The article makes several contributions to the management literature. First, it proposes an exploration of management as an historically situated process. More specifically, it discusses how individual managers experience change in their profession's culture. Second, it analyzes how managerial interpretive schemas are affected by changes at the broader institutional level. Third, it examines the process of environmental change from the managers' point of view. Fourth, it adds to the scarce organizational literature on the Portuguese case. Finally, it highlights the way agents may contribute, through action and sensemaking, to changing the profession's culture.

## **1. The Latin European manager and the international manager**

Contemporary managers are often confronted with contradictory advice: they are asked to manage with an "international mindset" and with "world class management techniques", while, at the same time, are warned about the need to respect local cultures. This requirement has been precipitated by the pressures for globalization, which are requiring managers to innovate their ways of working in order to comply with the available international management models. In other words, they are urged to implement their strategies across borders and cultures (Siehl, 1998). International managers have been variously defined, but some characteristics tend to be consistently

<sup>1</sup> As noted by one of the reviewers of this article, it may be somewhat audacious to make conclusions about the management style of Portuguese managers on the basis of their own representations, but representations influence practice. By way of circumventing this criticism, a sub-sample of non-Portuguese managers was also consulted. This raises another issue, however, as pointed out by another anonymous reviewer: these managers may be interpreting the Portuguese culture on the basis of their original culture, which may offer a very kaleidoscopic picture. Both of these criticisms are valid and should be addressed in future research. The present work, however, is a modest exploratory attempt at discovering what "Portuguese management" may look like. The previous criticisms should be considered as limitations of this research.

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