

# SPATIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

DISCUSSION PAPERS

**Sociological and Educational Studies**

Nº5

**DECEMBER 2010**

**The Identity of Sociology or what to do when the Universe is Unknown: Qualitative Solutions against the Quantitative Obsession**

A Identidade da Sociologia ou o que fazer quando o Universo é Desconhecido: Soluções Qualitativas contra a Obsessão Quantitativa

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**Looking Back Through a New Pair of Glasses: Conflict and Mediation in Local Development**

Uma Abordagem ao Conflito e à Mediação no Desenvolvimento Local

*António Fragoso and Emilio Lucio-Villegas*

# **DISCUSSION PAPERS N° 5: SPATIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS**

**Sociological and Educational Studies**

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# THE IDENTITY OF SOCIOLOGY OR WHAT TO DO WHEN THE UNIVERSE IS UNKNOWN: QUALITATIVE SOLUTIONS AGAINST THE QUANTITATIVE OBSESSION

## A IDENTIDADE DA SOCIOLOGIA OU O QUE FAZER QUANDO O UNIVERSO É DESCONHECIDO: SOLUÇÕES QUALITATIVAS CONTRA A OBSESSÃO QUANTITATIVA

*J. Andrés Domínguez Gómez  
Bernat Roig Merino  
Antonio Aledo Tur*

### ABSTRACT

Social Sciences can, on occasions, be similar to the so called “hard” sciences. However, in many cases, neither the object nor the classical methods fit in with the objectives of the work. The object requires methodological and technical adjustments, which are often avoided by means of an improper rigidity of the object’s needs. These adjustments can even alter the original research idea. The main objective of this article consists of proving that those objects of study, less suitable to be addressed by rigid positivistic strategies, can be approached both scientifically and sociologically. This can be achieved with the use of different strategies and flexible methodologies to ensure validity and reliability standards.

This paper will be posed, firstly, a reflection on the epistemological nature of the debate about the rigid-flexible perspectives. Secondly, the strategies and tools used by the research team to achieve the reduction of the uncertainty about the size and characteristics of the population studied will be described. Finally, some of the survey results obtained in this project will be compared to those provided by the *FAMILITUR* Survey (2008), conducted by the Spanish Institute of Tourist Studies (IET).

keywords: Metodological flexibility, quantitative-qualitative approach, identity of social sciences, residential tourism.

### RESUMO

As ciências sociais podem, por vezes, ser semelhantes às chamadas ciências exactas. No entanto, em muitos casos, nem o objecto nem os métodos clássicos se encaixam nos objectivos do trabalho. O objecto requer ajustes metodológicos e técnicos, que muitas vezes são evitadas por meio de uma rigidez indevida das necessidades do objecto. Estes ajustes podem até mesmo alterar a ideia de investigação original. O objectivo principal deste artigo consiste em provar que os objectos de estudo, menos susceptível de ser abordada por rígidas estratégias positivistas, podem ser abordados científica e sociologicamente. Isto pode ser conseguido com o uso de diferentes estratégias e metodologias flexíveis para assegurar a validade e confiança adequadas.

Este documento coloca, em primeiro lugar, uma reflexão sobre a natureza epistemológica do debate sobre as perspectivas rígidas vs flexíveis. Em segundo lugar, são descritas as estratégias e ferramentas utilizadas pela equipa de pesquisa para conseguir a redução da



incerteza sobre o tamanho e as características da população estudada. Por último, alguns dos resultados de pesquisa obtidos neste projecto são comparados com os fornecidos pelo inventário FAMILITUR (2008), conduzido pelo Instituto Espanhol de Estudos de Turismo (IET).

Palavras-chave: Flexibilidade metodológica, a abordagem quantitativa-qualitativa, a identidade das ciências sociais, turismo residencial.

JEL Classification: C18

## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to observe, in the daily practice of research, the manner in which professionals are obliged to constrain the techniques for quantitative data collection in order to make them appropriate for the operative demands of a project. From a qualitative and “flexible” perspective, such decisions can be methodologically justified and they can even result in a database that provides a close approximation to the population features. From a “rigid” or mathematical point of view, the actual capacity of these data to statistically represent the population, is an enigma.

Social Sciences can, on occasions, be similar to the so called “hard” sciences. However, in many cases, neither the object nor the classical methods fit in with the objectives of the work. The object requires methodological and technical adjustments, which are often avoided by means of an improper rigidity of the object’s needs. These adjustments can even alter the original research idea when clashing against the fears aroused by not knowing how to approach the topic with the classical “hard” tools.

In other words, sometimes a sociologically interesting research project can be influenced, modified in its objectives and even altered, because of the mathematical restrictions imposed by the statistics models for inferring sampling results to the population. This fact may entail the exclusion of a certain target population, whose characteristics are interesting to be quantitatively investigated. Some examples of this are the illegal immigrant population (Heckmann, 2004), populations who have experienced environmental disasters (Henderson, Sirois, Chen, Airriess, *et al.*, 2009), the homeless population (Dávid and Snijders, 2002) or, as it is case of this research, the tourist population occupying non-hotel accommodations (Sharma, Dyer, Carter and Gursoy, 2008). This is an unregistered population group. It is unknown how many of them there are and where exactly they are located. Therefore, and according to the statistics discipline, it would be impossible to approach this reality as a sociological object of study. Several academically accepted solutions to this problem, such as random routes, can result expensive and almost impossible to use within projects which do not manage a considerable budget or logistics, which is pretty frequent in social research. As a consequence, the background problem emerges again (Diaz de Rada, 2004; Diaz de Rada, 2007; Diaz de Rada, 2008).

These difficulties add to a wide history of theoretical and methodological controversies (Ferrarotti, 1991) which are ingrained in the basic question of the identity of sociology as

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to the Institute of Tourist Studies for their co-operation, as far as they facilitated us the necessary data to carry out this research. We would also like to make a special mention to Salvador Gregori, ODEC technician, for his advice and quick response to our questions. Likewise, we are most grateful to our colleagues Hugo Pinto, Fernando Sousa, Pedro Pintasilgo and Teresa de Norhona (University of the Algarve) for their invaluable comments to the successive drafts of this article. The translation of this paper was funded by the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain.

a science. Some classical authors already focused their efforts on this issue at the outset of the discipline, and they consistently demonstrated its scientific status<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, contemporary sociology continues to be burdened with this identity crisis.

Once this problem has been posed, the main objective of this article consists of proving that those objects of study, less suitable to be addressed by rigid positivistic strategies, can be approached both scientifically and sociologically. This can be achieved with the use of alternative and flexible methodologies which could incorporate different strategies of to ensure validity and reliability standards. This paper has been structured as follows. Firstly, a reflection on the epistemological nature of the debate about the rigid-flexible perspectives will be posed. This debate is framed within the discussion between a definitely positivistic sociology and a constructivist and procedural sociology. Secondly, the strategies and tools used by the research team to achieve the reduction of the uncertainty about the size and characteristics of the population studied will be described. Finally, some of the survey results obtained in this project will be compared to those provided by the *FAMILITUR* Survey (2008), conducted by the Spanish Institute of Tourist Studies (IET). The objective of this final point is to validate the approximation and results obtained by the research team. In this sense, if the results obtained from our survey are similar to those from the *FAMILITUR* survey, the scientific validity of the methodological proposal developed on this research could be inferred.

## 2. EPISTEMOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THIS RESEARCH

Durkheim (Durkheim, 1973) specifically defined the object of study of sociology, as well as the manner in which it should be approached. The *social fact* should be understood holistically, considered in its relational dimension, yet analysed according to its individual manifestations. The very isolation of these manifestations implies the risk of losing the scientific *line of life* with the necessary comprehensive approach (Hamel, 1992). The subjectivities show worlds of significance, related to a contingent interpretation (as meanings can be substituted by other meanings consecutively) rather than to mathematical modelling (Seiyama, 2006).

The sociological debate about the possibility of objectifying the subjectivity (Ho, 2008) is notably cleared up when considering that the main contribution to sociology of the classical sciences in general, and of mathematics in particular, does not so much reside in statistical techniques, as in a rigorous and realistic attitude towards the object (Feldman, 1972). We, as sociologists, are aware that our obsession to *seem scientific* sometimes leads our investigations towards an inappropriate use of the quantitative techniques, as well as towards the isolation of the individual manifestations of the object and to a deviation from the real object. Thus, the final appearance of the research is that of a “clumsy imitation” of science. This can be avoided if we keep our sight focused on the realism inherited from mathematics, rather than on the need to adopt rigid statistical models, as they cannot fulfil our needs and they can even make us mistake the means (method) for the ends (object). Therefore, the adoption of a quantitative technique should not determine the selection of our research aims. On the contrary, we shall look for the technique or the set of interrelated techniques (the methodology) that best enables the understanding of the object.

Also, in other social sciences, as in economics, the quantification of the object has been (and still is) very much questioned as far as it dangerously distances itself from a necessary adjustment to reality (Lawson, 2009; Swann, 2006; Pinto, 2009). In fact, since Heisenberg’s indetermination principle (1927), the awareness of the imperfect character of measurement

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<sup>2</sup> Emile Durkheim or Max Weber, constitute some of the main examples of this. Also, Vázquez (Vázquez Figueroa, 1975) carried out a good overview of the authors who established the basis for the study of the identity of Sociology.

in quantum physics brought attention to the limits of scientific knowledge in general as the main philosophical consequence, and especially, concerning probability-based knowledge (Colyvan, 2008). Non-probabilistic sampling and triangulation techniques in search of appropriate levels of confidence are often used in the *hard sciences*. They are necessary and important to assure the scientific nature of any process (Ben-Haim, Zacksenhouse, Keren and Dacso, 2009) or to control the risk implied in the limitations of knowledge (Guo, Bai, Zhang and Gao, 2009). The random or non-statistical nature of Nature often involves serious conceptual and operative complications for the practice of research in the realm of these sciences (Frellsen, Moltke, Thiim, Mardia, *et al.*, 2009).

The search for a quantitative technique – and nothing more than quantitative - which can adequately adjust to the object, often ends in the adoption of the least-bad solution (Heraux and Novi, 1974), which irrevocably increases the probability of error. The difficulties inherent in the quantification of sociological questions from the beginning of the process, with the control and classification of the population and its sample, to its very end (Hazelrigg, 1991) (Moin, 1989), practically compel us not to forget alternative possibilities in order to ensure the structure of quantitative reliability created in order to reduce the margin of error (Martin and Lynch, 2009).

Some authors clearly point out the need for flexibility and adaptability of the methodology to the object (Díaz de Rada, 2006; Diaz de Rada, 2006). We can also find a number of explanatory examples for the initiatives to be performed before the fieldwork in case of difficulties, as in the ones presented here (Mainar and Grilló, 2006). Also, the particularities of the object can be addressed with the qualification of the human resources employed in the development of the process of data production (Fernández Esquinas, 2003). Likewise, we should create strategies to get around the difficulties and provide constructive and creative solutions that fit each object and their own methodological problems. To be aware of the range of difficulties and to be able to overcome them, are tasks which are just as sociological as the analysis itself. In fact, this awareness is only achieved during tentative contact in the initial stages of the investigation, in its design and planning. A mistaken procedure would imply rejecting our goals or our object because of the methodological difficulties that they entail. This would involve the gradual reduction of the possibilities for sociological investigation and a limitation to the applied knowledge, which is a source of science-building and progress, whether it is “hard” science or not.

### 3. STRATEGY ADOPTED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR PROJECT

In order to provide an example of this issue and to search for solutions for this problem with both methodological and epistemological implications, we will use as an example the case study of the “*Residential Tourism: demand analysis and proposals for the restructuration of consolidated destinations*” project<sup>3</sup> (henceforth *TURVERCON*). The main objectives of this research are:

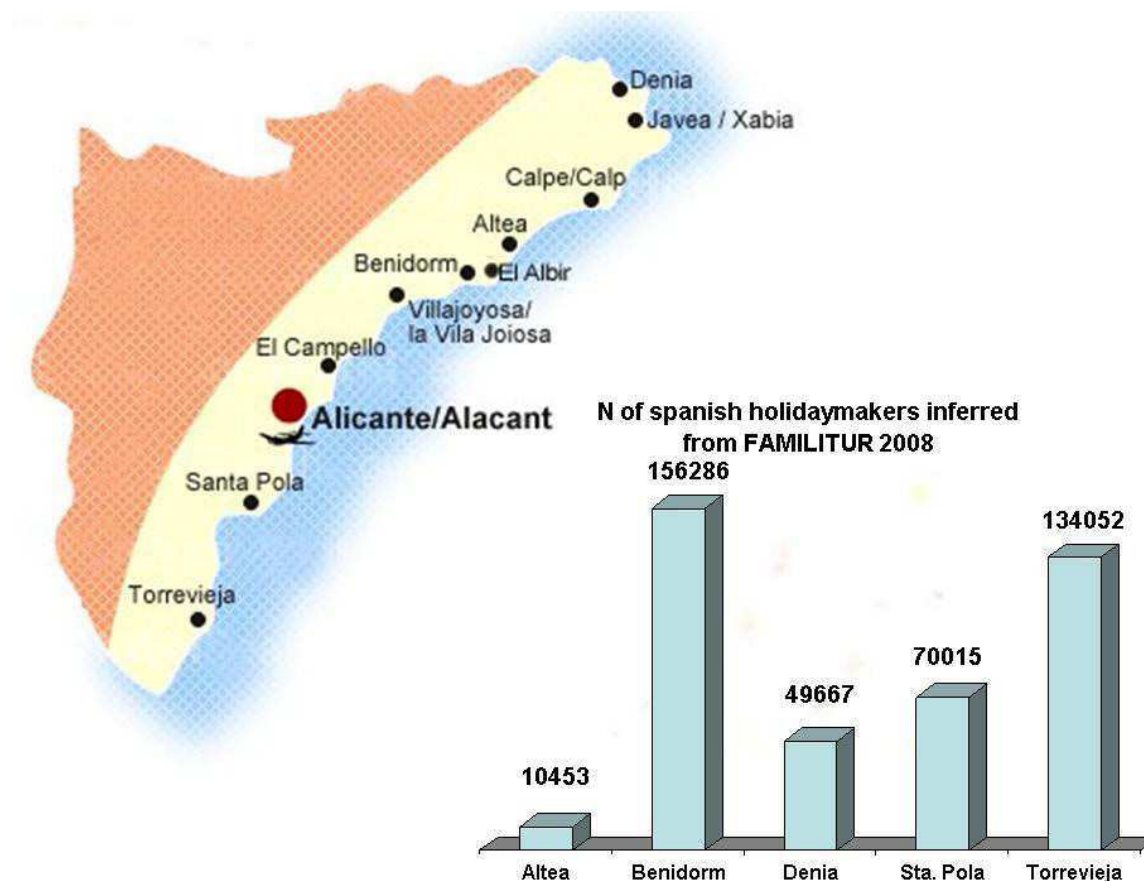
- 1) To analyse and diagnose the *Costa Blanca*’s residential tourism model (Salva, 1998; Torres, 2003).
- 2) To study the socio-touristic profile of holiday-makers, according to their socio-demographical characteristics, the configuration of different groups of holidaymakers and their lifestyles during summer leisure time.

These objectives were covered by using quantitative information obtained from a survey. This survey was addressed to Spanish summer holidaymakers in five municipalities in the Costa Blanca. The process of data collection was conducted simultaneously in the selected

<sup>3</sup> Research & Development project “Residential Tourism: demand analysis and restructuration proposals for consolidated destinations” (SEJ2005-04305), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (2005-2008).

municipalities (Denia, Altea, Benidorm, Santa Pola and Torrevieja) during the last three weeks of July and the first week of August (2008). The choice of these municipalities was made according to their significance as “sun and beach” tourism destinations (García Andreu, 2004; Mazon Martinez, 2006), the high number of non hotel holiday units available in the private sector (EXCELTUR, 2009; MUNRES) and with the aim of geographically covering the Costa Blanca from North to South.

Image 1. Sampling area map. Number of Spanish residential holidaymakers



Source: Own elaboration based on data from FAMILITUR (IET , 2009a)

The universe of study was the Spanish population who chose some of the cited destinations to spend their summer holidays in non-hotel accommodation (i.e., privately rented accommodation). Thus, these summer holidaymakers had to meet a number of requirements in order to be eligible for the study:

- a) Their main residence could not be located in one of the participant destinations.
- b) Their accommodation should be different from a hotel, a camping-site, a rural accommodation or a tourist complex accommodation. The summer holidaymakers linked to Residential Tourism stay in privately owned properties, family and friends' properties or rented properties.
- c) They should not be in any of the participant destinations for work reasons.
- d) Their length of stay should not be longer than three months or shorter than a week.

The main difficulty encountered by the *TURVERCON* research team was the lack of reliable data to establish the exact number of subjects in the universe of study (Casado, 1999). In other words, the number of Spanish summer holidaymakers who chose these municipalities

to stay in non-hotel accommodation was unknown (Aledo Tur and García Andreu, 2007). Thus, if the universe is unknown it is not possible to establish the representativeness of the sample. From a statistical or rigid point of view, the survey should have been ruled out as an appropriate research technique. Nevertheless, this research team adopted a more flexible approach with regards to the object of study. Likewise, information of a qualitative nature and from secondary sources was included in order to achieve an acceptable degree of knowledge about the population being researched. This became a necessary condition in order to make the use of the survey viable as a research technique and to accomplish the aims of the *TURVERCON* project.

As mentioned previously, there are no official records or elaborated data to determine the total number of tourists in the participant municipalities during the summer holiday period. Therefore, when faced with the difficulty of studying a volatile and numerically uncontrollable population, *TURVERCON* resolved to employ alternative tools, which allowed an approximation to the quantitative dimension of the universe of study (Heckmann, 2004; Dávid and Snijders, 2002; Mainar and Grilló, 2006; Eaton, Messer, Wilson and Hoge, 2006). Likewise, several interviews prior to fieldwork were conducted. The interviewees were key informants such as service company representatives (water, waste and energy companies, etc.), municipal experts on tourism and members of local councils responsible for tourism and town planning. After collecting this qualitative data, the impossibility of knowing the exact number of subjects in the universe of study was recognised.

Nonetheless, the information provided by the interviews, combined with complementary data<sup>4</sup>, allowed us to confirm that the universe of study would exceed 100.000 Spanish summer holiday-makers in the *Costa Blanca* as a whole. This figure has been traditionally recognised by sociological studies as an acceptable lower limit for an infinite universe. A total of 400 questionnaires would imply a confidence level of 95% and an error margin of 5%. The total amount of questionnaires conducted was 1800.

The difficulties to know the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the population discarded the use of quotas or other criteria for sample selection (Cea D'Ancona, 1996, p. 415). Once again, we resorted to the use of the information provided by key local informants. They were asked to point out on a map the mobility of the summer holidaymakers, mainly searching for the urban areas with the highest affluence of tourists and their peak times. All of this was based on their knowledge of the possible types of holidaymakers with regard to their tourist and leisure behaviour. With this information, sampling points and routes were established in each municipality under the criteria that they kept the highest possible affluence of people during the summer period. Besides, several time intervals were scheduled for every sampling points, with the purpose of complying, insofar as possible, with the probabilistic requirement of allowing each member of the population to be included in the sample. The fieldwork of the *TURVERCON* project was carried out during July and August 2008.

Under the presumption that the foremost reason for residential tourists choosing these municipalities as their destination is "sun and beach" (Aguiló, Alegre and Sard, 2005; Haug, Dann and Mehmetoglu, 2007) and given that the used routes cover a wider area than the one covered by the sampling points, we decided to conduct 70% of the interviews on the beach, where routes were established. The remaining 30% was carried out at the sampling points, with the idea of including those holidaymakers who were not on the beach but were taking part in other activities such as shopping, walking, socialising in terraces and coffee shops and the like. The sampling points were locations with a high concentration of people: central areas, shopping areas and malls, hotel locations and promenades. The time intervals

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<sup>4</sup> The number of households for potential tourist use and the households and population census data were provided by the *FAMILITUR* and *FRONTUR* surveys (IET, 2009a; IET, 2009b).

were also defined according to people density on routes and at sampling points, namely from 10:00 to 14:30 in the morning and from 17:00 to 20:00 in the evening. In order to select the sample unit, one out of eight holidaymakers was randomly selected. It is important to highlight here that, apart from the selection of the last sample unit, the establishment of sampling rules responds to criteria of a qualitative nature based on reliable information, yet with no statistical basis given the lack of quantitative data to establish the quota.

#### 4. VALIDATION OF THE SOLUTION ADOPTED

The aim of this section is to validate the approach and results developed by the research team. Likewise, if the results obtained by the *TURVERCON* survey are similar to those showed by the *FAMILITUR* survey (2008), the scientific validity of the former's methodological proposal could be inferred. *FAMILITUR* is a monthly, panel-type survey, conducted by the Institute of Tourist Studies, which belongs to the Spanish Industry, Tourism and Commerce Ministry. This survey is addressed to a representative sample of 12,400 Spanish households. Information is subsequently obtained from approximately 34,000 individuals residing in family main households in the whole Spanish territory. All collective accommodations, including hotels, barracks, convents, etc. were excluded from the population framework. The information provided by *FAMILITUR* is structured in three main blocks, in accordance with the three units of analysis: households, individuals and journeys.

In order to be able to carry out this comparison, we have used a subsample of the *FAMILITUR* data comprising the journeys made by Spanish citizens to every coastal destination in the province of Alicante (*Costa Blanca*)<sup>5</sup>. The types of journeys selected from *FAMILITUR* were the summer holiday trips with residential accommodations in the destination (privately owned or belonging to friends and family, time shares or rented housing). The duration of these trips should be equal to or greater than 6 nights, or less than three nights. These trips will be referred as **VRCB6** trips from now on.

The selection of all the municipalities of the *Costa Blanca* from the *FAMILITUR* survey (conducted "in origin"), and not only of the journeys made to the five municipalities specifically studied by the *TURVERCON* survey (conducted "in destination"), is justified owing to a number of reasons. Firstly, the five municipalities included in the *TURVERCON* survey are regarded as representative of the universe researched (*Costa Blanca*). Secondly, as the *FAMILITUR* survey comprehended the whole extent of the *Costa Blanca*, it provided us with a higher number of entries in the subsample of VRCB6 journeys (648 summer journeys in 2008 from 268 different households<sup>6</sup>).

For the results obtained from the *FAMILITUR* and *TURVERCON* surveys to be comparable, we proceeded to prepare the databases.

a) Since the *FAMILITUR* survey offers statistically representative results of the Spanish population who travelled to the *Costa Blanca* in the summer, the first step was to estimate the number of **VRCB6** trips in 2008. This is the population framework of the questionnaires conducted in the destination sites. It was only possible to make this estimation in May 2009, when the *FAMILITUR* data was available to the researchers, that is ten months after the *TURVERCON* survey was conducted.

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<sup>5</sup> *Costa Blanca* is the tourist brand-name for the coastal destinations in the province of Alicante.

<sup>6</sup> This implies a top sampling error of 6.0% for a confidence level of 95%, where  $p=q=0.5$ , and a simple random sampling. The *FAMILITUR* is stratified and multi-staged. Therefore, the complexity of the exact calculation of the sampling error is beyond the scope and objectives of this study. It is necessary to highlight that stratification reduces the sampling error and that the number of stages (also known as conglomerates) increases it. For that reason, the approximation in a simple random sample is often used in these situations with an illustrative purpose (Abascal Fernández and Grande, 2005), pp. 266-267.

We checked that *FAMILITUR* estimated the number of people living in Spain in 2008<sup>7</sup> at 44,764,076 and the number of tourist trips completed in the same year at 168,802,178. 12% of those trips were summer holiday journeys. 60% of these summer holidaymakers used residential accommodations. We will refer to this type of holidays as **VR** from now on. In the *Costa Blanca*, **VR** trips account for up to 69% of the total of summer trips to the destination. The *Costa Blanca*, as a destination specialised in **VR**, received 940592 **VR** trips in 2008, accounting for 7.66% of the whole **VR** by Spanish residents. The length of these trips was mostly over six nights (876,584 trips made by 773985 people)<sup>8</sup>. Out of the 876,584 **VR** trips estimated by the *FAMILITUR* survey in 2008, almost half of them (420,473) had one of the five municipalities cited in *TURVERCON* as their destination.

Stemming from the above it follows that the estimation of the population carried out by the research team for the destination survey (*TURVERCON*), was indeed correct. As indicated earlier, qualified informants and data from secondary sources were used to reach that estimation, which allowed the triangulation of the infinite universe (>100.000 **VR**).

b) The second task to accomplish with the *FAMILITUR* data was the estimation of the weight that each one of the five participant destinations should have over the total of **VR** *FAMILITUR* journeys to the *Costa Blanca*.

For the *TURVERCON* survey a constant allocation of the sample was used in each municipality. Thus, 400 questionnaires were conducted in *Benidorm*, *Torreveija*, *Santa Pola* and *Denia* and 200 in *Altea*<sup>9</sup>. This implies the need to weight the trips made to each destination, according to the estimated quota of **VR** journeys for each of them (estimation obtained from the *FAMILITUR* data). Annex 1 includes the table used for the calculation of the weighting coefficient for the five destinations.

At this point, it is necessary to highlight that the *TURVERCON* survey contain information about the sex and age of all the members of the interviewees' travelling group with the sole aim of providing a reference frame in order to check that the profile of the interviewees adjust to the profile of the **VR** travellers over 15 years old (under 16 years old travellers were not interviewed).

After reviewing the *TURVERCON* fieldwork, it has been observed that the 16-30 year old group is underrepresented in the **VR** total. In others words, after interviewing the subjects in their destination, the most represented age group is the over 30-year-olds<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, following the guidelines afforded by Abascal *et al.* (2005), and prior to analysing the profile of the *TURVERCON* interviewees, a certain weight was given to each interviewee according to their age. This was done in order to adjust them to the age profile of the five destination's sample. In Annex 2 the calculation of their weight is shown. Hence, each interviewee will have a final weight in the *TURVERCON* survey's database, as a result of combining the adjusted weight of each destination and their respective age weights.

Once the databases were ready for comparison, we proceeded to validate the representativeness of the *TURVERCON* survey. This was achieved by comparing the results from *TURVERCON* to those obtained from the *FAMILITUR*'s **VR** subsample. For this purpose, some specific questions from the questionnaires used in each survey were selected on the premise that these questions were worded in an identical manner.

The questions contained in the *TURVERCON* questionnaire that are comparable to the *FAMILITUR* ones are mainly of two kinds:

<sup>7</sup> Not including Ceuta and Melilla.

<sup>8</sup> Taking into account that the global size of the *FAMILITUR* sample that we used comprised 12,400 households, it follows that 1.7% of the population resident in Spain has made **VR** journeys, with a sampling error of  $\pm 0.23\%$  (102700 people) and a confidence level of 95%.

<sup>9</sup> The final distribution of valid interviews was: 218 in *Altea*, 395 in *Benidorm*, 398 in *Denia*, 397 in *Santa Pola* and 393 in *Torreveija*.

<sup>10</sup> Ortega (Ortega Martnez, 1990, p. 361) highlights the fact that, in any sample selected using a random procedure, it is frequent for the youngest population group to be underrepresented.

1. Questions relating to all the people travelling with the interviewee (travelling group), such as questions about their sex and age<sup>11</sup>.

2. Questions relating to the interviewee<sup>12</sup> only: type of accommodation, province of origin, length of journey, level of studies/qualifications, civil status, employment status and activities to be performed in destination.

Comparisons by sex and age of the members of the travelling groups are shown in Annex 3, Table 1. The differences observed between *TURVERCON* and *FAMILITUR* are not statistically significant, and are admissible within the error margin accounted for in each survey. The differences by sex account for a 2.3% and, in terms of age groups, the maximum difference is a mere 3.6%.

With regards to the results stemming from the questions relative to the interviewees, we also reported a high degree of similarity. With regards to civil status (Annex 3, Table 2), the main differences are found within the married group, although they minimally exceed the allowed error margins. The remaining differences are minimal and the distribution of percentual results by categories also coincides in both surveys.

As far as the level of studies of the interviewees is concerned (Annex 3, Table 3), the most significant differences are found in primary education. Yet, they are within acceptable margins. The rest of educational levels show similar results in both surveys. The distribution of results by categories also matches.

In the province of residence of the travellers (Annex 3, Table 4), the differences are within an admissible error margin, with Madrid and Alicante accounting for half the travellers.

Relating to the length of the stay in the destination (Annex 3, Table 5), the categories were grouped into two clusters, given the strong prevalence of short stays (between and a week and fifteen days). The match in this case is practically total.

Among the questions referring to the holiday leisure activities (Annex 3, Table 6) the most relevant differences are found in those questions that were not posed identically. Nevertheless, these questions were recodified with the aim of keeping the highest degree of similarity for their statistical treatment. Thus, the most important difference is found in the question related to “Cultural outings (museums, monuments and cities)”. While in the *FAMILITUR* survey the question formulated was literally “Cultural outings (museums, monuments and cities)”, in *TURVERCON* the analogous question was “Cultural outings (museums, theatres...)”. In spite of this, the differences found in the results are within the acceptable margins in both studies.

Lastly, with regards to the employment situation of the participants, in those categories comparable in both surveys (Annex 3, Table 7), we found no significant differences in the results.

Therefore, we were able to observe that the findings of both surveys are very similar, in general terms. There are several explanations for the most significant differences identified in some of the categories. Qualitatively speaking, these two surveys are different. While *TURVERCON* interviews were conducted in the streets, *FAMILITUR* is a panel-type survey, which allows for an easier and more intuitive response. In this case, the interviewees completed the questionnaire in their own homes and in a reiterative manner as they knew the questions better and they could therefore respond as they had done on previous occasions.

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<sup>11</sup> Out of these questions there are 6567 registered entries from *TURVERCON* (See Annex 1, column (B)), obtained from 1801 valid interviews, which implies an approximate sampling error of 2.4%. These entries can be compared to the subsample of 648 *FAMILITUR* VRCB6 trips, since here each subject's displacement is counted as a trip. These 648 entries in *FAMILITUR* come from 268 different households, which implies an approximate top margin error of 6.1%, for a confidence level of 95% and a simple random sample.

<sup>12</sup> There are 1801 registry entries obtained from these questions in the “in destination” survey. Therefore the approximate top sampling error in *TURVERCON* is  $\pm 2.4\%$ . These questions can be compared to those from the *FAMILITUR* VRCB6 for the group over 15 year old (obtained from 264 households). This creates an approximate top sampling error of  $\pm 6.1\%$ .



This is possible because the situations and conditions referred to by the questions do not change with time.

On the other hand, the periods of data collection (fieldwork) are not completely similar in each case. Whilst the *TURVERCON* data was collected during the last three weeks of July and the first week of August 2008 and the travellers had reached their destinations by then; in *FAMILITUR* fieldwork was conducted monthly (the travellers are asked about any journeys<sup>13</sup> they have carried out in the previous three months and those journeys are included in the month in which the journey concluded).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although this work has been justified both from an epistemological and a methodological point of view, our conclusions comprise and interrelate both dimensions.

The high degree of similarity found in the results obtained from the *FAMILITUR* and *TURVERCON* surveys fully justify the decisions taken by the research team at the stages of design and development of the study. Likewise, it legitimates and validates the results obtained through the application of methodological strategies which, from a positivist point of view, could be termed as unorthodox. The wider scope conclusions refer to the need and appropriateness of designing alternative methodological strategies when aiming at objects of study with quantitative control difficulties. For instance, in the case we have put forward, we approached our object of study through a quantitative technique: the survey. Yet, we obtained the initial information not from irrefutable, accessible, reliable and statistically appropriate quantitative data, but from qualitative primary sources that were contained within the very object of investigation. This data was triangulated and supported by secondary and complementary data. The final outcome is the configuration of an alternative methodology that becomes valid for the project's goals.

On the other hand, the chronic identity crisis of sociology often leads to a preferential use of quantitative techniques and tools whose comparability, validity and reliability are accepted by the Academia given their proximity to the positivist methodologies of the "hard sciences". As an unintended consequence, social research may tend to exclusively study those objects which call for the employment of "highly contrastable" and orthodox methodologies. The use of these methodologies would increase the level of scientific legitimacy of the projects in which they were developed. This is the case of the survey and the statistical analysis derived from its application. On the contrary, it could indirectly entail the abandonment (and even the discredit) of those objects of study which cannot be quantitatively controlled under the requisites of orthodox methodologies.

The results of this work show that new methodologies based on a mixed use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to support the decisions made at each stage of the research process, can be valid and reliable in those cases where the objects are highly uncontrollable. Moreover, these methodologies should be considered before discarding the object because it does not fit in with the requisites of a specific research technique.

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<sup>13</sup> Every month, a third of the *FAMILITUR* sample is asked about the family journeys completed in the three previous months. Consequently, monthly preliminary reports of the final data are produced. Each month's final data will be only available three months after the month in which all the participants in the panel are interviewed

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## Annex I

Calculation of the weighting coefficient for each TURVERCON destination.

	Number of VRCB6 trips Familitur 2008	Percentage of VRCB6 trips Familitur 2008 (A)	Number of journeys <sup>1</sup> in TURVERCON (B)	Percentage of journeys in TURVERCON (C)	Weighting coefficiente in TURVERCON D= A/C
Altea	10453	2.49%	782	11.92%	0.208600323
Benidorm	156286	37.17%	1400	21.33%	1.742170377
Denia	49667	11.81%	1524	23.22%	0.508608364
Santa Pola	70015	16.65%	1468	22.37%	0.744328332
Torreveija	134052	31.88%	1388	21.15%	1.507235505
Subtotal	420473	100	656.0	100	
Other	420473	-	-		-
Total	876584				-

## Annex 2

Calculation of the weight given to each interviewee according to age<sup>14</sup> (over 15 years old)

Age of member of the travelling group		TURVERCON Non-interviewed	TURVERCON Interviewed (E)	TURVERCON Total (T)	Weight of each interviewee  C= T / E
16-20 years old	Count	257	37	294	
	%	7.1%	2.1%	5.4%	2.64
21-25 years old	Count	280	100	380	
	%	7.7%	5.6%	7.0%	1.26
26-30 years old	Count	310	105	415	
	%	8.6%	5.8%	7.6%	1.31
31-35 years old	Count	309	165	474	
	%	8.5%	9.2%	8.7%	0.95
36-40 years old	Count	359	213	572	
	%	9.9%	11.8%	10.5%	0.89
41-45 years old	Count	302	187	489	
	%	8.3%	10.4%	9.0%	0.87
46-50 years old	Count	321	198	519	
	%	8.9%	11.0%	9.6%	0.87
51-55 years old	Count	305	182	487	
	%	8.4%	10.1%	9.0%	0.89
56-60 years old	Count	336	198	534	
	%	9.3%	11.0%	9.8%	0.90
61-65 years old	Count	305	175	480	
	%	8.4%	9.7%	8.8%	0.91
Over 65 years old	Count	540	241	781	
	%	14.9%	13.4%	14.4%	1.08
Total	Count	3624	1801	5425	
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

<sup>14</sup> The objective of this weighting is to adjust the age profile of the TURVERCON's interviewees over 15 year old (1801 subjects) to the age profile of the travelling group in the *TURVERCON* survey (a total of 5425 individuals over 15 years old).

### Annex 3

#### Comparison of the TURVERCON-FAMILITUR results

**Table 1: Sex and age of the members of the travelling group**

		TURVERCON		Familiarit VRCB6 trips 2008	
		Total of VRCB6 trips (weighted)	Approximate sampling error <sup>2</sup>	Total VRCB6	Approximate sampling error <sup>3</sup>
Sex of the members of the travelling group	Male	46.6%	2.4%	44.9%	6.0%
	Female	53.4%	2.4%	55.1%	6.0%
Age of the members of the travelling group	0-10 years old	11.9%	1.5%	15.5%	4.3%
	11-20 years old	9.2%	1.4%	10.1%	3.6%
	21-30 years old	11.9%	1.5%	11.6%	3.8%
	31-40 years old	15.3%	1.7%	12.0%	3.9%
	41-50 years old	15.0%	1.7%	15.3%	4.3%
	51-60 years old	15.5%	1.7%	16.4%	4.4%
	Over 60 years old	21.0%	1.9%	19.1%	4.7%
TOTAL		100.0%		100.0%	

**Table 2: Civil status of the interviewees (over 15 years old)**

	TURVERCON		Familiarit VRCB6 2008 trips (over 15 years old)	
	Total of VRCB6 trips (weighted)	Approximate sampling error <sup>4</sup>	Total VRCB6	Approximate sampling error <sup>5</sup>
Single	24.5	2.0	28.1	5.4
Married	66.1	2.2	58.3	5.9
Widowed	3.9	.9	7.2	3.1
Divorced	1.8	.6	2.0	1.7
Separated	1.6	.6	3.1	2.1
Cohabiting	2.1	.7	1.2	1.3

**Table 3: Educational level of the interviewees (percentage of trips for the over 15 year olds)**

	TURVERCON		Familiar VRCB6 trips 2008 (over 15 years old)	
	Total of VRCB6 trips (weighted)	Approximate sampling error	Total VRCB6	Approximate sampling error
Illiterate	.3	.3	.2	.5
With no qualifications (primary education unfinished) <sup>6t</sup>	4.4	33.6	3.1	40.6
Primary Education (old system, 10 years old)			14.5	
Primary Education	29.2		23.0	
Secondary Education	33.7	2.2	31.5	5.6
University (3 <sup>rd</sup> year)	13.6	1.6	12.0	3.9
University (4 <sup>th</sup> year and over) Postgraduates	18.8	1.8	15.7	4.4

**Table 4: Province of origin of the interviewees (percentage of trips for the over 15 year olds)**

	TURVERCON		Familiar VRCB6 trips in 2008 (over 15 years old)	
	Total of VRCB6 trips (weighted)	Approximate sampling error <sup>7</sup>	Total VRCB6 trips	Approximate sampling error
Alicante	10.8	1.4	8.8	3.4
Madrid	38.9	2.3	46.8	6.0
Valencia	3.2	.8	6.5	3.0
Others	47.4	1.8	37.9	4.4

**Table 5: Length of stay (percentages of trips for the over 15 year olds)**

	TURVERCON		Familiar VRCB6 trips in 2008 (over 15 years old)	
	Total of VRCB6 trips (weighted)	Approximate sampling error	Total VRCB6 <sup>8</sup>	Approximate sampling error
A week to 15 days	45.2	2.3	45.4	<b>6.0</b>
16 days or more	54.8	2.3	54.6	6.0

**Table 6: Activities performed by the holidaymakers during their stay**

Activity	TURVERCON		Familitur VRCB6 trips in 2008 (over 15 years old))	
	Total of VRCB6 trips (weighted)	Approximate sampling error	Total VRCB6 trips	Approximate sampling error
Visiting family and friends	44.4	2.3	45.9	6.0
Cultural outings (museums, monuments, cities)			43.8	6.0
Cultural outings (museums and theatres)	35.2	2.2		
Clubbing, pubs	44.6	2.3	41.3	5.9

**Table 7: Employment status of the interviewees (percentage of trips for the over 15 year olds)**

Employment status	TURVERCON		Familitur VRCB6 trips in 2008 (over 15 years old)	
	Total of VRCB6 trips (weighted)	Approximate sampling error	Total VRCB6	Approximate sampling error
Student	8.4	1.3	11.5	3.8
Retired or pensioner	22.1	1.9	16.8	4.5
Housewife	12.8	1.5	13.9	4.2
Unemployed/inactive	3.6	.9	3.7	2.3

(Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> We regard each trip as a return journey for one person. If the interviewee's travelling group comprises four people, we consider it to be four trips in TURVERCON, in order to use the same terminology as FAMILITUR.

<sup>2</sup> In a simple random sample, for a confidence level of 95%,  $K=1.96$  and sample size=1801 participants.

<sup>3</sup> In a simple random sample, for a confidence level of 95%,  $K=1.96$ , and sample size= 268 households.

<sup>4</sup> In a simple random sample, for a confidence level of 95%,  $K=1.96$  and sample size=1801 individuals.

<sup>5</sup> In a simple random sample, for a confidence level of 95%,  $K=1.96$  and sample size=264 households.

<sup>6</sup> In FAMILITUR there is a category called: "Certificate of Education, EGB 1<sup>o</sup>, 10 years old", which is not included in TURVERCON. As this category is situated between "With no qualifications, or Unfinished Education" and "Finished Primary Education", the categories for Primary Studies have been grouped in "Finished and Unfinished Primary Education" in order to make the samples comparable.

<sup>7</sup> Given that in TURVERCON the percentage of no answer for this question is very low (1.5%), the approximate sampling error is calculated as in the previous table. The percentage here is estimated over the total amount of valid responses.

<sup>8</sup> Given that in the FAMILITUR subsample for the over 15 year olds there are some individuals who completed two or three VRCB6 journeys in 2008, the length of the stay has been calculated adding the duration of each of their journeys, in order to make this comparable with the TURVERCON's length of stay. In TURVERCON, interviewees were asked for the total length of their stay in destination.



# DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF AN INSTRUMENT MEASURING THE STRENGTH OF THE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

## DESENVOLVIMENTO E VALIDAÇÃO DE UM NOVO INSTRUMENTO PARA MEDIR A FORÇA DO SISTEMA DE GESTÃO DE RECURSOS HUMANOS

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### ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding the theoretical and empirical support for the human resource management-organisational performance connection, authors still do not know *how* this association works. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) introduced the concept of the strength of the human resource system. In such systems, messages regarding what is appropriate behaviour are sent to employees in an unambiguous and consensual way. Human resource strength affects the way people interpret their environment (situation strength): strong human resource management leads to stronger situations, whereas weak human resource management leads to weaker situations. This research presents an instrument aimed at measuring the concept of strength; furthermore, it assesses Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) model.

Data was collected via questionnaires in six companies, from two distinct studies. Study I is based on 90 questionnaires from five companies; results from this study allowed us to improve the quality of the instrument developed, which in turn was used in a second study, carried out in a single company (88 valid questionnaires).

Overall, results show good reliability estimates of the new instrument, as well as a partial confirmation of Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) model. Explanations for these mixed results are presented and discussed. These explanations may be related to the research design itself, but they may also be due to unsatisfactory or inadequate definition in some of the elements of Bowen and Ostroff's model. Implications for future research are examined.

Keywords: Human resource management, instrument development, strength.

### RESUMO

O conceito de “força” (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Schneider, Salvaggio & Subirats, 2002; Shein, 1981), nas ciências organizacionais e gestão, é dotado de um elevado potencial teórico, mas ao mesmo tempo é intrigante e mágico. O potencial teórico deriva do facto que “força” reflecte o cruzamento de dois ou mais níveis de análise, pelo que pressupõe a ligação das percepções individuais aos comportamentos do grupo e da organização. O enfoque em múltiplos níveis de análise há muito que representa um dos grandes desafios em investigação e intervenção nestas áreas. O carácter intrigante e mágico reflecte a ideia de que o conceito de força capta e reproduz o pensamento e a crença de colectividades humanas. Existe ainda uma outra suposição: a de que aquilo que o grupo é capaz de fazer, é superior ao que o

indivíduo isolado consegue realizar. Neste sentido, “força” é a sabedoria das multidões, para usar um título de um livro por Surowiecki (2005).

Nesta apresentação para o CIEO, o conceito de força da GRH (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) é explorado num modelo em que se procura explicar o desempenho organizacional mediado pela força do clima. Ademais, propõe-se que a liderança concorre com a força da GRH para influenciar o desempenho através do clima.

O trabalho empírico decompõe-se em duas fases. Numa primeira, foram realizados vários estudos com vista ao desenvolvimento e teste de uma nova medida de força da GRH. Na segunda fase, utilizou-se um questionário num grande grupo hoteleiro, para recolher mais de 500 respostas válidas, e com o qual se procurou medir os conceitos centrais no modelo. Na sessão para o CIEO apresentam-se os resultados principais do estudo da 2ª fase, e mencionam-se brevemente os resultados da 1ª fase. Sugerem-se ainda pistas para interpretar os resultados, assim como se avançam ideias para a continuação do projecto.

Palavras-chave: Gestão de recursos humanos; desenvolvimento instrumental; força

JEL Classification: M12

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“How much does human resource management matter?” This is the question with which Gerhart, Wright and McMahan open their year 2000 article published in *Personnel Psychology*. The question reflects the debate in human resource management (hereinafter HR) literature in recent years, as the personnel function is increasingly called upon to show how it can contribute towards increasing individual and organisational productivity, in particular, and towards supporting and reinforcing organisational goals and missions, in general. These concerns have been at the centre of an important stream of research in HR in the last few decades, known as the strategic HR (SHR) perspective. Despite such interest, some studies (e.g. Aijala, Walsh and Schwartz, 2007) show that the HR function still has a long way to go before it reaches alignment on strategic priorities.

SHR focuses on the ways in which HR practices and the HR system are critical to organisational effectiveness. The implicit assumption is that if HR is done well, this will somehow make organisations perform more effectively (Ferris et al., 1998). The key research issue is captured by the word *somehow* in Ferris and his colleagues’ assertion. In fact, notwithstanding the theoretical and empirical support for the HR-organisational performance relationship, there is still a significant lack of knowledge with regards to *how* such association works.

Following this plea, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) proposed a model in which the relationship between HR and performance is mediated by the psychological interpretation of events, and specifically by the extent to which people diverge or converge in their views of situations. The degree of convergence is called psychological strength, and it reflects the degree of harmony that exists among the organisation’s collaborators, as far as their perceptions and beliefs are concerned. Greater harmony indicates stronger psychological situations, whereas greater disharmony denotes weaker psychological situations.

The main influencing cause of psychological strength, according to Bowen and Ostroff (2004), is a novel concept: the strength of the HR System. How strong an HR system is depends upon a set of attributes of such a system, which transcends any existing HR

practices, policies and philosophies. These meta-attributes are related more to the way the HR communicates with employees than to the content of the messages it conveys to people in the organisation. In other words, such features tell us about *how* HR communicates, not about *what* it communicates.

Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) model is a refreshing step in a promising stream of research in HR. However, it has not been tested for its conceptual validity or its power of explanation. The aims of the current paper are twofold: 1) to advance an operational definition of the concept of HR strength; and b) to present an initial test of Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) model.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The strength of human resource systems

Mischel (1973) first proposed the concept of situation strength to explain the influence that situations have on shaping individuals' behaviours. According to the author, in certain situations, behaviour is the result more of people's inner states than anything else, whereas at other times, it is the situation that shapes the actions of individuals. He goes on to elucidate that a situation is called 'strong' when it is able to lead everyone to construe particular events in the same way, and it induces uniform expectancies regarding the most appropriate response pattern. Conversely, individual differences determine behaviour when the situation is ambiguously structured and people have no clear expectations about the behaviours they need to adopt; these are called 'weak' situations. In sum, situational strength deals with the extent to which a situation induces conformity – a strong situation – or is interpreted as ambiguous – a weak situation.

Bowen and Ostroff (2004) picked up these ideas, further proposing that in strong psychological situations people share interpretations of particular events, therefore behaving in a uniform and consistent way, and showing a similar orientation towards goals and desired standards of performance. In weak situations, people rely on their predisposition states in order to behave, and it is therefore likely that they will exhibit more differences in terms of what is acceptable and efficient organisational behaviour.

Situation strength is not a novel notion. In fact, there have been some developments of this concept in the culture and climate literature. Climate strength is the extent to which people share perceptions regarding various issues related to their environment, i.e. the organisation (Schneider, Salvaggio, and Subirats, 2002; Payne, 2000). Culture strength (Schein, 1981) refers to the degree to which people share values and beliefs regarding their work and their organisation. Thus, both climate strength and culture strength can be used as proxy constructs to evaluate situation strength.

A novel idea introduced by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) is that of the strength of HR systems. These systems share three characteristics: a) distinctiveness (when a particular situation stands out in the environment, thereby capturing attention and arousing interest); b) consistency (it refers to an HR function which communicates regular and consistent messages over time, people and contexts); and c) consensus (agreement among employees in their view of the event-effect relationship).

These three characteristics were originally put forward by Kelley (1973), building on Heider's theory of attribution. According to Kelley (1967), attribution is an inferential process that allows individuals to understand and to be acquainted with the external world, mainly through objective information processing. When explaining behaviours in their environment, people take into account information about three distinct sources: objects in the environment (called entities), persons interacting with these objects, and the consistency

of these behaviours (circumstances). The output of this process is an attribution of the effect to an external cause (or to the entity itself) or to the self (internal attribution). Whether one makes attributions to internal or external causes depends on how distinct, consistent and consensual the situation is. These three main criteria help people confer validity to their knowledge about the external world. To the extent that one's attribution fulfils these criteria, there is high confidence in attributing the effect to the entity, that is, to reality. When one's attribution does not satisfy these criteria, judgement becomes uncertain and attribution to the entity is replaced by attribution to one's personal characteristics.

Back to Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) assertions, in strong HR systems, messages regarding what is appropriate behaviour are communicated (via HR practices) to employees in an unequivocal, consistent and consensual way. Hence, HR systems must possess a set of unique characteristics, which are related to the *process* by which a consistent message about HR *content* is sent to employees. The authors define the three dimensions in terms of nine attributes:

- Distinctiveness, which has four dimensions:
  - Visibility or salience: this refers to the degree to which HR practices are salient and readily observable. In social psychology, salience of an object is important so that people are able to make sense of it. For example, if performance criteria are not transparent, this will not create Mischel's strong situation;
  - Understandability: lack of ambiguity and ease of comprehension of HR practice content. HR practices (situational stimulus) can be ambiguous or understandable; in the first case, people will have different interpretations of a particular practice, whereas in the second case they will probably share interpretations;
  - Legitimacy of authority: degree to which the HR system and its agents have legitimacy in moulding people's and groups' actions. If the HR function is perceived as a high-status and high-credibility activity, then it is likely that individuals perceive it as an authority situation, thus submitting themselves to performance expectations as formally sanctioned behaviours; for example, if the HR director sits on the company's board, people may interpret it as "people matter in my company";
  - Relevance: degree to which people perceive the HR system as an important factor in helping to achieve particular goals in the company. The link between individual and organisational goals is central here: individuals must perceive that organisational goals are an important means to achieving their personal goals, and vice-versa.

The above features help draw attention to the message conveyed by the communicator (the HR system), thereby increasing the probability that the HR message will be interpreted uniformly among employees. But this does not suffice, since people will need to perceive that the HR function behaves in a consistent and regular way in all situations, with all employees, and over time. This is the second characteristic:

- Consistency, which refers to an HR function that communicates regular and consistent messages over time, people and contexts. It has three dimensions:
  - Instrumentality: this concept is similar to Vroom's instrumentality concept (Yukl, 1998) in his expectancy model of motivation. It refers to the extent to which people perceive that the HR function and its communicators link outcomes to behaviours or performances in a timely and consistent manner;
  - Validity: to what extent the purpose of HR practices is congruent with what is actually done in practice; for example, if "innovative and creative behaviour" is a key criteria in performance appraisal, but in practice nobody cares about someone's ideas and suggestions, then there is a low perceived validity in the performance appraisal;
  - Consistent HR messages: compatibility and stability of the signals sent by the

HR practices. Consistency has three dimensions: i) what senior managers say are the organisation's goals and values, and what employees actually conclude those goals and values to be; ii) consistency across HR practices; and iii) consistency over time.

- Consensus: agreement among employees in their view of the event-effect relationship. Several factors can help foster consensus among employees and can influence whether individuals perceive the same effect with respect to the entity or situation in question. Among these are:
  - Agreement among principal message senders: degree to which key decision-makers (Bowen and Ostroff write about two: top managers and HR executives) are seen as agreeing with each other in respect to the message sent by the HR function;
  - Fairness of the HR system: to what extent employees perceive that the HR system complies with the three dimensions of justice: procedural, distributive and interactional.

## **2.2 The measurement of HR strength**

Bowen and Ostroff's framework is appealing and it offers a provocative set of ideas. However, it needs to be tested and refined, so that further investigation can be carried out along these lines. The first question driving the current research is, therefore, "how can these nine attributes be assessed?"

Studies measuring the concept of the strength of HR Systems are still scarce in the literature and most are not concerned with the development of a reliable and valid way to measure the concept. In this section, a brief overview of existing studies is provided.

Edgar and Geare (2005) developed 20 questions to measure the perceived strength of four HRM practices (health and safety, training and development, equal employment opportunity, and recruitment and selection), which was operationally defined as the degree to which people agreed or disagreed with each statement (e.g. "working conditions are good"). Since the authors did not aim to explore Bowen and Ostroff's meta-attributes, no other information is provided in their work.

Dorenbosch, Reuver and Sanders (2006) carried out research in 66 hospital departments from four hospitals, in order to study the consensus between line managers and HR professionals. The Dutch team limited their investigation to two of the nine attributes in the Bowen and Ostroff (2004) model: consensus on the HR message and legitimacy of the HR message. Their aim was to check the effect of these two features on commitment strength, defined as the collective degree of identification and dedication to the organisation and organisational goals. A questionnaire with a similar set of questions was used to assess the views of line managers and HR professionals as far as two issues were concerned: human resource practices and the HR function roles. Agreement among the two groups of message senders (line managers and HR professionals) was calculated as the absolute deviance scores of the mean scores on the HR practices. The authors then calculated the inverse deviance scores, so that high scores on consensus refer to high agreement on the HR message among line managers and HR professionals. Legitimacy of the HR message was also assessed by means of a questionnaire, namely by asking line managers and HR professionals about their perception of the role of the HR function. The four roles put forward by Ulrich (1997) were: strategic, partner, change agent, administrative expert, and employee champion.

Finally, Chen, Lin, Lu, and Tsao (2007) collected data through questionnaires from over 400 hairdressers and shop-owners, to study the relationships between employee affective commitment, employee perceptions of HR practices and job performance. The Taiwanese team used HR Strength as a moderating variable in their model, and they focused solely on one of the attributes in Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) model: consistent HR messages between

hairdressers and shop-owners, as far as five HR practices were concerned: employment security, recruitment and selection, training, employee status, and compensation. The reason why the researchers used consistent HR messages as a proxy for the whole HR Strength concept is that they based their operational definition on a previous work by Ostroff and Bowen (2000), in which they proposed that HR Strength can be determined by how closely employee perceptions match those of their managers.

### **2.3 Issues in measuring HR strength**

From the above discussion, there are a number of key elements which are important when using the concept of HR Strength to address research in the human resource field.

1. Firstly, one needs to acknowledge that the nine aforementioned attributes are grounded on the concept of HR practices, which is a lower-order concept, in contrast to the concepts put forward by Bowen and Ostroff, which are higher-order (more abstract) ones. This implies that each of the attributes needs to be assessed by reference to lower-level concepts. Hence, people need to think over an HR practice or a set of interrelated HR practices (an HR System; Delery and Doty, 1996), and only then can they judge if that particular HR practice or HR System is distinct, consistent and consensual.
2. Secondly, as argued by Bowen and Ostroff (2004), the concept of strength requires the judgements and perceptions of employees; therefore the best way to assess the meta-attributes is by having the employees themselves make the assessment. The appropriate unit of measurement is the individual. However, employees do not always have enough information regarding a particular HR practice or set of practices. For instance, most employees would not have enough information regarding how recruitment and selection is carried out in their organisation, since they may have had only one or two contacts with such practices (i.e. when entering their organisation). Therefore, they need to be called upon to evaluate practices with which they have regular contact, such as training or performance appraisal.
3. The concept of strength is based on what James (1982) and Chan (1998) called compositional models, i.e. constructs operationalised at one level of analysis which are then somehow represented at another level of analysis. These compositional models allow good multilevel analysis to be carried out (Chan, 1998). The implication of this literature is that in order to operationalise HR Strength, one should first create a measure by which people are called upon to evaluate some feature of HR (e.g. a practice), and then the construct of "strength" is derived e.g. from some dispersion measure. In addition to dispersion and other similar measures, the more "traditional" measures of central tendency also allow interesting relationships to be studied, as recognised by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). Other issues in multilevel research are pointed out by authors such as James, Demaree, and Wolf (1984), Podsakoff and Organ (1986), and Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003), and they include: hetero and auto-reported measures, data collected from multiple sources of information, and group and organisational indicators built out of information collected at the individual level.
4. No easy answer can be found in the literature as to which HR practices should be selected. At least two interpretations are found: a) HR practice as a feature of a particular HR activity (e.g. recruitment is the activity, and the feature is internal recruitment, external recruitment, or both); or b) HR practice as the set of specific activities aimed at achieving a particular objective or group of objectives (e.g. HR practices directed at supporting innovation). The first view allows comparison across industries and companies, since it deals with generic HR practices which supposedly can be found everywhere. People can also produce meaning regarding the overall HR generic orientation, HR goals, or HR roles, as shown in some works (e.g. Arthur, 1994; Dorenbosch et al., 2006; Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), but this sensemaking activity (Weick, 1995) is pretty much dependent on more visible activities such as training and performance appraisal. As a re-

- sult, the current work focuses on generic HR practices that can be found in any company.
5. Finally, a related question is which practice or set of practices should be used to collect people's interpretations? The literature is not conclusive in this regard. For example, Pfeffer (1994) argues for a greater use of 16 practices, such as selectivity in recruitment and high wages. Ichniowski, Shaw and Prenzushi (1997) used 8 practices in their study, including communication and labour relations. Dorenbosch et al. (2006) used 7 practices, such as appraisal outcomes and appraisal criteria. Chen and colleagues (2007) used 5 practices. Combs, Hall and Ketchen (2006) estimate that, on average, studies use seven practices when conducting research on the HR system.

## 2.4 Research goal

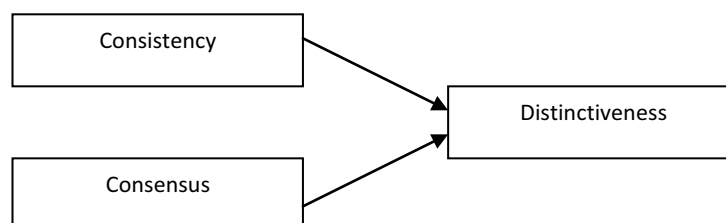
Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) model offers a refreshing and promising framework to look deeper into the relationships between the HR System, strategy, and performance. It links several levels of analysis in the organisation, and allows a dynamical view over process, human and management subject matters.

How each of the nine attributes relates to each other is still largely unknown. The authors suggest a few associations in their work, but in fact none of them has been truly tested so far, nor is their text dedicated to delving deeper into the matter. For this reason, as far as associations between the nine attributes were concerned, the current research followed an exploratory approach.

However, with regard to the three dimensions originally taken from Kelley's (1967, 1973) theory, a few associations can be drawn, which in turn require a confirmatory type of research. Although the three dimensions of distinctiveness, consistency and consensus are all required to help people build interpretations and make attributions about phenomena, the literature seems to defend the primacy of distinctiveness. Hewstone and Jaspars (1988), for example, conducted two studies in which consensus and consistency were found to influence distinctiveness, which in turn was the last and most powerful influencing factor in shaping final attributions. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) accept these relationships, further proposing that distinctiveness has the last word in influencing the Strength of the Situation.

Overall, these findings and theoretical propositions recommend that the three main dimensions studied in the current research should be related, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1 – Model proposed for testing the three dimensions of HR System Strength



Since the whole model is dependent on a new concept, namely that of HR Strength, it is vital that researchers develop powerful and suitable measures to assess such important, and yet still questionable connections in the HR field. The purpose of the current investigation is to advance knowledge in this respect, by reporting the preliminary results of a research project on the effects of HR System Strength on individual and organisational performance. In particular, the current text presents and assesses a novel measure of HR Strength, tested in two studies in different settings.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1 Participants**

A research project was set to develop appropriate measures for testing the full conceptual model presented by Bowen and Ostroff, as well as to explore previous propositions in the HR literature in which the HR System is linked with strategy and individual and organisational performance through situation strength. The current text presents results from two studies aimed at developing and testing operational measures for the constructs in Bowen and Ostroff's model.

Both studies used a quantitative approach (questionnaire). All items composing the main scales required respondents to rate the degree to which they disagreed or agreed with the particular statement. A 1-7 Likert type of scale was used. This was a similar procedure to the one followed by Edgar and Geare (2005), i.e. 1 ("totally disagree") represents a weaker HR practice or goal, and 7 ("totally agree") represents a stronger HR practice or goal. Biographical data included gender, age groups, tenure, and function in the company.

91 people participated in the first study, from five companies in distinct economic sectors: (company 1 – 16.5%), construction (company 2 – 19.8%), maritime management (company 3 – 20.9%), commercial printing (company 4 – 16.5%), and elevators (company 5 – 26.4%). 62% of respondents are male, and 26% are female (2.2% missing). 27.5% of respondents fall into the 30-40 age category.

Coincidentally, the second study is also based on 91 people, though from a single, large telecommunications company. We decided to focus on one single company in order to eliminate any company effects, potentially active in study 1. One such effect was the professional activity performed by respondents. While in the first study there were as many as 30 different functions across the five companies, in the second study, 86% of the respondents fall within the same job category, namely call centre operators. 42% of respondents in study 2 are male, and 52% are female (6.6% missing). 19.8% of respondents fall into the 30-40 age category.

#### **3.2 Item development procedures**

Due to the exploratory nature of the current work, and after a set of five interviews with HR managers, the authors decided to use performance appraisal in study 1, as the framework on which items could be generated to assess the nine attributes proposed by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). In fact, at the time of the interviews, performance appraisal was an important goal in the participating companies, with processes being implemented or already in place. In study 2, carried out shortly after the first one, it was decided that the main focus would be the HR System as a whole (e.g. generic orientation and HR goals), without emphasising any particular HR practice. The change is justified since the authors wished to engender a feeling as to which choice would work better: to focus on one single HR practice or to focus on the HR function. Other differences introduced from study 1 to study 2 are explained below.

The researchers used an iterative process to generate suitable sentences to compose the questionnaire, following authors such as Nunnally and Bernstein (1996). A first set of 63 sentences covering all the nine attributes was first created by the authors of this research and some fellow HR professionals (three organisational behaviour master's students at the time of the study). The phrases were then mixed up so that no association between the indicators and the constructs was possible to identify. The 63 questions were then circulated within the group, for blind recoding into the original nine constructs.

A final stage involved computing an inter-coder agreement index (percentages of matches) for all 63 sentences. Only sentences with three matches (50%) or above were selected for inclusion in the questionnaire. There were 44 sentences in this situation. Further



refinement led to the elimination of a few sentences which were redundant, somehow confusing, inadequate, or had only 50% of matches. In the end, there were 36 sentences in the questionnaire, four per attribute. Table 1 shows an example of the sentences generated with this procedure.

**Table 1 – Items used in the HR Strength scale – selected examples from study 1 (before change**

Attribute	Examples of indicators
Visibility	“In this company, performance appraisal goals are known to everyone”
Instrumentality	“Someone who is a bad performer in this company, should expect to feel the consequences (e.g., no yearly rewards)”
Agreement among message senders	“HR Managers in this company share the same vision as Senior Managers with regard to performance appraisal principles”

In the second study, items were changed in order to accommodate the shift in content. However, following preliminary analysis on the data from study 1, other improvements were introduced. In particular, and since several sentences did not render sufficiently good results in study 1, more sentences were created in study 2, while others were eliminated.

75 new sentences were written or rewritten and submitted to validation content by nine HR professionals. Based on their comments, some sentences were reworded. The six most consensual items of each attribute were chosen to integrate this version of the questionnaire. For “Fairness of the HR system”, the authors used a scale already adapted to a Portuguese context, based on the works of Rego (2000, 2002). Altogether, there were 54 items in the final version of the questionnaire used in study 2.

Table 2 shows an example of the sentences from the questionnaire used in study 2. As can be observed in tables 1 and 2, changes were sometimes very small, while in other cases, they required a completely new sentence.

**Table 2 – Items used in the HR Strength scale – selected examples from study 2 (before changes)**

Attribute	Examples of indicators
Visibility	“HR practices are known to everybody in this company”
Instrumentality	“If my behaviours in this company are adapted to its culture, I know that I’ll be rewarded in some way”
Agreement among message senders	“HR Managers in this company share the same vision as Senior Managers”

In both studies, the questionnaires were subject to thorough qualitative testing before application. Several HR managers, HR professionals and the research team revised each sentence for its clarity, face validity, and simplicity.

### 3.3 Variables

The nine attributes put forward by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) were the main target in both studies. In study 1, there were 4 sentences per attribute, whereas in study 2, there were 6 sentences per attribute. Since this framework was based on Kelley’s (1967, 1973)

attribution theory, the three dimensions of distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus were also included in the testing procedures. For terminology reasons, hereinafter the word ‘dimensions’ refers to Kelley’s (1967, 1973) three concepts; the words ‘attributes’ or ‘meta-attributes’ are used to refer to Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) nine concepts.

Figure 2 shows these two levels of variables.

**Figure 2 – Variables analysed in the current research**

Distinctiveness	Visibility or salience Understandability Legitimacy of authority Relevance
Consistency	Instrumentality Validity Consistent HR messages
Consensus	Agreement among message senders Fairness of the HR system

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Plan of analysis

Before the main data analysis was run, data screening was performed using SPSS 17. A first set of statistical procedures aimed at exploring the data. This had several purposes: to verify the data’s accuracy, to identify missing values, to spot outliers, and to test assumptions of multivariate statistical techniques. This was done for all levels of variables. Overall, only one case was removed from study 1 due to excessive missing data and 3 outliers were deleted from study 2, since they registered p values smaller than 0.001 on the Mahalanobis d-squared’ test. Final sample sizes were:  $n_1=90$  and  $n_2 = 88$ .

Most individual variables showed normal or approximately normal distributions, and the same was true for the aggregated constructs.

In a second phase, hypothesised models were analysed by computing structural equation models (SEM) using AMOS 17 (Arbuckle, 2007). The maximum likelihood method (MLM) was used for parameter estimation, which is taken as a robust method. The models’ goodness-of-fit was assessed using several indices. The absolute goodness-of-fit indices computed were the chi-square goodness-of-fit statistic (CMIN) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The relative goodness-of-fit indices were: the normed chi-square (CMINDF) and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI). For model comparison, the Browne-Cudeck Criterion (BCC) and the Bayes Information Criterion (BIC) were used. BIC has a greater tendency to pick parsimonious models than BCC. Bootstrapping was also used for several estimation and comparison proposals.

### 4.2 Sensibility and reliability estimates

Table 3 shows means and standard deviations for all the variables (original scales ranged between 1 and 7). All items and latent variables show approximately normal distribution, checked by Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and/or the skewness and the kurtosis coefficients.

Table 3 – Descriptive statistics for studies 1 and 2

Variables	Study 1 (n=90)	Study 2 (n=88)
Visibility or salience	4.23 (1.17)	4.51 (0.97)
Understandability	4.20 (1.14)	4.63 (1.04)
Legitimacy of authority	4.33 (0.95)	4.65 (1.13)
Relevance	4.15 (0.98)	4.61 (1.18)
Distinctiveness	4.22 (0.98)	4.61 (1.11)
Instrumentality	4.29 (1.25)	4.81 (0.98)
Validity	4.31 (1.05)	4.78 (0.96)
Consistent HR messages	4.09 (0.99)	4.58 (1.06)
Consistency	4.23 (1.01)	4.69 (1.16)
Agreement among message senders	4.36 (1.02)	4.48 (1.02)
Fairness of the HR system	3.96 (1.25)	4.25 (1.07)
Consensus	4.16 (1.06)	4.09 (1.08)

A second set of procedures intended to investigate reliability, which was computed through alpha coefficients. Table 4 shows results for both studies.

Table 4 – Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) estimates for studies 1 and 2

Variables	Study 1 (n=90)	Study 2 (n=88)
Visibility or salience	0.86	0.75
Understandability	0.86	0.80
Legitimacy of authority	0.79	0.89
Relevance	0.82	0.89
Distinctiveness	0.95	0.94
Instrumentality	0.85	0.75
Validity	0.82	0.85
Consistent HR messages	0.79	0.86
Consistency	0.93	0.92
Agreement among message senders	0.75	0.83
Fairness of the HR system	0.91	0.70
Consensus	0.90	0.83

The first two sets of procedures suggest that the item-generating procedures were efficient insofar as they produced sentences which were capable of discriminating between respondents, and also that they maintained a good level of internal consistency. Overall, results do not differ sharply between the two studies, although ‘fairness of the HR system’ registered a fall in reliability from study 1 to study 2.

#### *Distinctiveness*

To assess the quality of dimension distinctiveness, principal components analysis (PCA) was used in both studies.

In study 1, two components were obtained, explaining 65.2% of total variance. The components were rotated using iterative varimax method. Items with high loadings on component 1 were originally designed to measure ‘visibility’ and ‘understandability’; component 2 is mainly composed of items which were firstly designed to measure ‘legitimacy’ and ‘relevance’.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was next used with the items which revealed weights higher than 0.5 in each component and also that did not load on both components. These two criteria meant that 11 items were accepted for CFA (3 for ‘visibility’ and 3 for ‘understandability’ in factor 1; 2 for ‘legitimacy’ and 3 for ‘relevance’ in factor 2). Results from CFA confirmed the existence of two factors in dimension distinctiveness.

After some further analysis, parsimonious and good model fit was achieved with 8 items (2 for each of the 4 attributes considered earlier). For this last model, the goodness-of-fit indicators were: CMIN=25.507, DF=19, CMINDF=1.342, CFI=0.985, RMSEA=0.062, BCC=63.332 and BIC=102.004.

In study 2, four components were obtained, explaining 73.3% of total variance. However, this exploratory analysis was deemed inappropriate since attributes showed high correlations amongst them. On the other hand, CFA indicated a good fit for 3 subscales (‘visibility’ and ‘understandability’ together, ‘legitimacy’, and ‘relevance’). There were also 11 items retained after this analysis. For this model, the goodness-of-fit indicators were: CMIN= 47,302, DF=42, CNINDF= 1,126, CFI=0,990, RMSEA=0,038, BCC=102,982 and BIC=154,758.

*Consistency and Consensus*

For latent variable consistency and consensus, both EFA and CFA were unable to support the hypothesis of more than one attribute per variable. In other words, it was not possible to clearly identify the attributes of ‘instrumentality’, ‘validity’, and ‘consistent HR messages’ in dimension consistency. Neither was it possible to find evidence in support of separate attributes ‘agreement among message sender’ and ‘fairness of the HR system’ in dimension consensus. This lack of discriminant validity is probably due to the high correlations among the attributes proposed by Bowen and Ostroff (2004).

In study 1, after a set of intercorrelations and reliability analyses, 10 items were considered for assessing consistency, and 5 items for measuring consensus. In study 2, 9 items were considered for consistency, and 6 for consensus.

*HR System*

A final set of procedures aimed to test the full model in each study. Figures 3a and 3b depict the final solutions; figure 3a shows results from study 1 and figure 3b shows results from study 2. Standardised weights for each path and squared multiple correlations for each dependent variable are represented by the numbers next to each path and/or variable.

Figure 3a – HR System: SEM Results from study 1

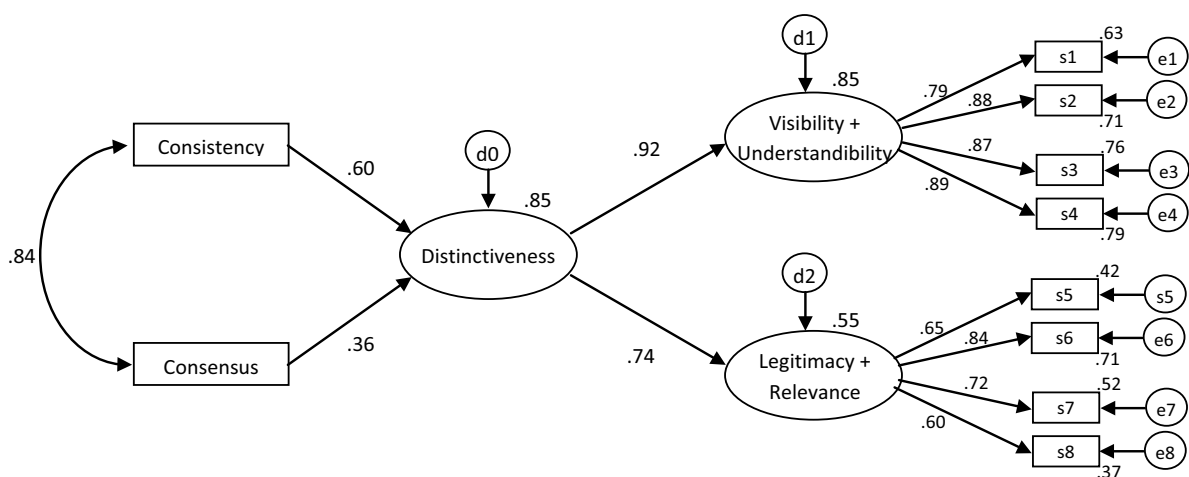


Figure 3b – HR System: SEM Results from study 2

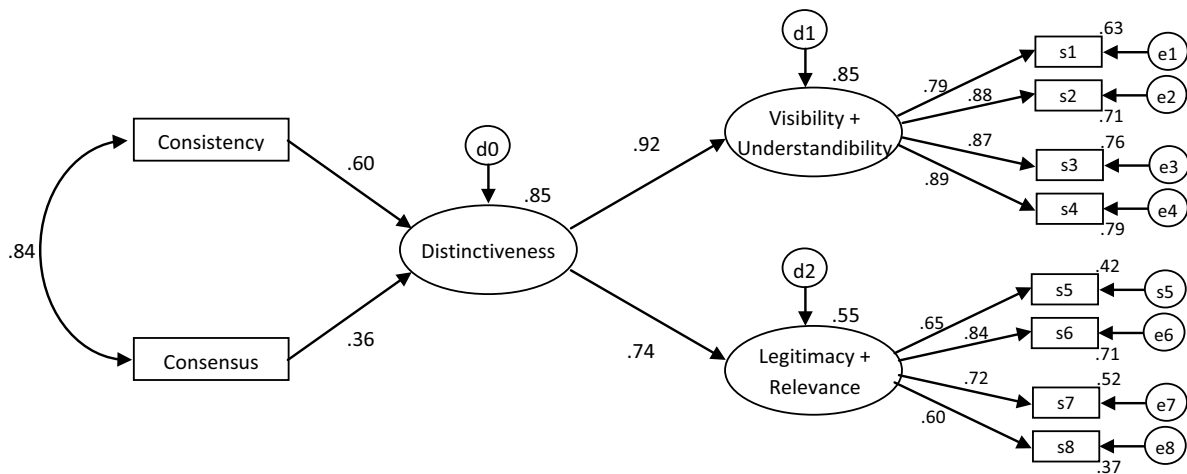


Table 5 shows goodness-of-fit indicators for SEM results. The model titled “Study 2b” in the table shows what happens when ‘legitimacy’ and ‘relevance’ are merged together; “Study 2a” in table 5 represents the model shown in figure 3b.

Table 5 – HR System: SEM Results from studies 1 and 2

Indicators	Study 1	Study 2a	Study 2b
CMIN	38.540	76.602	81.515
DF	34	50	51
CMINDF	1.134	1.532	1.598
CFI	.993	0.966	0.96
RMSEA	.039	0.078	0.083
BCC	86.463	142.440	145.002
BIC	133.036	201.968	202.403

Goodness-of-fit indicators in both studies are within the parameters suggested in the literature (Arbuckle, 2006) to accept SEM models. Figures 3a and 3b have a similar pattern of quality indicators, although figure 3a is slightly better than its counterpart 3b.

From both figures 3a and 3b, a number of important findings need to be highlighted:

- Consistency and consensus reveal a high level of association between one another; also, empirically-generated structures failed to give support to Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) five attributes of ‘instrumentality’, ‘validity’, ‘consistent HR messages’ (all from consistency), ‘agreement among message sender’, and ‘fairness of the HR system’ (both from consensus);
- Consistency and consensus have a strong impact on distinctiveness (see squared multiple correlations: 0.85 in study 1 and 0.97 in study 2), with a prevalence of consistency (standardised effects of 0.60 in study 1 and 0.78 in study 2, against 0.36 and 0.26 for consensus, respectively for studies 1 and 2);
- The attributes which comprise distinctiveness partly emerged in the data, especially in the model from study 2. In both studies, visibility and understandability are shown together, which suggests that these constructs are in fact very similar and may not even be possible to distinguish.
- Legitimacy and relevance also share a common ground, although data also suggests that these are separate and independent constructs, as shown in figure 3a. Several sentences emerged very clearly in both studies, in support of the variables visibility, understandability, legitimacy, and relevance. Although improvements were introduced

from study 1 to study 2, several sentences still presented problems. Out of the more than 100 sentences tested, only a dozen showed a good support for part of the model. Altogether, they allow the attributes of visibility/instrumentality, legitimacy, and validity, and the dimensions of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness to be measured.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Findings and limitations of the research

This work presented an attempt to operationally define the nine meta-attributes of HR System Strength as proposed by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). A second goal was to explore these authors' model as far as its construct validity is concerned. The number of respondents did not allow deeper relationships to be investigated, but results are interesting enough to stimulate further research. The fact that two studies were conducted in relatively independent conditions, and revealed a similar pattern of results, should offset the effect of the small number of cases used in both cases.

The two studies were designed to account for several measurement issues which have been addressed in the literature on strategic HR, in general, and in the literature on HR Strength, in particular. One such issue is the concept of the HR System itself, which may be represented as the following question: on what grounds and content should people be asked to produce their judgements regarding the HR function? Should they evaluate one or more specific HR practice, and/or should they call to view HR as a whole entity? Study 1 dealt with the first part of the problem, while study 2 aimed to address the second part. Data from the two studies show similar results, which gives support to the idea that HR content and HR process are two distinct concepts, as proposed by Bowen and Ostroff, in 2000 and again in 2004.

This is an interesting finding, since it suggests that the HR function needs to carefully address the *way* it communicates with employees, on top of the *content* of its messages. Sensemaking and causal attribution are complex psychological processes which are affected by both the content of what is perceived and the way it is conveyed to people (Kelley, 1973; Mischel, 1973; Weick, 1995). By its very nature, the HR function has a central communication role in all organisations, hence it should pay attention to this key process and all its features, including communication means, channels, and barriers. Relying on the message as the sole factor shaping individuals' perceptions is just half of the work needed to influence people's interpretation of their surroundings. Future works need to address in full the implications of these findings using Kelley's three-dimensional model. For example, Hewstone and Jaspars (1988) found that in conditions of high consensus, distinctiveness is likely to have a stronger impact on people's readings of the environment. Will this finding hold when the influencing factor is the HR System?

Reliability results of the new scales are encouraging, suggesting that the procedure which was followed to generate and check items was appropriate. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis showed a mixed, yet favourable set of results supporting some of the model's predictions.

In the first place, the three dimensions on which the authors built their framework is supported in both studies. In fact, distinctiveness, consensus and consistency appear to be independent constructs, perfectly captured by the sentences developed in this research. This result also supports Kelley's (1967, 1973) attribution theory, which seems to be useful in explaining how an HR setting (HR practices and HR goals) is part of the environment affecting people's interpretation and sensemaking processes. Second, the relationships between the three constructs also seem to follow a pattern expected in the literature. For

example, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) assert that “consistency and consensus are distinct but interrelated concepts” (p. 212). Both in figures 3a and 3b this premise is strongly supported, with a high correlation level between the two dimensions. Another interesting result that runs in favour of the model is the pattern and sequence of relationships between the three dimensions. As proposed by Bowen and Ostroff (2004), and shown in other literature from attribution theory (e.g. Hewstone & Jaspars, 1988), dimension ‘distinctiveness’ “drives up attention” (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p.214). Both studies carried out by Hewstone and Jaspars (1988) clearly show that attribution is especially affected by the way people understand their environment, as well as how they see it as visible and relevant. Consensus and consistency are also relevant, but mainly in affecting distinctiveness. These relationships were confirmed in both studies performed in this research. In fact, distinctiveness seems to be dependent on both consistency and consensus, with a stronger weight for consistency, which is also supported by Hewstone and Jaspars’ (1988) findings.

A disappointing set of results derives from the new attributes put forward by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). Neither exploratory nor confirmatory factor analyses provided definite evidence in support of the nine attributes. There are several explanations for this finding. A first explanation is related to the quality of the current research itself, whereas a second one is concerned with the constructs’ definition offered by Bowen and Ostroff (2004).

In the first group of explanations, sample size and sampling procedures are on the first line. In fact, although two independent studies were used to investigate the phenomenon under discussion, and although extreme care was placed on the initial phases of the questionnaire construction, data collection was limited to six medium-size companies with a relatively small number of respondents (fewer than 200 altogether). To fully validate a new instrument, a larger sample and other psychometric techniques are required (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1996). Nevertheless, the main goal of this research – to deliver an initial set of impressions regarding a new instrument to measure HR System Strength – was fully accomplished. The fact that it was carried out in real settings (organisations with HR Systems in place) is also a positive point worth mentioning.

Another shortcoming of the current research is concerned with the level of analysis. Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) model is interesting because it offers the possibility of studying phenomena at different levels of analysis. In the present investigation, data was collected only from individual employees. Due to small sample size, it was not possible to collapse individual data into group data. Such kind of data would satisfy some of the recommendations described by James (1982) and Chan (1998) to perform good-quality multi-level research. Central-tendency measures are intrinsically interesting (as recognised by Bowen and Ostroff themselves), but some sort of dispersion measures would also allow extra information on some of the attributes and dimensions, such as consensus and consistency.

Finally, although perceptions of people are key to evaluating how strong a HR System is, it is possible that for some attributes, people do not have enough information to produce meaningful answers. An obvious example is recruitment and selection: after working for more than 2 or 3 years in the organisation, regular employees (i.e. non-HR professionals) would probably have forgotten many of the details of the process in which they enrolled when they entered their company. In such a case, they would not be able to deliver a valid answer to many of the questions on the questionnaire. One can argue that performance appraisal is more present in an employee’s working life, but in reality, no one really knows whether or not an employee has enough information to produce a meaningful and valid answer regarding a particular HR practice or set of practices.

One way to minimise this problem is to use multiple sources of information (triangulation of information sources; Jick, 1979). In HR System Strength research, this may require information gathered both from employees and their immediate supervisors. Some of

the nine attributes may even be easier to collect from immediate supervisors than from employees.

With regard to the second group of explanations, some of the attributes put forward by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) may require further definition and delimitation. This unsatisfactory or inadequate definition may in some cases have caused the problems detected with the data. For example, the attribute 'consistent HR messages' is defined at three levels (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 211): a) between senior managers' explicitly stated goals and values, and what employees actually conclude those goals and values to be based on their perceptions of HR practices; b) internal consistency among the HR practices themselves; and c) stability over time. On the other hand, the attribute 'validity' (also from the Consistency dimension) is defined as (p. 211) consistency between what HR practices claim to do, and what they actually do. This definition of 'validity' is very similar to the first interpretation (a) of 'consistent HR messages'. One might hypothesise that for employees at low levels in large organisations, it may be difficult to distinguish between different message senders. In other words, for some employees it is probably a minor issue whether messages regarding appropriate organisational behaviours come from senior managers or from HR practices.

The relationships between the nine attributes also need clarification. Although this stream of research on HR is very much in its initial stages, it is necessary to clarify how the attributes relate to each other. Several hints are advanced by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). From an intuitive standpoint, connections between attributes are also expected. For example, understandability of a particular HR practice (knowing how it works, its criteria, and so on) may be highly dependent on its visibility or salience; in fact, how can one generate understanding of something which is not visible? This may also help explain why understandability and visibility merged together in the data in both studies. On the other hand, the practical challenges associated with specifying several connections between the nine attributes, hence producing a non-orthogonal model, are of several types and difficulties. For instance, an extremely large sample would be required to test with some quality a model with three dimensions, nine attributes, and a dozen or two paths amongst them.

## **5.2 Limitations and future research**

The exploratory nature of the current work raises more questions than answers, but it also stimulates thinking both at the theoretical and methodological levels. A few questions which need to be addressed in the future are:

- Should aggregate data be collected at an organisational level or group level? Culture theorists (e.g. Schein, 1981) accept that sub-cultures within organisations may exist, suggesting that smaller groups than the organisation can be used to carry out studies; likewise, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) suggest that people working in small groups may share, to a greater or lesser extent, a particular perspective regarding HR practices.
- Is HR Strength the sole influencing factor in shaping people's view of the situations? Yukl's (1998, p.5) definition of leadership suggests that HR Strength may not be alone in the influencing process: leadership is "a process through which an organisation's individual or group is able to influence all other members' interpretation of events". Future work on the influencing factors shaping one's perspective of the situation needs to take leadership into account.
- Last but not least, the whole idea of the HR Strength and Situation Strength concepts is to propose a way to link the HR function with individual and organisational performance (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). As far as the current research was concerned, such a link was not a goal; therefore no final conclusions can be drawn regarding the validity of the model. Future work needs to test this theory, by incorporating individual and organisational performance variables and measures.



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# THE LEADERSHIP OF SCHOOLS IN THREE REGIONS IN PORTUGAL BASED ON THE FINDINGS OF EXTERNAL EVALUATION

## A LIDERANÇA DAS ESCOLAS DE TRÊS REGIÕES PORTUGUESAS VISTA A PARTIR DA AVALIAÇÃO EXTERNA

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### ABSTRACT

School leadership has significant effects on the learning, development and academic success of the pupils and on the quality of educational organisations, so, to a large extent, the effectiveness of the school depends upon the way in which leadership is carried out. It is on this basis that we undertook our study which led in this article. In it we sought to characterise the leadership of schools and school clusters in the regions of the Algarve, Alentejo and Lisbon and Tagus Valley, globally and specifically, based on the analysis of the content of external evaluation reports produced by teams from the General Inspectorate of Education during the 2006/2007, 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 academic years. This analysis was carried out as part of the research project FSE/CED/83489/2008 under the responsibility of the Centre for Sociology Research and Studies from the Lisbon University Institute, the University of the Algarve and the Barafunda Association, and we were part of the respective research team. By analysing the data we have been able to establish a joint and per region “profile” of the leaderships in the schools and school clusters that were evaluated, although we consider that their results cannot be extrapolated, given the limits in the wording of the evaluation reports and the fact that these reports were produced by different teams from region to region and even within the regions themselves.

Keywords: “external evaluation of schools”, “external evaluation reports of schools”, “leadership of schools”, “exercising of leadership in schools”.

### RESUMO

A liderança escolar tem efeitos significativos na aprendizagem, desenvolvimento e sucesso académico dos alunos e na qualidade das organizações educativas, pelo que das suas práticas depende, em grande medida, a eficácia da acção da escola. Foi tendo estes pressupostos por referentes que desenvolvemos o estudo de que este artigo dá expressão pública. Nele procuramos caracterizar a liderança das escolas e agrupamentos de escolas das regiões do Algarve, Alentejo e Lisboa e Vale do Tejo, em termos globais e específicos, com base na análise de conteúdo efectuada aos relatórios de Avaliação Externa produzidos pelas equipas da Inspeccção-Geral da Educação nos anos lectivos de 2006/2007, 2007/2008 e 2008/2009, análise esta realizada no quadro do projecto de investigação FSE/CED/83489/2008, da responsabilidade do Centro de Investigação e estudos de Sociologia do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, da Universidade do Algarve e da Associação Barafunda, de que integrámos a respectiva equipa de investigação. A análise dos dados agora efectuada permitiu-nos traçar

um “perfil” de conjunto e por região das lideranças das escolas e agrupamentos de escolas avaliadas, embora consideremos que os seus resultados não possam ser extrapolados, dados os limites da redacção dos relatórios de avaliação e destes serem produzidos por equipas diferentes de região para região e nas próprias regiões.

Palavras-Chave: “avaliação externa das escolas”, “relatórios de avaliação externa das escolas”, “liderança das escolas”, “exercício da liderança nas escolas”.

JEL Classification: I21

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The evaluation of nursery, primary and secondary education establishments was instituted by Law No. 31/2002 of the 20th of December, and comprises a system which includes two complementary processes: Internal Evaluation and External Evaluation. An experimental phase was undertaken in 2006 and all schools in mainland Portugal are expected to be covered over the course of a four-year cycle.

Internal evaluation is undertaken by the school itself, which should produce “a discourse constituted by judgments that relate variables (a fact or situation that is observed, recorded, learnt about the evaluated subject) to standards (a fact or situation that is seen as an ideal)” (Figari, 1996).

External evaluation, which was assigned to the Inspeção Geral da Educação (IGE - *General Inspectorate of Education*), in collaboration with external experts belonging to higher education establishments, is aimed at: encouraging schools, to systematically question the quality of their practices and their results; coordinating the contributions of external evaluation with the culture and methods of internal evaluation in schools; strengthening the capacity of schools to develop their autonomy; contributing to the regulation of the education system; contributing to a better understanding of schools and of public education, fostering social participation in the life of schools.

Operating on a referential composed of five parameters (results, rendering of educational service, school organisation and management, leadership and capacity for self-regulation and improvement, each broken down into a variable number of factors), the external evaluation teams produce a final report based upon the analysis of documents and panel interviews conducted in schools with a very diverse set of participants, the results of which are returned to the schools evaluated allowing them to define the issues not only that they should improve but that they might want to improve. All areas and factors are examined in a qualitative and descriptive manner. In addition, the areas are given a classification which may range from “Very Good” to “Unsatisfactory”. After the evaluated school has been made aware of the data, the reports are published on the IGE website.

The methodology used allows all the educational participants to be contacted and thus exchange information about their views on the school’s performance in the areas being analysed. However, as the time that each team spent at the educational establishment was limited, with no direct contact with teaching practices and with the almost exclusive use of the interview technique, where the information given must be considered true, the data collected only allows a clearer analysis in certain areas, leaving uncertainty in others. It was also not possible to analyse causal relationships or the contamination between the different areas. This set of circumstances contributed to the random and disperse character of the

external evaluation reports, as not all the indicators were taken into account. It is up to each team of evaluators to integrate those which best describe and characterise the educational unit evaluated.

This study looks at the Leadership that is developed in schools (one of the areas which the External Evaluation focuses on), using the analysis of the External Evaluation reports, and is aimed at understanding how educational organisations put their school vision into practice and how they implement the sharing and flow of information to be able to achieve the set goals and purpose, thereby giving substance to the hierarchical line for the exercising of power.

As a recent project on this subject showed (Leithwood, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2009), school leadership has significant effects on the learning, development and academic success of the pupils and on the quality of the educational organisation.

Our interest in examining this aspect is reinforced because, currently, Portuguese schools are confronted with a new legal framework for their organisation and management, which requires a new paradigm of leadership that determines, among other aspects, the substitution of the Chairman of the Executive Board by a Director. This change is not merely formal, in that it emphasizes the action of leading as opposed to managing, although exercising the role of management includes both. The director has to undertake tasks that are aimed at getting the institution to operate under both general and internal standards and regulations, meaning not only managing, but also influencing the other members of the organisation so that it can improve through this openness to change and innovation, which is what leading means (Ruzafa, 2003). Indeed, both management and leadership are necessary for the dynamics of change and the improvement of the school, and leadership is decisive in mobilising the various participants to resolve the difficult problems faced (Fullan, 2001; English, 2008).

The study focused exclusively on three regions – the Algarve, Alentejo and Lisbon and the Tagus Valley. The reason for this selection was the concern of covering territories with distinct characteristics. The region of the Algarve occupies 5.6% of Portuguese territory and has a population density of 79.1 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. The region of the Alentejo occupies the largest area of the country (30.7%) but it has a much lower population density, 19.6 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>, and the overwhelming majority of its parishes are rural (92.3%). As for the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, it is the most densely populated region at national level (959 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>), exceeding the density of Portugal as a whole (115.4 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>). The majority of its 207 parishes are urban (72%); however, its “rurality” has increased since 2002, when the region of Lezíria do Tejo<sup>1</sup> was incorporated into it. The 3 regions share the general scenario of the country both in terms of the predominance of the population who have completed obligatory schooling (between the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education), and of the general increase in the levels of education over time.

In methodological terms, our option to focus on the analysis of the external evaluation reports was a challenging route for the research, since it is based upon records made by evaluation teams from information provided by the schools. The analysis of secondary sources of information provides access to information made from the interpretation of other agents, in this case the evaluation team. If, on the one hand, this condition can be regarded as a limitation in so far as the information is seen through the eyes of the evaluating agents, on the other, they themselves become the object of the analysis. Therefore, we must bear in mind that we are in the presence of a social construction, which, in reality, also happens even when dealing with the primary sources. It is also important to add that our decision to carry out our analysis using the external evaluation reports also allows us to constitute, as the basis for the analysis, documents which, at a first glance, have other objectives.

<sup>1</sup> Source, Instituto Nacional de Estatística (National Institute for Statistics)

The external evaluation of schools has certainly contributed to a reflection on the organisational conditions necessary to promote school success, and this study integrates this purpose.

## **2. SCHOOL EVALUATION AND LEADERSHIP**

### **2.1 Evaluation**

Organisational evaluation in the field of education, which includes the external and internal evaluation of schools, presently occupies a fundamental role in worldwide educational policy agendas.

With the ability of assuming a plurality of formats and a diversity of responses, these evaluation methods differ in the purposes that they pursue and in the players who carry them out. However, there should be a complementarity between both which leads to developments and improvements in the school organisation (Alaiz, 2004; Azevedo, 2002, 2007; McNamara and O'Hara, 2008).

The idea that persists is that the main function of external evaluation is the rendering of accounts, in order to return an overall appraisal of the quality of schools, education and the teaching provided with a view to their improvement. In the words of Janssens and van Amselsvoort (2008) the double function of *accountability* and *improvement*, pertaining to internal evaluation, "is a crucial mechanism for a school to acquire any type of development" (McBeath, 1999, p.40).

The concept of *empowerment* is frequently used to illustrate what is deemed to be the ultimate objective in the evaluation of educational organisations - external and internal evaluation - viewed, in this manner, as complementary processes. This understanding of organisational evaluation reinforces the presupposition of the autonomy that schools have been claiming over the years and, in many countries, evaluation processes respond to this reality, working as instruments of external and internal monitoring of practices which schools develop while exercising their autonomy (Schildkamp, 2007).

Within Europe, especially in countries with a more consolidated experience in the evaluation of schools, such as Scotland, England and the Netherlands, the educational inspection services are responsible for external evaluation. The attribution of this function to these bodies has contributed to the acceptance that the evaluation of schools is an issue for which an external body is responsible and, consequently, has hampered processes which turn evaluation into a task for which the school itself, and those directly involved in it, are responsible (McNamara and O'Hara, 2005).

Experience garnered along the way has shown that changes in both direction and purpose are advisable. The classic role of "monitoring" and "control" which used to characterise the performance of inspection services and contaminate the evaluations that were undertaken, is being substituted by available support methods, such as working together with the schools and the provision of models and tools for self-improvement. The current trend is for external evaluation to take a complementary and supporting role and for internal evaluation to be given priority as a contribution to the school's development. As stated by McBeath and McGlym (2002), it is a model whereby external evaluation focuses, first and foremost, on promoting schools' capacity for internal evaluation.

In Portugal, the processes for evaluating schools are still in their infancy when compared to other European countries. Even though several external school evaluation programmes, projects and procedures have been developed over the last two decades for primary and

secondary schools, both due to initiatives taken by private institutions<sup>2</sup> and various educational administration bodies (General Inspectorate of Education and Institute for Educational Innovation), educational policy measures pertaining to the evaluation of schools only appeared in 2002 with the publication of a law approving the educational evaluation system, and including both external and internal evaluations, with the latter being compulsory.

The rule of complementarity which, as mentioned above, should characterise these two methods of organisational evaluation, is not yet a reality in Portuguese schools. In the case of internal evaluation, which was not part of the culture and practices of Portuguese schools but which is now required under law, schools found themselves faced with a challenge to which they have been responding in a more or less structured manner. After eight years of schools being obliged to conduct their own evaluations, the scenario today is very atypical and appears more like a practice that is legally required than a need which is perceived and installed in the practices of teachers and the culture of schools.

In the case of external evaluation, the model in force in our country is the responsibility of IGE (General Inspectorate of Education) and was initiated in 2006 by the “Working Group for the Evaluation of Schools”, as it was then known. This was a pilot experiment in which 12 schools were evaluated and was later expanded to all other schools nationwide. It is expected that, by the end of the 2010/2011 academic year, all schools and school clusters will be evaluated.

Corresponding to the requirements of the law, and also to the processes and principles which form the basis of the evaluation of schools that is carried out in other countries and which we have used as our inspiration, the project for external evaluation that is currently being developed is intended to make a significant contribution to the development of schools and the improvement in the quality of student learning, in a perspective of reflection and continuous improvement (IGE, 2010).

The objectives for the external evaluation of schools can be summarised in five main lines of action: a) to promote, in schools, a systematic questioning of the quality of their practices and their results; b) to coordinate the contributions of external evaluation with the culture and devices for internal evaluation in schools; c) to strengthen the capacity of schools to develop their autonomy, d) to contribute to the regulation of the operation of the education system, and e) to contribute to a better understanding of schools and of public education, fostering a social participation in the life of schools.

The external evaluation process operates with an evaluation reference that covers five areas of analysis: Results; Provision of Educational Services; School Organisation and Management; Leadership; Capacity for Self-regulation and School Improvement. Each of these areas includes between two and five factors, with a set of illustrative issues for each one. Each of the five domains that structure the external evaluation is rated on a scale comprising four levels: Very Good, Good, Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory.

External evaluation is conducted by a team of three, comprising two inspectors and an external evaluator from the IGE, most of whom are teachers and researchers in higher education. The methodological principles that led to the establishment of these teams emphasise “the exchanging of ideas in the identification of strategic issues for the improvement of the school and the diversity of experiences” and the “source of enrichment of the work carried out by the IGE” (IGE, 2009, p. 12).

In terms of procedure, the undertaking is based on three steps considered essential for the thorough and detailed knowledge of the educational institution, and also for the

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<sup>2</sup> The Manuel Leão Foundation, created in 1996, responsible for the AVES Programme - Evaluation of Secondary Schools is especially worthy of note. It has been developing its work in the area of school evaluations since the year 2000 and has received financial support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

feedback, to the school evaluated, of information that will help it implement the necessary improvement processes. These steps include:

- i) The analysis of documents, provided by the school, and which may have been prepared specifically for the external evaluation, such as a document to introduce the school, or already exist within the educational organisation and be of a structuring nature in their course of action;
- ii) School visits, which last for two or three days depending on whether it is a non-clustered school or a cluster of schools. The visit includes a session with a presentation of the school by the executive board, a visit to the facilities and semi-structured panel interviews, covering a wide range of participants, both internal and external, from the educational community: students, parents, teachers, non-teaching staff, local councillors and other school partners;
- iii) The writing up of school/cluster reports, prepared by the external evaluation team. The report is written on the basis of evidence gathered from the main documents of the school, the presentation made by the school itself, and the multiple panel interviews (IGE, 2009) and contains five chapters: Introduction, Characteristics of the School/Cluster, Conclusions of the Evaluation by Parameter, Evaluation by Factor and Final Conclusions. Once the report has been sent, the school evaluated has a period of time in which to respond. The reports and response are published on the IGE's website.

Now that the first round of external evaluations of schools is coming to its conclusion, a provisional report shows that there are two aspects which constitute the core of the entire process. The first has to do with creating a culture of evaluation of schools and its acceptance by the educational community, running the risk, in its absence, of developing an undertaking that does not have significant implications in improving the real and effective quality that is offered by the teaching establishment. As stated by Santos Guerra (2002) "if teachers reject the process, are defensive, behave in an artificial manner, and deny the evidence, then the evaluation will be a waste of time" (p.51). A second aspect relates to the close relationship that should exist between the need to develop this culture of evaluation and a new way of looking at management and strategic planning. The evolution which has been observed in management models of school organisations tends to emphasise the meaningful relationship between the orientation that is given to the educational organisation - its mission, vision and the values that it defends - and the identity of each school. In this context, the evaluation of schools can be seen as a fundamental tool for becoming acquainted with and characterising the educational organisation and identifying its problems, while also allowing appropriate plans of action to be defined and schools to develop, which, undoubtedly, means a determined exercising of leadership.

## **2.2. Leadership**

The leadership of school organisations must be seen as a means for developing an educational and pedagogical action (Costa, 2000), which, in operational terms, means shared management (Sergionanni, 1988, 2004), whose practice and efficacy demand, on the one hand, effectiveness and recognition and, on the other, the use of concerted strategies for action and the promotion of the individual and collective commitment of the entire educational community in carrying out work projects, with a view to resolving difficult problems (Nóvoa, 1992; Fullan, 2001; English, 2008).

To specify the meaning of the concept, given the paradigm shift taking place in Portuguese schools in terms of organisational and operational structures, management and leadership will need to be distinguished, although they are complementary in the exercising of the management function. Therefore, while the manager's action is essentially geared towards running the institution in keeping with general and internal standards (Ruzafa, 2003),



taking on a role that is largely one of control through the budget, the planning of activities and other organisation tools and the regulating of school life, the leader must, above all, set goals for the future, encourage commitments and promote and guide changes (Bolman and Deal, 1994, quoted by Estêvão, 2000). Thus, by exercising leadership, the director must not only focus on the actual work being developed within the school and promote a permanent dialogue and exchange among teachers so that they can discuss their practices and the circumstances in which they are undertaken, with a view to their improvement (Ruzafa, 2003), but also focus on educational provision, the teachers' professional development and the organisational development of the school as a whole (Gairín and Villa, 1999), a process that, according to Bolívar (1997), means a multiple and dynamic exercise of leadership.

This exercising of leadership, which presupposes a set of technical and instrumental skills, and the capacity to instil principles of ethics and evolution, which, in truth are acquired and developed through training and learning (Sanches, 1996; English, 2008), is carried out on the basis of three types of variables (the personal qualities of the leader, the organisation's structure and the school's culture) and is influenced by three aspects: i) legal, the statutory legal or formal framework of the role of the school as an organisation; ii) personal, as a consequence of the personal qualities of the director iii) and functional, which refers to the characteristics of the group and their level of suitability in relation to the aforementioned skills and capacities (Ciscar and Uria, 1986, quoted by Gairín and Villa, 1999).

In fact, the exercising of the leadership of school organisations comprises technical, human, educational, symbolic, cultural and political aspects (Gairín and Villa, 1999), and if it is to be effective, the moral dimension of education, the interpersonal and social nature of educational practices, the instructional dimension and the political nature of education (Alves, 1999) cannot be overlooked. In this context, the director continues to take charge of the day-to-day running of the school, while simultaneously instigating "change and participation", coordinating the actions carried out by various bodies (Fonseca, 2000) and, especially, acting as the "communicator" who anticipates, averts, manages and mediates conflicts, promotes and encourages good relations between the members of the school community and takes proper decisions based on the interests and needs of the school (Fullan, 2001).

Regardless of the different models which, diachronically, have supported the exercising of leadership, from the traditional (mechanistic, bureaucratic, formal and hierarchical), to the democratic and participative, to political, subjective, ambiguous, cooperative and collegial, or even the educational and pedagogical (Costa, 2000; Sanches, 2000; Rocha, 2000), a plurality of practices is involved which, in our opinion, should configure a "transformational" perspective (Burns, 1978) of the school, that means being open to new ideas and tolerant of differences in opinion, seeing weakness as a source of learning, questioning fundamental suppositions, thinking in a prospective and speculative manner, and searching for relations and systematic coherence (Glatter, 2007).

In the Portuguese education system, the regulations defining the bodies and areas of intervention of school leadership form a model where there are shared responsibilities and where the processes of decision making are assumed by the collective bodies (Executive Board/Director, School Board/General Board and Intermediate Leaders). This leads to an internal decentralisation of management, which is exercised and manifested in a dispersed manner, creating multiple leaderships that should work in a coordinated and complementary manner (Ainley and McKenzie, 2000). Therefore, a leadership model based on the principles of collegiality prevails (Sanches, 2000), allowing organisational and pedagogical action of mutual reinforcement and which facilitates individual expression.

This leadership practice is therefore based on a rotation of roles, arising from the possibility of teachers exercising different functions within the educational organisation,

which expands their perception of the reality and allows the identification of one voice and one identity that enables safe and shared management relationships, learning from others and with others, and also the creation of a culture of collaboration, interaction and connection with the community (Beatie, 2002; Gold, Evans, Earley, Halpin, and Callarbone, 2003; Leithwood 1994).

As a logical consequence, the leadership should maximise collaboration and commitment to provide structures and resources which promote dialogue, where all members of the educational community (teachers, students and families) are encouraged to participate in the governance and management of the curriculum. Conditions are thus created whereby multiple voices expressing different ideas can be heard in the processes of change and organisational development (Ross and Gray, 2006; Robertson, 1999).

In short, the leadership action must be creative and innovative, in so far as leading is, without a doubt, a creative process where leaders must be concerned with the creation and re-creation of learning communities which involve the entire democratic life of the educational community (Barker, 2007).

In this process however, we must bear in mind that educational organisations are complex systems whose operations require the collection and circulation of information. The abovementioned systems are open - so information is constantly imported and exported, meaning constant change - and holistic, which presupposes that the parts are not complete in themselves, thereby limiting a cascading management style where top management can control all levels of decision. On the other hand, the respective limits are not easy to determine, making it difficult to capitalise the influence of some participants, such as the parents and other members of the community. In addition, these same limits have tended in the past to give preference to forms of acting and reacting that restrict the planning of change, with the principle of chaos taking the upper hand, which means that interfering in a variable may cause a chain reaction with unpredictable consequences (Coppiers, 2005).

In spite of these restrictions, the circulation of information between teachers on the various aspects of the organisational operation of the school stimulates the actual flow of information and foments change. Additionally, the intensity and quality of the information depend on the level of production of knowledge and the degree of interaction between the structures, and also the culture of communication within the system (Fullan, 2001).

In Portugal, however, the existence, in the same establishment, of teachers with different training backgrounds and who teach different age groups, together with the geographical dispersion that characterises school clusters, may constitute factors which are conducive to barriers that prevent dialogue and hinder the circulation and acquisition of information. This is a situation that requires urgent attention, bearing in mind that, as shown by several studies, regardless of the type of school, the effective use of information proves to be efficacious in identifying expectations and stimulating processes of inquiry and discussion that lead to development (Bert and Gerry, 2005; Coppiers, 2005).

It is therefore vital that those in leadership positions ensure that conditions are in place whereby information about the school is able to circulate.

This means that they must ensure the circulation and quality of information, as well as the variety and diversity of means and forms through which it circulates. They must also ensure the effectiveness of this circulation through a clear system of delegation of responsibilities to ensure that the existing knowledge on indicators of development, progress and school improvement is appropriate to interested parties, namely the educational community.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

With the study of leadership in clustered and non-clustered Portuguese primary and secondary schools as its purpose, this article presents an independent analysis of data obtained as part of the research project “*Sucesso escolar e perfis organizacionais: um olhar a partir dos relatórios de avaliação externa*” (“*Academic success and organizational profiles: an analysis based on external evaluation reports*”)<sup>3</sup>. Only data resulting from the analysis of contents of a categorical nature from 293 External Evaluation Reports, drawn up by the General Inspectorate of Education during the academic years 2006/2007, 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 and relating to the regions of the Algarve, Alentejo, and Lisbon and Tagus Valley, was taken into account in our study.

Leadership is one of the five areas considered in the external evaluation of schools (results, provision of educational services, school organisation and management, leadership and the schools’ capacity for self-regulation and improvement). For the purpose of the evaluation, four different factors were analysed: i) vision and strategy; ii) motivation and commitment; iii) openness to innovation and iv) partnerships, protocols and projects, which were assessed in relation to a variable number of referents. However, for this article, we considered only the data concerning the first two factors, which are related to:

- vision and strategy: a) “objectives, goals and strategies”, as defined by the school for the purpose of achieving, in a hierarchical manner, not just the goals it sets itself, but also to solve the problems it encounters; b) “education/training offered and areas of excellence” the former in terms of the criteria of definition, diversification and adaptation to social reality, as well as qualification activities for adults, and the latter according to their internal and external recognition; c) “attractiveness of the school”, meaning the measures that generate demand for it “because of its quality, management, hospitality and professionalism”; and d) “strategic vision and future development”, which can be identified in the guideline documents for the educational management unit;
- motivation and commitment: a) “areas of action, strategies and motivation,” which include not only knowledge of the areas of action by both top management and intermediaries, the definition and implementation of strategies for the improving results and the motivation and commitment of managers in the assumption and performance of their duties; b) “liaison between the bodies” in terms of subsidiarity, complementarity and valorisation of duties and responsibilities and in the mobilisation of the different parties for the fulfilment of established objectives; c) “mobilisation of participants” in terms of their “capacity for information, involvement and recognition”; and d) “monitoring of assiduousness and “critical incidents”, in other words, how the assiduousness of teaching and non-teaching staff is monitored, the strategies used to avoid absenteeism and to lessen its effects, and also the results achieved.

The analysis of the content of the abovementioned reports allowed us to establish five major categories: i) vision; ii) exercising of authority (Executive Board/Director, School Board/General Board and Intermediate Leaders); iii) decision-making processes, iv) sharing and circulation of information and v) openness to innovation.

In this article we will restrict ourselves to the presentation and interpretive analysis of data concerning the vision, the exercising of authority and the sharing and circulation of information, since the main objective we have set ourselves is to characterise the leadership in the three regions under study (the Algarve, Alentejo and Lisbon and Tagus Valley) and, depending on the outcome, reach an understanding as to how educational organisations put

<sup>3</sup> Reference: FSE/CED/83498/2008. This project was submitted by the Sociology Research and Studies Centre of the Lisbon University Institute (CIES-IUL), together with the Barafunda Association and University of the Algarve, for the public tender which resulted from the cooperation between the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education/Foundation for Science and Technology and Ministry of Education, to fund research projects on factors and conditions that contribute to promoting academic success and combating drop outs in primary and secondary education.

their vision of the school into practice and how they implement the sharing and circulation of information to achieve their objectives, thereby giving form to the hierarchical line for the exercising of power.

To conclude the methodological characterisation of the research process, of which this article is a short report, it should be noted that the process falls into a humanistic, heuristic and interpretive conception of the research (Erickson, 1986; Patton, 1990; Bogdan and Biklen, 1994; Deshaies, 1997), without neglecting, however, a methodological perspective which integrates the qualitative and the quantitative (Shulman, 1986; Estrela, 1997), in the perspective of “methodological continuum” as understood by Huberman and Miles (1994).

As regards the collection and treatment of data, we can consider two specific situations. Firstly, and within the scope of the research project mentioned at the start of this section, in which we were involved as members of the team of researchers, the aforementioned 293 external evaluation reports were viewed as the analysis *corpus* and were subjected to a content analysis (Bardin, 1979), using the MAXQDA software programme. Thereby, the indicators which typify the evaluation carried out were identified, and in turn were categorised into categories and sub-categories.

Secondly, and acting entirely independently to produce this article, we took the data, organised as already mentioned (but now only pertaining to the three regions of the Algarve, Alentejo and Lisbon and Tagus Valley) and taking into consideration only the subject of leadership (as a field for the analysis of external evaluation) and the categories (exercising of authority, vision, decision-making processes and sharing and circulation of information<sup>4</sup>) and subcategories that it comprises, and set it all out in tables. The tables, which we shall be using as the basis for our interpretative analysis of the data, show the number of reports and their respective percentages by region, the various subcategories, and also the respective sum and percentage value related to the total of the 293 reports.

## 4. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The analysis of the reports revealed a hierarchical line of the exercising of leadership which we will try to characterise using the data relating to the category “exercising of authority” at its various levels (Executive Board/Director, School Board/General Council and Intermediate Leaders<sup>5</sup>), which comprises different leadership styles, expressed, and at the same time, adapted by the “vision” of the school to which they give shape, through the “decision-making processes” that they implement and through the “sharing and flow of information” that their agents use and promote.

### 4.1. Exercising of authority

Below is an interpretive analysis of the data relating to the hierarchical exercising of authority by the school, which consolidates the respective leadership.

#### 4.1.1. Executive Board/Director

In the external evaluation reports, the leadership of the Executive Board/Director of the school is characterised according to different perspectives whose analysis yielded the following parameters: Leadership Style, Definition (or Non-definition) of Procedures, Type of Management (Strategic or Non-strategic) and Capacity to Mobilise other agencies and the school community (Table 1), which we shall now analyse.

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the content of the external evaluation reports allowed us to establish five major categories - the four indicated plus “openness to innovation” which we did not consider in this article.

<sup>5</sup> The Administration and Management regime of schools was changed over the three school years in which the reports analysed were prepared. Therefore, some of them relate to situations under the previous Administration and Management regime, while others relate to the current one, which is why we have considered the designations Executive Board/Director and School Board/General Council, to cover both situations.

Table 1. Executive Board, by region

	Algarve		Alentejo		Lisbon and Tagus Valley		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Executive Board</b>								
<b>Leadership Style</b>								
Active/Committed/Strong	3	7.32	4	7.02	29	14.87	36	12.29
<b>Openness and Availability</b>								
Educational Action	22	53.66	14	24.56	53	27.18	89	30.38
Relational/Emotional	11	26.83	14	24.56	67	34.36	92	31.40
Negative Relational/Emotional	1	2.44	0	0.00	2	1.03	3	1.02
Centralised Leadership	1	2.44	2	3.51	11	5.64	14	4.78
Others	3	7.32	1	1.75	9	4.62	13	4.44
<b>Definition/Non-definition of Procedures</b>								
Non-definition	4	9.76	7	12.28	50	25.64	61	20.82
Definition	5	12.20	14	24.56	50	25.64	69	23.55
<b>Type of Management</b>								
Non-strategic Management	4	9.76	10	17.54	25	12.82	39	13.31
Strategic Management	9	21.95	23	40.35	65	33.33	97	33.11
<b>Capacity to Mobilise/Sharing of Vision</b>								
Weak Capacity to Mobilise	4	9.76	3	5.26	13	6.67	20	6.83
Sharing of Vision/Mobilising Action	3	7.32	6	10.53	40	20.51	49	16.72

Taking all three regions into account and, in accordance with the data, the leadership of school Executive Boards/Directors is characterised overall by the exercising of an authority that is expressed mainly: i) by “Openness and Availability”, meaning a commitment as regards the “Relational/Emotional” parameter identified in 92 reports (31.40% of the total 293), and the “Educational Action” parameter (89 reports, or 30.38%); and ii) by the implementation of a management process, which varies between “Definition” (69 reports, meaning 23.55% of the total) and “Non-definition” (61 reports, or 20.82%), and whose nature is essentially strategic (as mentioned in 98 reports, representing 33.11% of the respective total), although it was also considered as non-strategic in 39 reports (13.31%). Also showing traits which are characteristic of the exercising of authority by the Executive Boards/Directors of the school, but with less relative weighting, we can refer to the sharing of the school vision, in the sense of mobilising other educational partners (16.72%, corresponding to 49 reports) as well as the leadership being “Active/Committed/Strong” (12.29%).

If we focus our analysis on the regions, one by one, we can see that, in the Algarve, the leadership of the schools evaluated, during the time period considered, has, as its main characterising traits, a concern for Educational Action (22 reports, or 53.66% of the respective total) and the establishment of a relational/emotional environment with the other educational agents (26.83% of the total reports), while assuming a nature with a strategic trend (9 reports, or 21.95%). In procedural terms, although there is a trend towards a leadership with defined procedures (12.20%, which corresponds to 5 reports) it is not particularly assertive since reference to the non-definition of procedures was found in almost the same number of reports (4, meaning 9.76% of the respective total). Pertaining to other factors that, according to the content of the external evaluation reports, define the character for the exercising of leadership of the Executive Boards/Directors of schools in the Algarve, the data reveals almost residual values, among which we would highlight the Capacity to Mobilise/Share the Vision, which varies from being weak (in 9.76% of reports from the region) to manifesting itself as Mobilising Action (in 3 reports, or 7.32%).

As for the Alentejo region, the level of exercising of leadership which we considered is also characterised, although less emphatically in numerical terms, by Openness and

Availability, on an equal footing with the Relational/Emotional and Educational Action parameters (14 reports, or 30.38% in both cases), and by a process of a more affirmatively strategic management (23 reports, meaning 40.35% of the respective total, against 17.54%, corresponding to 10 reports that relate to a non-strategic management). Likewise, the following parameters are also significant in the characterisation of the leadership of the schools in this region: an action characterised more by the Definition of Procedures (seen in 14 reports, or 24.56% whereas Non-definition is present in 7 or 12.28%) and by the Sharing of Vision/Mobilising Action of the various educational agents (mentioned in 6 reports, or 10.53% of the total, against 5.26%).

Pertaining to the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, the leadership of the respective Executive Boards/Directors is characterized mainly by a commitment to Educational Action (67 reports, which represent 34.36% of the total) and by the fact of being Relational/Emotional (53 reports, or 27.18%); by the manifestation of a practice that varies, in parity, between the Definition and Non-definition of Procedures (50 reports, or 25.64% in both cases); by being strategic (65 reports, representing 33.33% of the respective total, while being considered as non-strategic in 25 reports, or 12.82%); by its concern in sharing its vision of the school and being a mobiliser (an aspect contained in 40 reports, or in 20.51% of the total); and by the fact of being Active/Committed/Strong (29 reports, or 14.87%), a trait which is numerically significant when compared with the results of the other two regions for the same parameters.

In summary, we can state that the exercising of leadership by the Executive Boards/Directors of the schools tends to be stronger in the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, while in the Alentejo and Algarve, it is more diffuse in character. In general, the three regions have the same dominant characteristic which is reflected in an open and available leadership with regard to Educational Action, is firmly founded on its Relational/Emotional aspect, has a strategic tendency and shows some concern for the mobilisation of the different educational agents and community for a concerted action.

#### 4.1.2. School Board/General Council

The analysis of the content of the reports concluded that the exercising of authority of the School Board/General Council was considered on two levels: the level pertaining to the relationship with the Executive Board/Director and that of the functions of the School Board itself or the General Council. This data is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. School Board/General Council, by Region**

	Algarve		Alentejo		Lisbon and Tagus Valley		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>School Board/General Council</b>								
Relationship with EB	12	29.27	4	7.02	9	4.62	25	8.53
<b>Role of the School Board/General Council</b>								
Absent	1	2.44	1	1.75	3	1.54	5	1.71
Formal	5	12.20	10	17.54	16	8.21	31	10.58
Participative	11	26.83	16	28.07	42	21.54	69	23.55
Members	3	7.32	0	0.00	16	8.21	19	6.48

The reference to the relationship of the School Board/General Council with the Executive Board/Director was only found, for the three regions, in 25 reports (8.53% of a total of 293), which would appear to suggest a certain distance, or at least, a lack of complementarity, between the two main leadership bodies of the educational institutions.

On the other hand, the functions of the School Board/General Council will be defined, according to the contents of the reports analysed, mainly as participative (69 reports, or 23.55% of the total). It is also significant that, according to 31 reports (10.58%), they were considered formal, and, according to the other 5 reports (1.71%), absent. There are also cases in which the image of this body's action can be seen as the action of some of its members, which is the case in 19 reports, representing 6.48% of the total.

Now looking at the analysis of the data by region, we can see that, in the Algarve, the relationship of the School Board/General Councils with the Executive Board/Director is mentioned in 12 reports (29.27% of the total), with this being the highest value of references, in this parameter, in relation to the three regions. Regarding the functions of the School Boards/General Councils, the pattern shown by the analysis of data related to all three regions remains, although, in this case, with higher specific percentages. Therefore, the main characterising trait continues to be the one defining the function as participative, now with a percentage value of 26.83% (11 reports from the total), while 5 reports (12.20%) refer to it as being absent, and 1 (2.44%) as being formal. The focus on members of the different bodies now corresponds to 3 reports, or 7.32% of the respective total.

Pertaining to the Alentejo region, the relationship between the Executive Board/Director and the School Boards/General Councils has a percentage value lower than the overall, only 7.02% (4 reports from the specific total). The function of the body in question is once again seen as being mainly participative, a characterising trait that emerged from the analysis of 16 reports (28.07% of the total, the highest percentage in this parameter in the three regions) and we cannot fail to mention that it was also considered as formal in 10 reports (17.54%), and absent in 1 report (1.75%). The demonstration of the role or actions of the body's (or bodies') members did not exist in this case.

Lastly, pertaining to the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, we can affirm, in light of the data, that the relationship of the School Boards/General Councils with the Executive Boards/Directors is expressed in 9 reports, 4.62% of the total, which is the lowest figure in this parameter for all the three regions. As for the function of the School Boards/General Councils, the pattern follows that of the other two regions, but in this case, its numerical values are lower in all parameters. Therefore, it continues to be characterised as primarily participative (42 reports, or 21.54% of the total), while also being regarded as formal (16 reports, meaning 8.21%) and absent (in 3 reports, or 1.54% of the respective total). The focus given to some of its members is, now, present in 9 reports, which represents 4.62% of the specific total.

Generically, we can say that, as a result of the analysis carried out, the participation of School Boards/General Councils in the exercising of authority or leadership, ranges from participative to formal, although leaning more towards the former, in the three regions whose external evaluation reports were analysed.

#### **4.1.3. Intermediate leadership**

Intermediate leadership is described in the reports in terms of the quality of liaison between the structures, the form of participation in the management of the school, and the level of recognition and integration in the school organisation and the limits of its performance, aspects which, in the analysis, were globally considered as defining for the "hierarchical line" of the exercising of power pertaining to this level of leadership in schools (Table 3).

**Table 3. Intermediate Leadership, by Region**

	Algarve		Alentejo		Lisbon and Tagus Valley		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Hierarchical Line/Intermediate Leadership</b>								
<b>Liaison between Structures</b>								
Good Liaison	5	12.20	15	26.32	76	38.97	96	32.76
Limited	2	4.88	7	12.28	9	4.62	18	6.14
Submission to EB	1	2.44	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.34
<b>Forms of Participation</b>								
Management of the Pedagogical Service	5	12.20	3	5.26	11	5.64	19	6.48
Mobilisation and Co-responsibility	0	0.00	2	3.51	11	5.64	13	4.44
Monitoring of the Educational Action	3	7.32	2	3.51	10	5.13	15	5.12
Others	0	0.00	1	1.75	3	1.54	4	1.37
Recognition and Integration	17	41.46	14	24.56	58	29.74	89	30.38
Limit of Performance	14	34.15	6	10.53	40	20.51	60	20.48

Considering the overall data, for all the three regions, we can see that liaison between the structures is characterised as good in 96 reports, representing 32.76% of the total of 293, and that it is the highest percentage of all the parameters comprising this category of analysis. However, it should be noted that, in 18 reports (6.14%), liaison is reported as being limited, which must be taken into consideration. It is also worth noting that in only 1 report (0.34%) the intermediate structures are considered to be in submission to the Executive Board/Director. Interpreting this data, as a whole, it can be said that in schools and clusters whose reports were analysed, the intermediate leaders exercise their action in a relatively autonomous manner and, undoubtedly, complementarily to all other bodies of the respective institutions. This interpretation seems to be reinforced when 89 reports (30.38% of the total), affirm the recognition and integration of the intermediate structures in the exercising of leadership, although this is mitigated by the fact that 60 reports (20.48%) acknowledge limitations in performance. This relativity also seems to make more sense when we look at the low percentages in the different forms of participation of the intermediate leaders, whose values range from 6.48% (19 reports) to 1.37% (4 reports). Standing out among these forms of participation, however, are those that refer to the management of the pedagogical service (19 reports, or 6.48%), to the monitoring of educational actions (15 reports, or 5.12% of the total of 293) and to mobilisation and co-responsibility (13 reports, or 4.44%).

We shall now move on to analyse the data given in Table 3, looking at each region individually. Starting with the Algarve, we can see that liaison between the structures is considered good in 5 reports (12.20% of the respective total) – the lowest value for this parameter in the three regions - and as limited in 2 (4.88%), this being the region where we find the reference to submission to the Executive Board/Director (1 report, or 2.44%), which we have already mentioned. In turn, this is the region which has the highest numerical value out of the three (17 reports, 41.46%) as regards the recognition and integration of intermediate leadership, which seems contradictory in relation to the data just given, but makes more sense when we look at the references to the limits in the performance of the leadership in question, which show the highest percentage value from each of the regions (14 reports, 34.15%). Pertaining to the forms of participation of the intermediate leadership and, once again, somewhat contradictorily, we can see that, if on the one hand, the importance shown by their recognition and integration appears to be visible, in so far as the management of pedagogical services is present in 5 reports (12.20%) and the monitoring of educational



action in 3 (7.32%) - values greater than those found in the other two regions -, on the other, the mobilisation and co-responsibility of the intermediate leadership is completely omitted.

Pertaining to the region of the Alentejo, liaison between the structures is considered good in 15 reports, 26.32% of the respective total (this figure being the second highest in this parameter in the three regions), and limited in 7 reports, or 12.28%, which is the highest figure for the parameter, also in the three regions. The recognition and integration of the intermediate leadership was, in this case, identified in 14 reports, 24.56% of the total, while the limits of its performance were identified in 6 reports, or 10.53%, which constitute, respectively, the lowest and highest value, of one and another of these parameters in the three regions. Pertaining to the forms of participation of the intermediate leadership, they are even less representative, in numerical terms - management of the pedagogical service, 5.26% (3 reports), and monitoring of educational action, 3.51% (2 reports) - as those from the Algarve, except with regard to monitoring and co-responsibility (2 reports or 3.51% of the respective total).

Where the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region is concerned, liaison between the structures shows the highest percentage value of the three regions (76 reports or 38.97% of the respective total), whereas it was characterised as limited in 9 reports (4.62%). As was the case with the reports from the schools in the Alentejo region, there was no mention of submission to the Executive Board/Director. Continuing with the analysis, we can see that the recognition and integration of the intermediate leadership is expressed in 58 reports, representing 29.74% of the total, a figure which is lower than the one for the same parameter in the region of the Algarve, but greater than in the Alentejo, while the limits on their performance, mentioned in 40 reports (20.51%), are numerically less significant than those in the Algarve and almost double those in the region of the Alentejo. Lastly, the figures for the factors that define the ways in which the intermediate leadership participates are similar, as the management of the pedagogical service and mobilisation and co-responsibility are considered to be on an equal footing, both being present in 11 reports (5.64%), while the monitoring of educational action is present in 10 (5.13% of the total).

In summary, we can apparently state that the exercising of authority by the intermediate structures is defined, primarily, and in descending order of the relative weight of the respective factors, in the regions of Lisbon and the Tagus Valley, Alentejo and Algarve, by good liaison between them, although the schools in the Algarve lead the way where the recognition and integration of the intermediate leadership and the respective limits of performance are concerned, being followed by the region of Lisbon and the Tagus Valley and lastly, by the Alentejo. With regard to the forms of participation, the pattern is identical in all three regions, although with some numerical variation. In addition, the absence of references to mobilisation and co-responsibility of intermediate leadership in reports from the region of the Algarve should be noted.

#### **4.2. Vision**

In the reports analysed, the “vision” comprises the objectives, goals and strategies that are defined by the school or cluster, namely by the priority areas of intervention and the strategies used to achieve them, the educational offer that is available, considered adequate to the social reality in which the school is integrated, and also by the strategic vision for future development (prospective vision/future/opportunities) (Table 4).

**Table 4. Vision, by Region**

	Algarve		Alentejo		Lisbon and Tagus Valley		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Vision</b>								
Objectives, Goals and Strategies								
Areas of Priority Intervention	7	17.07	17	29.82	45	23.08	69	23.55
Strategies	0	0.00	2	3.51	5	2.56	7	2.39
Educational offer	16	39.02	39	68.42	102	52.31	157	53.58
Prospective Vision/Future/Opportunities	4	9.76	18	31.58	63	32.31	85	29.01

The data collected for the three regions allows us to conclude that, to achieve the objectives, goals and strategies that are proposed, the schools are tending to commit to the identification of areas of priority intervention. The existence of 69 reports that mention this, out of 293, is instructive for a practice that seems usual. However, unexpectedly, only 7 reports, which represent the small percentage of 2.39%, identify strategies that are implemented and that will contribute to achieving the objective that schools have set themselves. The results seem to suggest that there is no corresponding strategic action that responds, operationally, to the implementation of what was considered as a priority area of intervention. The availability of a diversified offer of education is the most illustrative purpose of the vision of the schools evaluated. In 157 of the reports analysed, which corresponds to a percentage of 53.58%, mention is made of the large and diverse response, in terms of courses or alternative educational responses, which will address the requirements of various audiences with different educational needs. As for the prospective vision, 85 reports allude to it (32.31% of the total analysed), which shows some limitation in the ability to envision a possible development and to give an appropriate response. Globally speaking, we can conclude that the vision of the schools analysed is characterized by an intentionality that relies on intervention areas identified as priority, which in operational terms means the abundant provision of a rich and diverse educational offer, although reference to strategies that make this possible is very scarce. Pertaining to the capacity of leadership to look to the future and to organise a suitable response, the results moderately reflect this possibility.

Next we will take a more specific look at these characteristics or trends for each of the three regions.

In line with the general trend, in school organisations in the Algarve priority is also given to the educational offer (16 reports, or 39.02%), with the definition of areas of intervention (7 reports, which represent 17.07 % of the respective total) coming second. As the third most mentioned subcategory, we have the prospective vision and future opportunities (4 reports, or 9.76%) and, somewhat strangely, no report referred to strategies for leadership actions. If, as we have seen, the strategic dimension is very small for the regions in general, in the case of the Algarve, it is non-existent.

Pertaining to the reports from the Alentejo region, the educational offer is also prominently mentioned (in 39 reports, or 68.42% of the respective total) but, contrary to the trend seen for the Algarve, in second place we have the prospective vision (in 18 reports, or 31.58%), and only afterwards do we have the defining of areas of intervention (17 reports which represent 29.82% of the respective total). The strategies for implementing the school's vision are only covered in 2 reports (3.51%) from those produced in this region.

With regards to the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, the management bodies' vision of their schools is mainly reflected, as in the overall trend, in the educational offer. This was mentioned in 102 reports, or 52.31% of the respective total, followed by their prospective vision and the awareness of opportunities to be put into practice in the future, according

to the contents of 63 reports (32.31% of the total), and the definition of priority areas of intervention, an aspect contained in 45 reports or 23.08% of the total. Lastly, it should be noted that strategies to give substance to the vision of the school were found in only 5 reports, corresponding to 2.56% of the total in this region.

To conclude, where this category is concerned, the differences between the three regions in question are subtle and match the profiles that characterise the generality of the reports analysed. In the Algarve, Alentejo and the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, schools recognise the areas in which they should invest, but the strategic intent that would ensure the capitalisation of this investment is very weak, and the huge commitment to the educational and training offer does not appear to have arisen from a conscious capacity to anticipate the future. Therefore, the form of leadership which prevails is one whose nature is procedural rather than intentional.

### 4.3. Decision-making processes

With regards to the decision-making processes, the reference framework for the external evaluation calls for the collection of evidence on how the participants are involved and also about the processes that are mobilised by the leadership structures to pursue the goals that the schools and clusters have set themselves. As a result, excerpts compiled in reports refer mainly to the involvement in the decision-making process, and more specifically to the logic of the chain of action, that successively transfers, to distinct levels, the responsibility to comply with what is established in the structuring documents of the school or cluster. In the set of illustrative questions that external evaluation teams put to the panels interviewed, questions arise regarding the hierarchy and scheduling of the school or cluster's objectives, and as to how management promotes liaison between the bodies, to recognise, both the principle of subsidiarity and the valorisation of the complementarity which arises from the nature of the duties and responsibilities. The participants are also asked about the incentives given to them to make decisions and to take responsibility for them.

The scarcity of reports that address these issues, expressed in Table 5, which shows that in a universe of 293 reports only 64 spoke of decision-making processes (21.84% of the total), shows that the evaluators did not find much evidence of leadership actions in this field. However, the most remarkable characteristic of this category was the impossibility of listing distinct angles of appreciation for this area in the *corpus* analysed and which would have allowed for the creation of sub-categories.

Table 5. Decision-making Processes, by Region

	Algarve		Alentejo		Lisbon and Tagus Valley		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Decision-making Processes	5	12.20	17	29.82	42	21.54	64	21.84

The descriptive analysis, by region, uncovered some discrepancies in the decision-making processes that are evident in the reports from the Algarve, Alentejo and Lisbon and Tagus Valley.

In the region of the Algarve, only five reports mention the decision-making processes (12.20%), in the Alentejo the number of reports and their percentage is much higher (17 reports corresponding to a percentage of 29.82%) and finally, in the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, references to this category of analysis were found in 42 reports (21.54%). We could not find any explanation for this inequality other than the choice that must have been made

by the external evaluation teams involved in the respective schools as to what to include in their reports. In fact, the results that this study reached do not allow us to draw conclusions that go beyond the limited scope of the contents of the school and cluster external evaluation reports which, being a secondary source of information, represent a subjective view of an observed reality. The contents of the reports are the result of evidence gathered from various sources, and there are restrictions and constraints in their wording, such as space limitations, but also inherent to the fact that different teams carried out the external evaluation in each region. It is likely that these circumstances dictated choices on the content to be included in the reports that, which in the case of the decision-making processes, may have contributed to a different valorisation between the regions.

#### 4.4. Sharing and Use/Flow of Information

This category refers to communication, involvement and recognition of the participants in the educational sphere. Globally speaking, the sharing, use/flow of information is expressed predominantly in terms of the flow of information between the school and the community, mentioned in 112 of the 293 reports analysed (38.23% of the total), of the flow of internal information (21 reports, or 7.17%), and other aspects, namely difficulties and weaknesses that hinder a more effective flow of information (in 19 reports, 6.48% of the total) (Table 6).

**Table 6. Sharing, Use/Flow of Information, by Region**

	Algarve		Alentejo		Lisbon and Tagus Valley		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Use/Flow of Information</b>								
School/Community	14	34.15	24	42.11	74	37.95	112	38.23
Internal Communication	7	17.07	4	7.02	10	5.13	21	7.17
Negative Aspects	10	24.39	3	5.26	6	3.08	19	6.48

In a general assessment of these results, there are two areas that deserve some comments: i) the valorisation given by the external evaluation to the processes for communicating information that schools establish with the surrounding community; and ii) the scant reference in the reports of text referring to the internal flow of information. If, on the one hand, it is interesting and positive to know there is very significant liaison and contact between the school and community (though the contents, objectives and consequences of the passing of information is not detailed), on the other it was not expected that there would so little reference to internal circulation. The causes of this weakness in the content of reports eludes the analysis carried out and, among other explanations that could be given, we can assume that the acceptance of the informality, which normally characterises the circuits for the passing of information in schools, has trivialised its existence to the point that no emphasis is given in the reports produced. We can therefore infer that the teams evaluating the internal communication processes did not consider them particularly worthy of note. This finding is worrying, especially when we are dealing with very complex organisations, such as schools and clusters where decisions are taken on different levels, each corresponding to distinct but complementary levels of leadership. As we see it, the scant reference to the processes which sustain a transfer of information that orientates the pursuit of what should be common goals undermines a leadership which, although shared, should be integrated into collective purposes.

Another point worth noting, and which returned significant figures in the results reported, relates to the difficulties and weaknesses in the processes for the circulation of information.

In this context, what is highlighted in the reports are, mainly, the failings arising from the difficulties encountered by participants in the use of technological resources. It seems that the existence of resources is not enough for the flow of information to be triggered and, in this case, the potential that technology provides does not guarantee that the information disclosed is appropriate to the recipients.

Having assessed the results by region, we can see that, in the Algarve, the school/community relationship is mentioned in 14 reports (34.15% of the total in the region), the negative aspects emerge as the second most mentioned subcategory (10 reports, corresponding to 24.39%) and, following the trend of the overall results in this category, the internal communication processes are least mentioned, present only in 7 of the reports from the region (17.07%). In the Alentejo, the subcategory that is most referred to continues to be the school/community relationship (present in 24 reports, which corresponds to a percentage of 42.11%), but contrary to what is observed in the Algarve, negative aspects are only reported in 3 reports from the region, which corresponds to 5.26%. Internal communication too is insignificant, given that it only appears in 4 reports which represent 7.02% of the total. Taking a predominantly rural territorial typology, where the dispersion of schools that comprise the same group can affect the communication processes between the different education participants, as the basis of the analysis of this region, we did expect the reports to reflect this reality. The aforementioned informality that characterises internal communication within school organisations and which, in many cases, consists of a “conversation” between teachers, is not compatible when distance is a barrier that prevents people from meeting. It is up to the leaders to overcome this constraint, possibly instigating informal processes for communicating information based on the use of technology.

In the region of Lisbon and Tagus Valley, the School/Community Relationship follows the general pattern, emerging as the subcategory most referred to (74 reports, 37.95%), and very low figures are shown in the reports for both Internal Communication and Negative Aspects (respectively, in 10 and 6 reports, corresponding to 5.13% and 3.08%). The most relevant aspect in the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, and which distinguishes it from the others, is the high percentage difference between the School/Community Relationship and the other subcategories, in contrast to the much more balanced figures in the Algarve and the Alentejo.

Generically speaking, we can state that in all three regions the flow of information to the community is well achieved, but the same cannot be said for the internal processes. This data can only be seen as troubling. It is known that the internal circulation of information, both by establishing interaction among teachers, and by providing information about problems that can be communicated, such as student performance, is essential in promoting academic success. The signalling, which is common to all three regions, of negative aspects that, as we have seen, refer to difficulties and weaknesses that limit a more effective flow of information, may be an indication that schools are aware of the consequences of the difficulties identified in internal communication.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, and according to the data just analysed (based on an analysis of the content of the 293 External Evaluation reports drawn up in the 2006/2007, 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 academic years in school and clusters in the regions of the Algarve, Alentejo and Lisbon and Tagus Valley) we can say that the leadership in the various schools share some of the characteristics that define the concept of school leadership, and which we have sought to delineate in point one of this article. Others, however, are absent or, at least, are

not mentioned in the reports. This may be because they were not subject to analysis during the evaluation process or because they were not detected either in the documents analysed by the External Evaluation Teams or in their visits to the schools.

Let us focus then on the “model” of leadership in Portuguese schools that, globally speaking, has to be seen in reference to the legal standards in force, which, rather than taking a traditional centralist view of the management of schools, envisage a sharing of vision and objectives, of the effective circulation of information, of responsibilities and the decision-making processes, which, as we have seen, give rise to multiple leaderships that, in order to be effective, must operate, as stated by Ainley and McKenzie (2000), in a coordinated and complementary manner. This mode of operation is reflected in what Sergiovanni (2004) calls shared management, which is exercised, in particular, at three levels: Executive Board/Director, School Board/General Council and Intermediate Leadership, especially the Pedagogical Board, Departments, Class Councils and Class/Registration Teachers.

Our goal for this article being to characterise leadership at these three levels, without losing sight of the whole, let us see how closely or distantly it resembles the standard model(s), both for all three regions jointly, and also in relation to each one individually.

In this sense, a first observation is that the Executive Board/Director has a decisive role, both through their duties and by their practice, in the exercising of leadership, its relationship with the School Board/General Council being limited, while the latter’s action is not very visible, even though they are the real principle body for the operation and regulation of an educational organisation. On the other hand, in terms of Intermediate Leadership, the hierarchical line for the exercising of leadership unclear and even seems to lack assertiveness.

If we confine ourselves, in a specific manner, to each of the three levels mentioned, we can, in short, characterise them as follows:

- Executive Board/Director - exerts a weakly centred and not very active/committed/strong leadership, revealing as their most striking characteristic traits their openness and availability as regards the manner in which they relate to other education agents, characterised by the establishment of interpersonal relationships (that are inducers of a practice of democratic leadership (Alves, 1999), their concern for the educational activity, a moderate tendency to define procedures and an also not particularly significant ability to share the vision/take mobilising action;
- School Board/General Council - seen, according to the data, as taking a participative attitude, but with a non-negligible penchant for formality, and functioning in a secondary role in the exercising of leadership. Their relationship with the Executive Board/Director is not very effective, which could mean a weak complementarity of action between the two;
- Intermediate Leadership - although the data shows that they are recognised and integrated into the leadership process and have a good relationship with the Executive Board/Director, whilst nevertheless being somewhat limited in their actions, the figures suggest little involvement in the exercising of authority and leadership.

Following on from the characterisation of the leadership of the schools mentioned above, let us now briefly focus on the vision of the school, on the decision-making processes and the flow of information (aspects which are relevant to all three levels of leadership we have been considering) that contribute to the exercising of leadership, on the one hand resulting from it, and, on the other, constituting a shaping factor.

Pertaining to vision, the central concern of leadership is clearly focused on the educational offer, something which, according to Gairín and Villa (1999), is crucial to the development of an educational and pedagogical leadership, leaving in the background, not only the vision for the future/opportunities of the school, whose definition, as we have shown, and according to Bolman and Deal (1994, quoted by Estêvão, 2000) is fundamental to the exercising of

an effective leadership, but also the setting of priorities for intervention. Additionally, and paradoxically, the strategic dimension of implementing the vision of the school is practically absent in the reports, from which one may infer a certain sense that management is more procedural than truly prospective, and more reactive than active, thereby not giving shape, at least in an obvious manner, to the promotion of concerted action strategies, which, as we have already mentioned, Nóvoa (1992) advocates as promoting the individual and collective commitment of different education agents towards the development of the school.

Regarding the decision-making processes, the content of this field of analysis refers to the relationship between governing bodies, to the complementarity of roles and responsibilities and, consequently, the mobilisation of leadership bodies to achieve the goals set, in line with what is advocated by Leithwood *et al.* (2009), meaning in the sense of attaining the collective commitment of the school community to achieve the defined objectives (Glass, 2000).

In turn, the use/flow of information is characterised by an accentuated valorisation of the interactions that the schools establish with the surrounding community, to the detriment of the internal flow of information. While the former is undeniably important, this situation is unsuited to the spirit of permanency and efficiency of the communication process which should characterise the leadership and which should occur in a more efficient and structured manner (Fullan, 2001). The acknowledged informality which characterises the circuits for the flow of information within the educational organisations may explain the results obtained. Other relevant data refers to the identification of the constraints that the schools face which are more frequent in clustered schools.

Looking now at each of the regions considered, and on the basis of the data analysed, it is fair to state that the exercising of leadership by the different bodies in the schools and school clusters is, generally speaking as would be expected, globally identical to the group “profile” that we have been outlining, although, logically, with variations in some aspects.

Pertaining to the region of the Algarve, it is important to mention that the central concern in the exercising of authority by the Executive Boards/Directors, as revealed by the analysis of the reports, relates to educational action. Other characterising traits are the relational/emotional dimension with other educational partners, the concern of putting into practice a strategic type of management, and, less significantly in terms of numerical weight, the definition of action procedures. The relationship of the Executive Board/Directors with the School Board/General Council can be considered as moderate, but much more representative than in the other two regions, while the role of these bodies is largely participative, even if only with a moderate percentage. In turn, the exercising of authority by the Intermediate Leadership, in the schools evaluated in the region of the Algarve, is mainly defined by three factors: its recognition and integration and, with very similar figures, the limitations on their performance, which considerably plays down the first aspect, and a rather insignificant affirmation of the good liaison between the structures. Next, we must draw attention to the fact that the different leaderships express their vision of the school mostly in terms of its educational offer and the definition of priority areas of intervention, although less significantly in both cases than in the other two regions. The weighting of the decision-making processes is also lower in percentage terms than in the schools and clusters in the Alentejo and Lisbon and Tagus Valley regions, while the use/flow of information is mainly aimed at the community (despite being less significant in percentage terms than in the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region, and, most of all, in the Alentejo). Further, the figures relating to the negative aspects of this factor are considerably higher than in the other two regions, while the exact opposite is shown with regard to the percentage value for internal communication.

As for the leaderships of schools and school clusters in the Alentejo region, their main characteristic now is the development of an essentially strategic management and, on an

equal footing, their focus on educational activities, the establishment of an emotional/relational environment and the definition of action procedures. Their relationship with the School Board/Council General is very weak, varying between being participative and formal, with the latter, however, being more marked than it is in schools and school clusters in the Algarve. In this region, the participation of Intermediate Leadership in the exercising of authority is mainly defined by two aspects: good liaison between the structures, although the figures are low, and the recognition and integration of these structures in the overall leadership process. The figures relating to the school vision shared by the different levels of leadership are higher than those for all the same factors in the two other regions, except with regards to the prospective/future/opportunities parameter, where is much higher than in the Algarve but slightly lower than Lisbon and the Tagus Valley. Therefore, the vision of the school is characterised by the educational offering, the perspective of the future, the definition of priority areas of intervention and by a somewhat timid (but still more pronounced than in the other regions) concern on the part of the leadership structures for a strategic decision for action. The decision-making processes in schools evaluated in the Alentejo stand out in relation to the other two regions, with the same being true as regards the use of information in relating to the community, where the percentage is higher than the figures for Lisbon and the Tagus Valley and the Algarve. Here too, the internal circulation of information is extremely poor.

Lastly, looking at the schools in the region of Lisbon and the Tagus Valley, the data analysed allows us to state that action of their Executive Boards/Directors focuses primarily on the establishment of positive emotional relationships with the educational community (parameter with the highest percentage in the three regions) and, secondly, on their concern with educational action, an action that tends to be strategic, and varies, in parity, between definition and non-definition of procedures, although this body does strive to mobilise a sharing of the school's vision. Its relationship with the School Board/General Council is very limited, although the figures show that these bodies are seen as being participative in function. As regards defining the hierarchical line for the exercising of leadership by intermediate structures, whose recognition and integration is asserted significantly although not insignificant limitations on their actions also exist, liaison is seen to be good, the figures being higher than in the other two regions. It should also be noted that the forms of participation of intermediate leadership in the managing of schools and school clusters in this region is much more assertive than in the Alentejo and Algarve and that their vision of the school is once again mainly characterised, (more markedly so than in the Algarve and less than in the Alentejo) by the educational offer, where it is to the fore over all three regions, as far as the prospective/future opportunities parameter is concerned, and comes in behind the Alentejo, but ahead of the Algarve, in relation to the definition of priority areas of intervention. Here, the figures shown in report indicate that the decision-making processes occupy second position behind the Alentejo, pushing the Algarve into third place. This same is true with regard to the use/flow of information, where again priority is given to the community, while, internal communication is the least significant over all three regions.

In summary, the analysis of the data seems to allow us to say that, in general, the leadership exercised by the school Executive Boards/Directors is more defined or stronger in the region of Lisbon and the Tagus Valley and more diffuse in the regions of the Algarve and Alentejo.

The participation of the School Board/General Council in the exercising of authority is not expressed in the reports as being very effective over the three regions, though it may, however, be considered as moderately more significant, in liaison with the school Executive Council/Director, in the regions of the Alentejo and Algarve.



As for the intermediate structures, their participation in the exercising of authority seems to be felt more in the regions of the Algarve and Alentejo, especially in the managing of the pedagogical service than in the Lisbon and Tagus Valley, where the hierarchical line is less established and where the main concern is focused on the monitoring of the educational action and the managing of the pedagogical service.

Additionally, the vision of schools emerging from the reports from the three regions considered (Algarve, Alentejo and Lisbon and Tagus Valley) can be seen to focus mainly on the educational offer and on the definition of priority areas of intervention (although the strategic aspect of the action undertaken by the respective management bodies is not very explicit), and the prospective vision of the school, especially in the regions of the Alentejo and Lisbon and Tagus Valley, is also evident.

On a more pragmatic scale, the data shows that the leadership in the schools under analysis is characterised by the definition of the priority areas of intervention, which is not alien to a certain prospective vision of its performance, which will lead it to a somewhat timid decision-making process.

Pertaining to this, the incipient manner in which it is referred to in the reports analysed, suggests that it may have been played down to a certain extent, especially as regards the capacity of each of the schools' management bodies to assert themselves individually within the scope of the competences attributed to them. The figures analysed largely indicate a standard vision, focusing on processes which create loyalty in the decisions taken with a view to achieving the goals and objectives set forth in the structural documents of the schools or clusters.

A comparative analysis, by region, shows that the number of reports in which this category is most referred to, is in the Alentejo, followed by Lisbon and the Tagus Valley and, lastly by the region of the Algarve. We did not find any explanation for this trend, leaving us with the idea that this is the result of options made by the teams who undertook the external evaluation process in each of the regions studied. The break down, per type of school organisation, is also not clear, with a consistency in the references to decision-making processes of reports from innovative, traditional and diffuse schools.

Pertaining to the flow of information, expressed in the parameters School/Community Relationship, Internal Flow and Negative Aspects, the analysis per region, shows that there are no relevant differences as regards the first two categories under analysis. However, where the negative aspects that inhibit the flow of information are concerned, the Algarve is the region that highlights them most.

To conclude and by way of a summary, it is important to highlight that the results achieved by this study do not allow us to reach conclusions that go beyond the limited scope of the contents of the reports pertaining to external evaluations that were carried out on the schools and school clusters, which are, in fact, a subjective view of an observed reality. The contents of these reports were the result of evidence gathered from various sources, including panel interviews, and there are limitations and constraints in their wording (especially with regard to the limited space available), but also inherent to the fact that the external evaluation was carried out by different teams in each region. This set of circumstances is likely to have contributed to the disperse nature that, as we have said, globally characterises the reports analysed. However, it is important to highlight that each report, *individually*, contains specific information, pertaining to one school or cluster in particular and, in this sense, when it is returned to the school, it expresses the findings of the external evaluation, presenting an opinion on the quality of the education and teaching offered by the school in question, that may contribute to its improvement.

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### **Legislation**

Law 31/2002, of 20<sup>th</sup> December, approves the system for the evaluation of nursery, primary and secondary education in public, private, cooperative and charity institutions.

# LOOKING BACK THROUGH A NEW PAIR OF GLASSES: CONFLICT AND MEDIATION IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

## UMA ABORDAGEM AO CONFLITO E À MEDIAÇÃO NO DESENVOLVIMENTO LOCAL

*António Fragoso*  
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### ABSTRACT

Local development processes include a complex social dynamic where, frequently, conflicts has an important role, namely blocking the cooperation modes between social actors or institutions. Mediation can have an important role in local development processes. In this paper we analyse data from long lasting processes of local development, focusing on the mediation structure in order to highlight some conclusive reflections.

Keywords: “Local development”, “conflict”, “mediation”, “social change”.

### RESUMO

Os processos de desenvolvimento local incluem dinâmicas sociais complexas nas quais, frequentemente, o conflito tem um papel importante, nomeadamente bloqueando as formas de cooperação entre os actores sociais ou as instituições. Neste artigo analisámos dados de um longo processo de desenvolvimento local, focando-nos na sua estrutura de mediação, com a finalidade de sublinhar algumas reflexões conclusivas.

Palavras-chave: “Desenvolvimento Local”, “conflito”, “mediação”, “mudança social”.

JEL Classification: I29

## 1. CONFLICT AND UNPREDICTABILITY IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Local development is a type of social intervention in which people, with or without the help of external social actors or institutions, try to make concrete the processes that would promote their vision for the future of a certain territory. We could point out a considerable number of characteristics that currently define local development as we see it<sup>1</sup>. But, in this paper, we focus on a small number of features: the beginning of processes around community problems as defined by the community (Amaro, 1998; Reszohazy, 1998), the participation of social actors at all levels of these processes (Nogueiras, 1996). Local development is mainly made up of educational processes, including formal, nonformal and informal processes (Santos, 1990). Finally, social change is one of the central aims of local development, as broadly defined by Luque (1995).

<sup>1</sup> For a more complete analysis of local development characteristics, see Fragoso (2009).

Regarding the endogenous character of local development, it is common to state that the resources (human, economic and environmental) existing in a certain territory are enough to build knowledge that could be used to address the needs of a community. In this sense, endogenous processes of development could be said to be based on the internal impulse to start the dynamics of social change. Yet, several authors, such as Melo (1988), point out that deprived communities do not have the dynamics for spontaneous change. Moreover, external initiation is fundamental to trigger development processes. Furthermore, Vachon (2000) shows that endogenous development often needs external contributions, provided that central change dynamics come from within.

The fact that we take participation, in a nonpaternalistic way, as a central value of local development has other types of consequences. Experts and researchers may think that the particular directions that people take are wrong. But, if we truly believe in participation, then people possess the control of the processes. Being external researchers or field agents, we can debate and advise. But, we cannot force people to take specific actions that theoretically are thought to be ideal. As we have argued in Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas (2004a), there is no way to predict the particular directions that local development changes could take. Such processes are, in fact, insecure and unpredictable—characteristics that frequently enervate community educators or other social actors.

These characteristics lead to the conclusion that local development processes are often complex and involve important collective dynamics. To be involved in local development dynamics means, for the most part, to be permanently debating what is being done by a number of individuals and groups. What is more critical and difficult is developing a clear view of the strategic dimensions and problems that should be tackled, with what instruments, by whom and how. In this type of setting, conflicts between people or entities occur frequently. Taking for granted that conflict can have a blocking effect on local development processes, mediation could surely be highlighted as a possible solution to this problem.

According to Williams, mediation can be defined as (a) finding a central point between two opposites, (b) describing the interaction between two opposed concepts or forces within the totality and (c) describing such interactions as substantial [...] but also as a process in which the form of the mediation alters the things mediated (1989, p. 205). This definition does not resolve the issue. Rather, several questions emerge that we should be able to answer: Who is responsible for the mediation processes? Can it be an external mediator or a community or collective member? Does mediation bear different meanings, dimensions or other factors not directly present in William's definition? Which factors are attributable to influencing mediation processes?

## **2. CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY**

Our research was conducted during the period from 1998 to 2002 in a rural area called Cachopo, located in northern, mountainous Algarve, south of Portugal. This area, since the Second World War, has been subjected to gradual episodes of economic, social, and economic crisis. The structural causes of this decay are basically the tensions and contradictions that arise from the transition between tradition and modernisation. These major factors and others have also caused the mass emigration of the population to other European countries and a mass exodus to national coastal cities experiencing tourism booms. Paramount to these disruptions has been the aging of the population, the bankruptcy of traditional agriculture (subsistence agriculture used to be the main economic activity) and a strong devaluation of cultural traditions.

For research purposes, it is important to understand some elements around the social space of Cachopo. The city is in a mountainous area of about 200 Km<sup>2</sup>, which today has around 1,000 inhabitants (every ten years the population decreases by 25-29%). The social organisation of the space is very important. In fact, the main population area that concentrates all of the existing services is a small village with 200 people. The remaining 800 live in very small clusters<sup>2</sup> of houses spread throughout the field, which in some cases today have no inhabitants at all. The biggest cluster (Mealha) has only around 50 people.

The main purpose of the research was to examine the processes of local development in this area from 1985 until 2002. We tried to identify major changes caused by the actions of the people involved. Our research consisted of five case studies (Yin, 1993) that had a strong conceptual component directed to the holistic comprehension of development processes. Our study was mainly interpretative (Merriam, 1998). The techniques used were document analysis, nonparticipating observation and, mainly, nonstructured interviews as defined by Ruiz Olabuénaga (1999). In a second phase, in which we were looking for specific information as we better understood the context, we conducted some interviews that were semistructured, in accordance with the work of Gighlione and Matalon (1992).

Although we ended this research in 2003, we had never included mediation in the analysis of our data. The main aim of this paper is, therefore, to review some of the data and to change the basic theoretical perspective in an attempt to reveal different patterns and points of interest.

### 3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES IN CACHOPO

In Cachopo, the processes of local development began in 1985, when the Radial<sup>3</sup> team (an external team) initiated a participative project that involved some local groups interested in solving problems they felt to be urgent. This external institution stayed in the field for six years. During that period, this group, together with groups from Cachopo, launched a number of initiatives: *i*) two training programmes for women designed to build two microenterprises in which people could create their own jobs; *ii*) the creation of an infant centre for children between 3-12 years, which conveyed the need to design an in-service, action-research training programme for educators; and *iii*) an organisational process involving local groups, aiming both to prepare them to manage the projects and to open the possibility of future development processes.

In this context, we can only point out the major evolutions of the case, and, to do so, we are going to divide the main events into four phases (Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas, 2004b).

We considered the period from 1985 to 1991 as a **learning phase**, in which community groups had the chance to access specific knowledge and to see their skills grow. Three different types of learning processes were in progress: *i*) *The first learning process involved* two years of nonformal professional training programmes, directed at the creation of self-employment and structured around small units of production with close links between theoretical training and productive work. *ii*) The second learning process consisted of an in-service, action-research training programme for infant educators of the four centres that had begun functioning. The process lasted three and a half years and depended on collaboration with the University of Algarve. It alternated formal learning with nonformal learning. *iii*) The third learning process entailed nonformal and informal learning efforts based on the organisation of groups, on the construction of collective structures (associations) and on the valuable lessons of participation that were derived from it. The process was fed by

<sup>2</sup> These clusters are called in Portuguese *Montes*. There are about 56 *Montes* in the area.

<sup>3</sup> Support Network for the Integrated Development of Algarve.

conscientisation. The project was participative. Autonomy was embryonic, and dependence on the external entity was significant.

The second phase (1991-1993) was a **transition** that began when the external institution left the field. This time was important for personal and collective ruptures (even in the psychological dimensions) that forced local social actors to assume their growing autonomy in all dimensions. During this period, there was a certain stabilization of the successful experiences. But, one of the created workshops closed down because it could not achieve economic viability, and there were no local spontaneous actions. This period was also important in that social actors began to assume the new technical cultures they had gained, and accordingly, they experienced some changes in their social roles. In the beginning, the defence mechanisms of the community were so strong that it denied those persons a corresponding social status. But, gradually, this situation showed some signs of change. Finally, a new external institution entered the field with the firm purposes of staying and acting as part of the community, which soon became a fact.

We have called the third phase (1994-1999) the **dichotomic phase** because the pattern of changes included opposite tendencies:

- On the one hand, people had already gained the awareness that, through their actions, change was possible. Hence, endogenous processes of local development emerged. New groups and initiatives arose, and some changes extended to the community, especially the ones related to gender roles. People who had participated in former processes were now being the “engines” of development activities.
- On the other hand, it was clear that some things were not evolving as “expected”. For instance, the level of fragmentation within the core groups was growing, and conflicts that were less visible before were now clear. The local equilibria of power were definitely moving. In this phase, the speed of change seemed to accelerate, and the circumstances in the region were unpredictable.

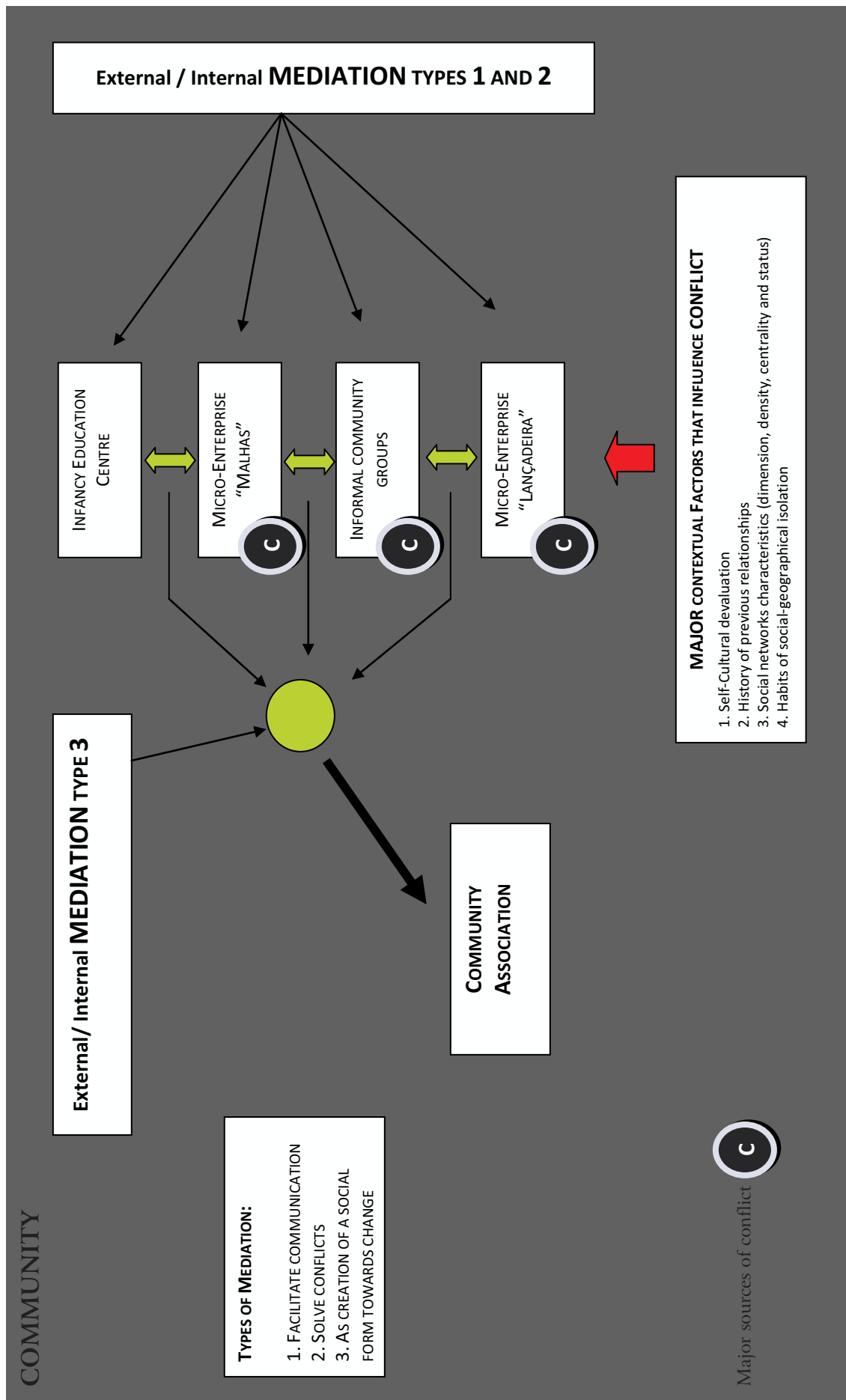
Finally, in the phase of **stabilisation** (2000/2003), the patterns of some local development actions were maintained. These patterns showed tendencies that can be seen in their negative and positive aspects. The internal territories of social action seemed to be clearer, and so were the status and centrality of some actors. It also became clear that individual protagonists were in some cases much more important and visible than the ones from the groups. The levels of fragmentation were apparent, and individual actors recognised that the ideal for the future of Cachopo would not be fulfilled. In short, the idea of the different groups from Cachopo speaking with one collective voice was a shattered dream.

#### **4. THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN CONFLICT AND MEDIATION**

This very brief summary compresses an immense number of events. But, we think that the elements discussed are sufficient to understand the case. Next, we will look at these phases, considering conflict and its consequences, together with the context factors that allowed conflict to appear. Figure 1 will help us in that task.



Figure 1. Learning Phase (1985-1991)



In figure 1, we can see that the external project team (Radial) that launched the processes of local development in Cachopo worked with informal groups in the community to build some experiences: an infancy education centre and two training courses aimed at building microenterprises (“Malhas” and “Lançadeira”). Within these groups, conflict was frequent due to several factors. First, this was a community with a long history of abandonment and isolation, a rural world in destruction; the inland communities of Algarve had no chance of making the transition from a subsistence form of agriculture to a modern one based on mechanisation. Hence, we witnessed not only the bankruptcy of agriculture and the traditional professions linked to it but also the threat to the cultural characteristics of this rural identity. The community itself believed that its culture was not adequate to face modern world challenges. In the three initiatives listed here, the linking of the traditional and the modern was a departure point. In the children centre, the in-service training process designed for educators tried to focus on modern pedagogy. But, in attempting that focus, the educators departed from local culture in building specific activities for the kids. In Lançadeira (a small weaving enterprise), the challenge was to innovate in techniques and to create more modern products in an aesthetic sense while preserving local cultural elements (in the colours or patterns of the used fabrics). Malhas was dedicated to producing sweaters, combining traditions old and new. To conclude, a task that seemed logical—joining the traditional and the modern—was difficult in this phase. People reacted strongly against it in some cases. Therefore, we can say that *self-cultural devaluation* was a factor of conflict.

There are two major sources of conflict that are deeply intertwined: social network characteristics and the history of previous relationships. Let us begin with social networks. According to Walker et al. (1994), the factors that influence the social support that individuals can receive and give in their networks are as follows:

1. The *dimension* of the network. The bigger the networks, the greater the number of members who provide others with emotional help, goods and services is. The bigger the networks, the greater the percentage of members who receive social support is. Hence, people within larger networks have greater advantages.
2. The *density* of the network is measured by the proportion of the constructed links over all of the possible links that social actors could create. Dense networks facilitate communication and coordination, thus allowing better social support. But, the authors also warn that low density networks can be more satisfactory to individuals, especially if network links are formed by friendship relations.
3. *Centrality* and *status*. The terms refer to the prominence or importance of individuals in their own network. A certain person is central if he or she is involved in many relationships—thus, the most simple measure of centrality lies in the number of connections that a member of a particular network maintains with other members of that network.

The primary characteristics of the social networks in Cachopo are the following: small networks in dimension; high density relative to the number of persons who have a personalised knowledge of the other; but low density when it comes to friendship relationships. In this first phase of the investigation, there were no central or high status social local actors. That is, centrality and status were given to the external team that triggered the processes (Radial). Even if they were external, their continuous, everyday presence in the location made this possible.

Under these conditions, we can say that the opportunities for obtaining social support were not the best. The fact that centrality and status were given to Radial team members indicated that people from Cachopo entertained a significant number of preconceptions and assumptions about them. For instance, the people from Cachopo said that Radial members “were communists” who “only came to Cachopo because they earned a lot of money from

the fees paid to them”. For some years, this type of information circulated freely among local actors without knowledge of the Radial team. It is our interpretation that this situation had consequences: *i)* some sectors of the population kept a distance from the processes going on; and *ii)* the “outside” information and opportunities that Radial brought had begun to circulate in smaller zones of the network.

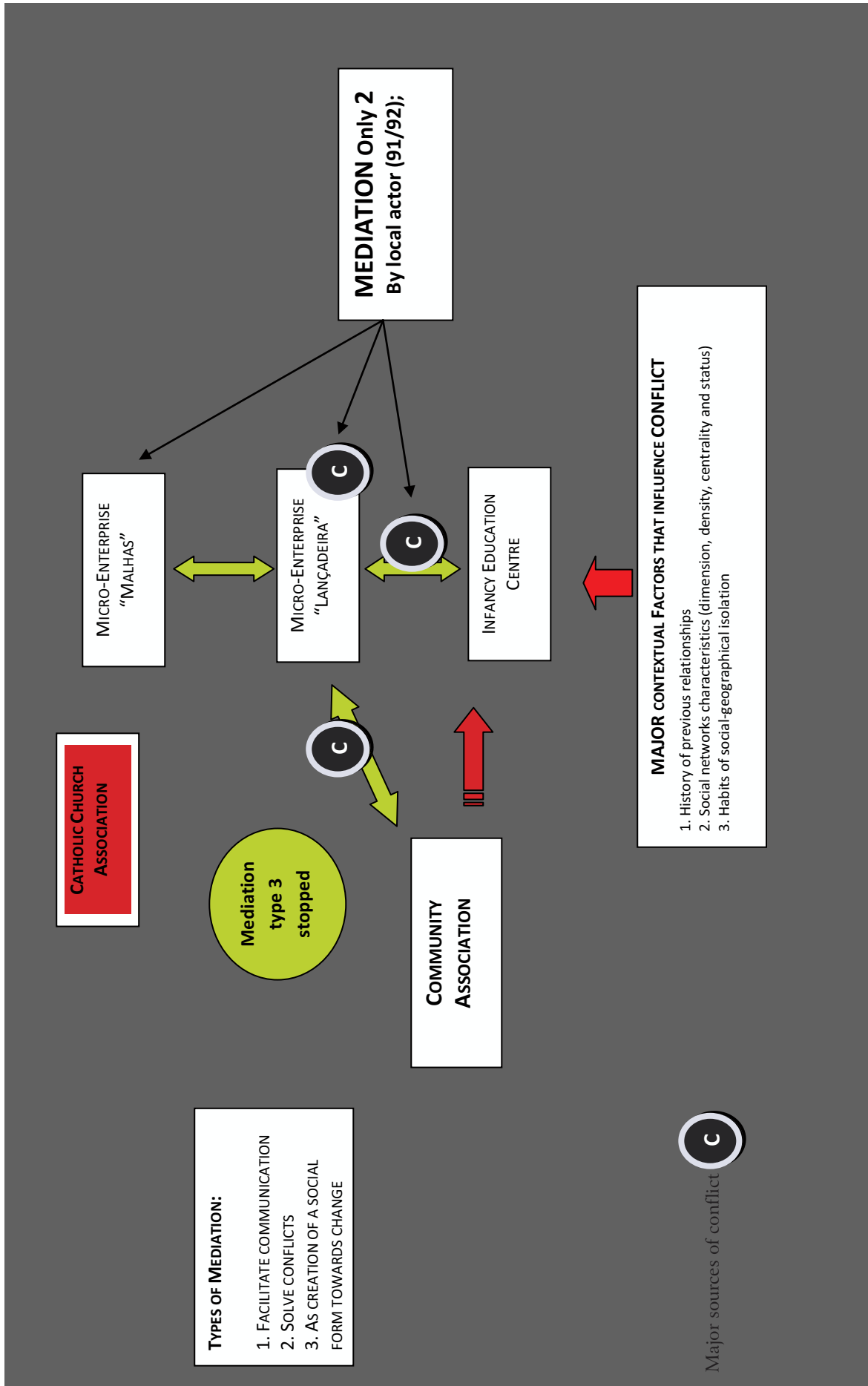
The *history of previous relationships* was a determinant in this phase. The different experiences joined people from the community. Some former conflicts were transported to different and smaller contexts, such as the microenterprises and the infancy centre, which in some cases made conflict harder to manage.

The Radial team provided two different types of mediation during this phase. First, the team operated inside the individual groups, creating moments and spaces for people to debate and make common decisions on the issues important to the groups. It was very important that conflicts were not hidden. When conflicts between persons emerged, Radial members gathered people around a table, debated and contributed to resolving the conflict. The Radial team created a second type of mediation made in a very sensible, strategic dimension: the uniting of members of these groups to form a new association. This community association should be the one to assume the future common strategy for development issues, generally speaking. Also, mediation was an attempt to make people completely responsible for the development processes. Ideally, the external entity Radial would have been dispensable after a short period. In this phase, this type of mediation (we call it creation of a social form towards change) seemed to work well; the association was built and several members of the individual groups were active in it.

But, circumstances changed significantly during the transition phase, as we can see in **figure 2**. As we mentioned before, the Radial team had to terminate its direct intervention in Cachopo. Mediation was left to community local actors who, due to a number of factors, could not follow the same type of mediation. Except for cultural devaluation, which was not a problem anymore, the same factors influencing conflict were present. For a number of reasons, local actors focused their mediation actions only on one type in trying to resolve the emerging conflicts between people. That is equivalent to saying that the mediation towards more general strategic aims disappeared (mediation type 3), and the same situation occurred with the types of mediation intended for better communication between persons. It is not strange, therefore, that the fragile bonds existing inside the community association broke in several directions. This association, from this moment on, managed the infancy education centre effectively (in 1992, a new centre was inaugurated), but it abandoned all the other areas of action.

It is notable that, during this phase, the fragmentation of the groups increased. In addition, in 1991, a new association emerged. Two young adults accepted an invitation from the bishop of Algarve. They came to live in Cachopo and were devoted, not only to making the Catholic Church visible, but also, in these first years, to building services for older adults. This new Catholic association would grow quickly and influence greatly the future power distribution at a local level.

Figure 2: Transition Phase (1991-1993)



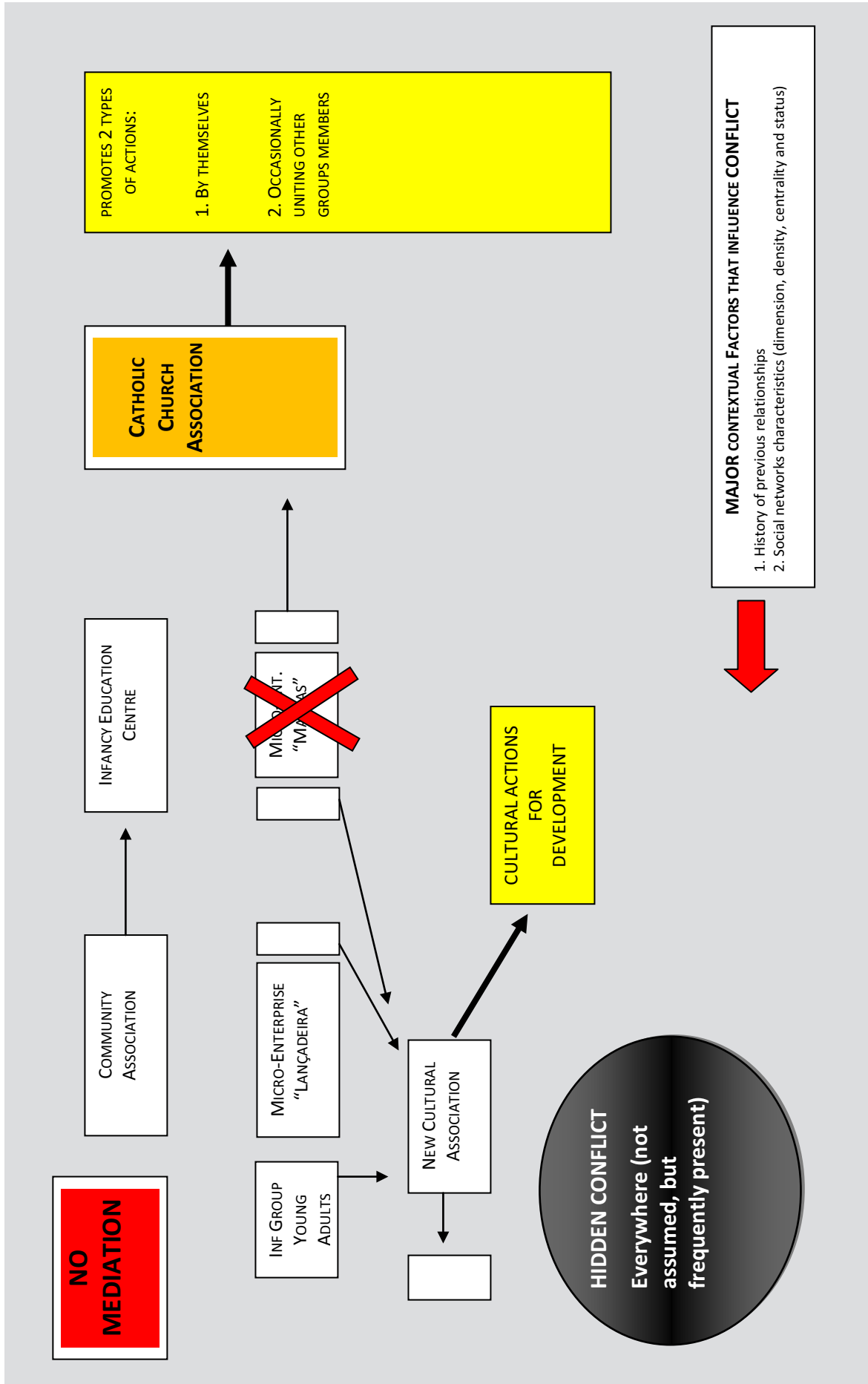
**Figure 3** shows the evolution of events between 1994 and 2002, in a context in which mediation disappeared completely. The community association stood isolated, confined to its role of managing the infancy education centre. The Catholic Church association grew significantly in importance at several different levels:

- IV. In its actions with the older adults. This initiative included a day centre, a service for older adults in their homes and literacy courses.
- V. Expanding its actions to other dimensions. The association built a library for young adults and started a programme for helping them with their school studies.
- VI. Joining, from time to time, the other increasingly fragmented groups. Although this participation was not done intentionally or strategically, some initiatives (relative to local producers, for instance) would never have been possible without this association.
- VII. This association began to be identified through one person; it became visible through the importance of individual protagonists.

This was the period in which conflict emerged in its more destructive forms, only possible by a special configuration of social networks. We mentioned before that some sectors of the community were at an early stage detached from sectors engaged in local development activities. That is, privileged information and other information now circulates in more narrow parts of the social network which, consequently, diminishes the social network even more. At the same time, the circulation of information in this particular area of the network is very fluid. Sensible information is therefore blocked; a person will not share sensible information knowing that in the next day, it will circulate quickly. In these conditions (and with no mediation actions occurring to stop it), a new type of conflict emerges: a hidden conflict that everybody knows but no one assumes. When a conflict emerges, people do not debate, share or try to resolve it through dialogue; they simply leave the group, increasing the levels of fragmentation.

Figure 3 shows this occurrence clearly. There is a first fragmentation in Lançadeira; there is a second one in Malhas. Some elements from Malhas and Lançadeira, together with young adults from the community, start a new and strong association. But, a couple years later, there is a new fragmentation. Time will force some young adults to leave the community (searching for studies or simply for jobs), leaving this new association without any strength. Individual protagonists are now much more visible than before. The collective work was each time more difficult because conflict without mediation blocked the cooperation modes between the social actors of the community. From this moment on, there is no hope that the community of Cachopo will be capable of uniting. The central notions of collective action to benefit community were shattered.

Figure 3: Dichotomic / Stabilisation Phases (1994-2002)



## 5. CONCLUSIONS

There are some very brief conclusions from the analysis of this case:

First, conflict is a very important factor in local development processes. It can block the processes at its core, mainly because it breaks the cooperation forms between social actors or institutions. Conflict undermines the collective, which represents a central value in local development.

Second, there are a number of factors that influence the emergence of conflict. Some of these are contextual. They are deeply connected with the community's history, culture and evolution. Some of the factors influencing conflict depend more on the nature of the group and the dynamics and social relations that the group establishes.

Third, mediation seems to be a central instrument in preventing or resolving conflict. It is therefore fundamental to integrate the processes of local development. We have identified three different types of mediation. The first two are more instrumental. The main aim of its use is to prevent or to solve problems that naturally arise in every process where social relations are crucial. The third type—mediation as the creation of a social form towards change—represents, nevertheless, a strategic dimension. It points to the future and aims at guiding social life towards social change.

It is not the first time that we have identified the importance of mediation in development or adult education processes. In Lucio-Villegas & Fragoso (2009), we mentioned the programme *Adult Education and Citizenship*, interconnected with the Participatory Budget in Seville (Lucio-Villegas, Cowe & Garcia Goncet, 2008), where experts adopted an educational role in a Freirean perspective. In this case, experts have always had their starting point in real people's situations. Needs—as a social construction—have been described as stemming from a participatory process involving people and experts. Therefore, when we face participatory, unpredictable processes, it seems fundamental to have a mediation system that can not only prevent the blocking effects of conflict but also steer social change to a level where the lives of those involved can have real improvements. However, it is important to take into account that mediation tasks represent very complex dynamics and should be studied further. For instance, sometimes mediation can promote dependency between social actors. To conclude must not be a limitation to participation; on the contrary it must encourage it. In this sense, the role of the mediator is not to be a new experts but an educator in a Freirean sense.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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