NATIONAL CULTURE AND PLANNING AND CONTROL OF PROJECTS IN PORTUGAL

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Previous research report abundantly that management practices are impregnated with national culture, in particular the practices of project management. This is an area with a high impact on the sustainability of countries and organizations, given the importance of efficiency and effectiveness of project management for the economic and social development.

This work focuses on attitudes towards planning and control of projects and on practices of these management activities in Portugal. It is based on the application of a survey to 634 professionals involved in implementing and / or managing projects, across the country and in most economic sectors.

Although several published studies refer that Portuguese culture attribute low importance to planning and control, the surveyed professionals report a high importance attributed to planning and control of projects. On the other hand, the comparison with a similar study conducted in the USA revealed similar levels of practices of planning and control of projects in these two countries. This is a surprising outcome that raises the possibility of changes being happening in the national culture of Portugal.

Keywords: *National; Culture; Project; Management*

CULTURA NACIONAL Y LA PLANIFICACIÓN Y CONTROL DE PROYECTOS EN PORTUGAL

La investigación anterior habla en abundancia de que las prácticas de gestión se impregnan con la cultura nacional, en particular las prácticas de gestión de proyectos. La gestión de proyectos es una actividad con un alto impacto en el desarrollo económico y social de los países y sociedades.

Este trabajo se centra en las actitudes ante la planificación y control de proyectos y sobre las prácticas de estas actividades de gestión en Portugal. Se basa en la aplicación de una encuesta a 634 profesionales participan en la aplicación y / o la gestión de proyectos , a través del país y en la mayoría de sectores económicos.

Aunque varios estudios publicados se refieren que la cultura portuguesa asigna poca importancia a la planificación y el control , los profesionales encuestados reportan una alta importancia que se atribuye a la planificación y control de proyectos . Por otro lado , la comparación con un estudio similar realizado en los EE.UU. reveló niveles similares de prácticas de planificación y control de proyectos en estos dos países. Este es un resultado sorprendente que plantea la posibilidad de cambios que se están sucediendo en la cultura nacional de Portugal.

Palabras clave: *Gestión de proyectos; Cultura; Nacional*

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1. Introduction

The culture of a society or country, the national culture, understood as the sharing of a story and a set of, beliefs, ideologies, traditions and language systems (Alas & Tuulik, 2007), or collective programming (the software of the mind), influences the way people feel, think and tend to act (Hofstede, 2001). This programming distinguishes the members of one group or society and is reflected in different areas of our life, like art and social organization, and also in management. No group of people can escape the effects of culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

Several authors, such as Baskerville-Morley (2005), criticize some methodological aspects of the research and the findings of Hofstede and his (many) followers. Including the assumption of uniformity of national cultures and the influence of national culture on effective professional practices of each individual or group.

Although there is no agreement about the concept of national culture and its actual impact on people and their practices, there is a broad consensus on the existence of significant differences between the attitudes and the way things are done in different countries and regions (Smith, 2006), and that these differences exist also on management activities (Cassell, & Blake, 2012; Javidan & House, 2001; Ralston, Terpstra & Kai-Cheng, 2008). Management is carried out by people who are imbued with values and beliefs related to the context to which they belong, so it's difficult to talk about management without considering cultural aspects (Bredillet, Yatim, & Ruiz, 2010).

Among the many studies that support this conclusion, Keating, Martin & Szabo (2002) conducted an interesting study comparing practices and values of students and managers in Ireland and Austria, and concluded that there is a higher consistency in each of these countries regarding practices and values among Irish students and managers, and among Austrian students and managers. In this study, national culture is more important to characterize practices and values than age or professional group.

Also project management is influenced by the culture of the countries were projects are carried out (Bredillet, Yatim & Ruiz, 2010). As stated by Chevrier (2003), projects involving teams with members from different countries, are not only international projects, they are fundamentally inter-cultural projects.

The objective of this study is to characterize the attitudes and practices of Portuguese people towards project management, specifically towards planning and control of projects.

2. Background

Projects are very important in our society because the success of organizations (and therefore of the whole economy and the whole society) depends largely on the success of the projects carried out (Shenhar et al, 2001).

Planning and control are two essential management activities, two critical projects' success factors, as emphasized by the extension literature review conducted by Fortune & White (2006). Kendra & Taplin (2004) emphasize that management processes, specifically planning and control, are basic functions of management, and therefore undoubtedly critical factors for project success. Similarly, Elattar (2009) states that planning and control (monitoring) are factors strongly related to project success.

According to results presented by Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov (2010), Portuguese culture can be characterized by a large power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, femininity and short-term orientation. These authors claim that in countries such as Portugal, that have high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance, planning and control are poorly formalized and poorly systematized.

Cabral (2006), in an empirical study about attitudes and behaviors of the Portuguese population, concludes that there is a high power distance in all socio-demographic categories of this population. Lopes (2010) applied a survey on nearly 2,000 executives of Portuguese companies, obtaining results consistent with several features of Portuguese national culture identified by Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov (2010). The author concludes that Portuguese culture is characterized by the propensity for improvisation and individual creativity, with strong contextual conditions of ambiguity (femininity), low capacity for planning, low sense of organization and a strong trend to create a small group for mutual help (high collectivism). The high power distance leads to a confrontation with a impositive hierarchy, causing an emotional erosion that brings out the improvisation and clandestine self-management.

Several authors relate more specifically national culture and project management.

Bony (2010) identified significant differences between the way the Dutch and French scientists value and develop project control activities, relating these differences to cultural differences between these two countries. According to Chevrier (2003), there are evidences that national culture is a impact factor on project management, specifically on the planning and control activities. Mohammed, White, & Prabhakar (2008) stress the importance of the cultural dimension in project management, as cultural patterns in the environment of a project reflect cultural patterns of organizations, societies and project teams. Zwikael, Shimizu, & Globerson (2005) reported significant differences in the way projects are managed in Israel and in Japan, in both project managers pratices and support systems offered by the organization for the implementation of projects.

There are some facts that indicate that one of the features of Portuguese national culture is the low importance given to planning and control of projects. For example, there are many large public construction projects that are initiated without adequate and realistic plans, and therefore significantly exceed costs and deadlines (Tribunal de Contas, 2009). In these and other projects carried out in Portugal, the main causes reported for these deviations are also deficiencies in planning and control (Couto & Teixeira, 2006; Monteiro, 2010).

According to this background, we formulated two hypotheses:

• H1: Portuguese people give little importance to planning and control of projects.

• H2: Portuguese people have a reduced level of use of tools and activities for the planning and the control of projects.

3. Methodology

Since national culture reveals itself, among other ways, through the beliefs and practices (Hofstede, 2001), this study uses a survey to assess Portuguese people projects' planning and control beliefs and practices.

3.1 The sample

We got 634 valid responses to our survey, from professionals involved in projects carried out in Portugal over the last two years. The respondents were mostly Portuguese (99%), with a high level of education (78% were graduate or post-graduate) and a significant project management experience (70% had more than one year of experience).

About the organizations where projects were carried out, most had the majority of Portuguese capital (83%), and represent 19 of the 20 industries classified in the Portuguese economic code of activity. For 13 of these industries, we received 10 or more responses.

This sample has a significant dimension, consisting of respondents who appear to be able to comment project management practices in a variety of organizations, industries and projects in Portugal.

3.2 Instrument to assess the importance given to planning and control of projects

As we did not find in the literature review an instrument to assess the importance given to planning and control of projects, we elaborated an instrument for this purpose. We follow the thought of Hofstede (2006) and Smitth (2006), who argue that the culture of a society or group can be best characterized asking people in that society about the value they attribute to aspects that represent the beliefs in question.

This instrument contains a set of statements about the importance of planning and control for project success. Respondents are asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement. For the development of this instrument we consulted a group of experts in project management. These were the most valued questions for these experts in terms of relevance and representativeness of the importance attached to planning and control of projects (Table 1).

Table 1 – Instrument to assess the importance given to planning and control of projects

What is your opinion about planning and control of projects? (please refer to what extent you agree with each statement, by choosing a number from 1 to 5, where 1 corresponds to "Strongly disagree" and 5 corresponds to "Strongly agree")
I1 - Planning is one of the most important factors for project success
I2 - Planning is important even if there is a careful execution of the project
I3 - Control is one of the most important factors for project success
I4 - Control is important even if there is a careful implementation of the project

Exploratory factor analysis of this instrument (Table 2) allows us to conclude that these four items are aggregated into a single factor we call “Importance given to the planning and the control of projects”.

Table 2 - Components of the matrix after Varimax rotation (Instrument to assess the importance given to planning and control of projects)

	Matrix components
I1	0,708
I2	0,736
I3	0,721
I4	0,828

The coefficient of Cronbach's alpha for this instrument is 0.72 (Table 3), which indicates a satisfactory degree of consistency of the instrument items. The correlation of each item with the total factor is equal or greater than 0.46, what suggests good discriminatory power or internal validity of the items (none of the items if removed raises the alpha of the instrument).

Table 3 - Analysis of the items of the instrument to assess the importance given to planning and control of projects

Items	Average	Standard deviation	Ritc	Alpha if item removed
I1	4,68	0,54	0,46	0,69
I2	4,65	0,53	0,49	0,68
I3	4,31	0,70	0,48	0,69
I4	4,32	0,68	0,64	0,58
Importance given to the planning and the control of projects (items average)	4,49			Instrument alpha= 0,72

The factor "Importance given to the planning and the control of projects" is calculated as the arithmetic mean of the average of the four items forming this factor (I1 to I4).

3.3 Instrument to evaluate practices of planning and control of projects

To evaluate practices of planning and control of projects we used an instrument proposed by Papke-Shields, Beise, & Quan (2010), based on the tools and practices of project management as defined in the PMBOK (2008). The PMBOK - Project Management Body of Knowledge - is the project management standard most used around the world. It is proposed by PMI - Project Management Institute, which is the largest academic and professional organization in the field of project management (Hall, 2012).

The PMBOK (2008) divides practices and tools of project management into 5 process groups: "Initiating", "Planning", "Executing", "Monitoring & Controlling" and "Closing". For this research, are relevant the practices and tools relating to process of groups of “Planning” and "Monitoring & Controlling" (control).

This instrument contained 41 items related to process groups of Planning (28 items) and Monitoring & Control (13 items). Each of these items is a tool or practice, for planning or control, and respondents are asked how often these tools or practices were obtained or used in the projects carried out in Portugal they were involved in the last two years (Table 4). It included other items that are not considered because they are related to other process groups that are not relevant for this study.

These tools are associated to activities that are organized in the PMBOK (2008) in 9 knowledge areas: "Project Integration Management", " Project Scope Management", " Project Time Management", " Project Cost Management", "Project Quality Management", " Project Human Resource Management", " Project Communication Management ", " Project Risk Management" and "Project Procurement Management" (Table 4).

Table 4 - Frequency of use of tools and practices of planning and control of projects in Portugal and in the U.S.A.

Based on all projects carried out in Portugal completed in the last 2 years in which you have been involved, please indicate how often the following items were obtained or used.

Knowledge area	Tools and practices of planning and control of projects	Process groups[a]	Average use [b]	
			Sample in Portugal (n = 530 to 634)	Sample in the USA (n = 142)[c]
Integration	1 Project plan	P	4,01	4,47
	2 Status review meetings	M&C	4,07	4,64
Scope	3 Project deliverables list	P	3,90	4,40
	4 Scope statement	P	3,82	4,27
	5 WBS (work breakdown structure)	P	3,40	3,78
	6 Scope change proposals	M&C	3,17	3,55
	7 WBS update	M&C	3,19	3,28
	8 Scope statement update	M&C	3,18	3,25
Time	9 Project schedule	P	4,10	4,58
	10 Schedule update	M&C	3,77	4,32
	11 Schedule baseline	P	3,72	4,04
	12 PERT or Gantt chart	P	3,34	3.78
	13 Project activities list	P	4,07	4,25
	14 Activity duration estimates	P	3,93	4,16
	15 Activity list update	M&C	3,78	3,64
Cost	16 Cost baseline	P	4,03	3,84
	17 Cost estimate updates	M&C	3,54	3,69
	18 Cost performance reports	M&C	3,47	3,49
	19 Activity cost estimates	P	3,73	3,45
	20 Cost baseline updates	M&C	3,69	3,39
	21 Time-phased budget plan	P	3,46	3,29

[a] P = Planning; M&C = Monitoring & Controlling

[b] 1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Frequently; 5 = Always;

[c] Source: Papke-Shields, Beise, & Quan (2010, p. 655)

Standard deviation values are not displayed because we do not have this data from the study conducted in the United States.

Table 4 (cont.) - Frequency of use of tools and practices of planning and control of projects in Portugal and in the U.S.A.

Based on all projects carried out in Portugal completed in the last 2 years in which you have been involved, please indicate how often the following items were obtained or used.

Knowledge area	Tools and practices of planning and control of projects	Process groups[a]	Average use [b]	
			Sample in Portugal (n = 530 to 634)	Sample in the USA (n = 142)[c]
Quality	22 Quality checklists	P	3,16	3.08
	23 Defined quality metrics	P	3,20	3,07
	24 Quality management plan	P	3,26	3,01
	25 Quality change requests	M&C	2,84	2,46
Human Resource	26 Project staff assignments	P	3,83	4,07
	27 Roles and responsibilities lists	P	3,57	3,74
	28 Responsibility assignment matrix	P	3,38	3.34
	29 HR change requests	M&C	2,89	2,17
Communications	30 Communication management plan	P	2,91	3,39
	31 Information distribution plan	P	3,01	2,92
	32 Communication requirements analysis	P	2,87	2,65
	33 Communications change requests	M&C	2,63	2,44
Risk	34 Risk management plan	P	3,02	3.31
	35 Contingency plan	P	2,88	3,13
	36 Risk register	P	2,92	2,60
	37 Quantitative risk analysis	P	2,73	2,59
	38 Risk register updates	M&C	2,75	2,51
Procurement	39 Contract statement of work	P	3,65	4,00
	40 Supplier evaluation criteria	P	3,58	2,96
	41 Procurement management plan	P	3,28	2,87
	Planning items - average use		3,46	3,56
	Monitoring & Controlling items - average use		3,31	3,29
	Global average use		3,41	3,47

[a] P = Planning; M&C = Monitoring & Controlling
[b] 1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Frequently; 5 = Always;
[c] Source: Papke-Shields, Beise, & Quan (2010, p. 655)

Standard deviation values are not displayed because we do not have this data from the study conducted in the United States.

Papke-Shields, Beise, & Quan (2010) applied this set of items to a sample of 142 U.S. project practitioners. The use of the same items on the survey used in this investigation in Portugal allows us to compare the responses obtained in the two countries (Table 4).

4. Results

The results we got were unexpected.

Contrary to what is stated by other authors who address this issue, as shown in Table 3, Portuguese respondents refer giving high importance to planning and control of projects. Although we don't have results from other countries that allow us to compare scores, the absolute levels of the responses are very high: the factor "Importance given to the planning and the control of projects" has the value of 4,49 on a scale of 1 to 5, where "5" represents the entire agreement of the respondents regarding the high importance of planning and control for project success.

Consistent with these responses, results regarding the frequency of use of tools and practices to plan and control projects is also high. For the 41 items of tools and practices of planning and control, is reported by respondents that in the projects they were involved in the last two years, the average utilization rate was 3,41 on a scale of 1 to 5, where "1" corresponds to "Never" and "5" corresponds to "Always" (Table 4).

More surprisingly, this result is similar to the result obtained by Papke-Shields, Beise, & Quan (2010) in an survey that includes the same 41 items of tools and practices of projects' planning and control, that was applied to 142 professionals involved in the management projects, members of a PMI chapter of the eastern United States (Table 4). Contrary to what might be expected, the overall use of management tools for planning and controlling projects reported by respondents in these two countries is very similar. Given that, unlike Portugal, the USA is a country with cultural characteristics of low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), one would expect that in the Unites States the project planning and control processes were more formalized and more systematized than in Portugal.

Both hypotheses of this study were rejected, since the results show that in Portugal, people gives high importance to planning and control of projects (H1) and there is a very frequent use of the tools and activities of planning and controlling of projects (H2).

5. Discussion and conclusions

Previous studies about Portuguese national culture concluded there is a reduced emphasis on planning and control and a reduced use of these management practices. These characteristics are expected to be identified also in project management practices in Portugal. Our results did not validate this assumption.

According to Hofstede (2007), national culture tends to be stable over time and to resist to the changes that are currently taking place in different societies.

However, Taras, Kirkman & Steel (2012) reached different conclusions. These authors conduct an analysis of data from more than 400 studies of the decades of the 1980s, 1990 and 2000, using national culture models compatibles with the model with four dimensions, presented by Hofstede in 1980: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and uncertainty avoidance. They balanced the indices obtained by Hofstede in 1980 with the results of other studies in that decade and calculated indices for the next two decades, based on studies in those decades. They conclude that, in several countries, there is considerable variation over time in the scores of these national culture dimensions. Regarding to Portuguese national culture, this study, shows an increase of

individualism and a decrease of power distance, femininity and uncertainty avoidance over three decades.

As referred by Fang (2006, p. 88), culture, like the oceans "… has no boundaries, and its various waters are both separate and shared, both different and similar, and both independent and dependent". Economic and cultural globalization influences national culture (Bird, 2003; Grishma Shah, 2009). Also the integration of Portugal in the European Union, where there is great ease of movement of people, goods, services and information, certainly contributes to the increase of the influence of several national cultures in Portugal.

More specifically about project management, the study carried out by Bredillet, Yatim & Ruiz (2010), based on the Hofstede's national culture model, relates the culture and the economic development with the development of project management in 74 countries. According to these authors, Portuguese national culture characteristics (low individualism, high uncertainty avoidance and high power distance) favor a reduce development of project management. However, in the same study Portugal is placed among the 24 countries with higher development of project management, ahead of countries like France and Belgium. Also Gomes, Yasin & Lisbon (2008) reported a good level of knowledge of the characteristics and important variables of effective project management practices by a sample of project managers of Portuguese government organizations.

Our results contradict some of the conclusions of previous studies about the importance given by the Portuguese to planning and control. In this specific perspective, the results do not confirm the characteristics of the Portuguese national culture presented by several authors. These results suggest the possibility that a change is occurring in the importance that Portuguese people give to planning and control, which is also reflected in project management practices in Portugal. This change may be associated with a change in the Portuguese national culture, since this hypothesis has also been raised by other authors.

It will be useful to conduct more studies to test this hypothesis, given its important implications.

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