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Title: “Swedishness” at work: a case study of perceived cultural transfers in a Swedish multinational company and in its Portuguese subsidiary

Título: “Swedishness” no trabalho: um estudo de caso sobre percepções de transferências culturais numa multinacional sueca e na sua subsidiária portuguesa

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Abstract By analysing the case of IKEA, a Swedish origin multinational company, and its Portuguese subsidiary, this article debates how certain assumptions about national culture are used to justify work practices and how these are perceived by management. The research was based in the analysis of company documents and in 16 in-depth interviews with managers in the two countries. Results show a strong incorporation of national and organisational cultures in the company’s image and in the narratives of management. Both the Portuguese and Swedish interviewees recognise a close association between the national (Swedish) and organisational culture in the company, though Portuguese managers tend to perceive the “Swedishness” of the organisation more strongly. The study case points out to particular processes of culture formation, transmission, dissemination and reception, influenced by material and symbolic circumstances of the countries involved.

Resumo: Através da análise da IKEA, empresa multinacional de origem sueca, e da sua subsidiária portuguesa, este artigo debate como as assunções sobre cultura nacional são usadas para justificar práticas de trabalho e como são percebidas pelos gestores. A pesquisa baseou-se na análise de documentação da empresa e em 16 entrevistas em profundidades com gestores nos dois países. Os resultados demonstram uma forte incorporação da cultura nacional e organizacional na imagem da empresa e nas narrativas dos gestores. Tanto os portugueses, como os suecos, reconhecem uma forte associação entre a cultura nacional (sueca) e organizacional na empresa, mas os portugueses tendem a integrar a “Swedishness” da organização de forma mais evidente. O estudo aponta para processos particulares de formação, transmissão, disseminação e recepção de cultura, influenciados pelas circunstâncias materiais e simbólicas dos países envolvidos.

Keywords: cross-cultural management, multinational companies, culture, Sweden, Portugal

Palavras-chave: gestão intercultural, empresas multinacionais, cultura, Suécia, Portugal.

Introduction

For many decades, the study of the interconnections of national and organisational cultures in multinational settings focused on the measurement of cultural dimensions and on the comparison of work practices between different countries, often reinforcing national stereotypes and neglecting national cultural heterogeneity. The acknowledgement of these and other conceptual and methodological imprecisions around the broad notion of culture have raised the need to develop more research on the role of culture in MNC, considering the complexity of the processes of cultural transmission.

In this article, we discuss how national culture assumptions are used and perceived as a rationale for work practices in multinational companies, by analysing the perceptions of cultural transfers at IKEA, a multinational company of Swedish origin. The research was based on the study of Swedish and Portuguese workplaces belonging to the company and supported by documentary analysis and interviews with managers in both countries.

After the literature review and presentation of the theoretical framework of the research, we present our methodological choices, describing the countries, the company and the individuals under study, and then the results obtained. Finally, we discuss our results within the framework of the current debates on cultures and organisations in a globalised labour market.

Linking national and organisational cultures: a review

Traditional approaches to culture tend to define it as a set of values, expectations and behaviours that are learned, shared and reproduced by a group. From an organisational perspective, culture has been associated with shared meanings, assumptions and practices (Robbins, 1989; Schein, 1985; Smircich, 1983).

As an essential element in the analysis of organisational contexts, the study of culture in MNC often implies considering the articulation between organisational and national cultures. The first studies addressing this relationship are widely attributed to the work of Crozier on the influence of national culture on the organisation of French companies (Crozier, 1963), and to the work of D'Iribarne, who, over the years, has been actively adding a series of relevant contributions to the study of culture (D'Iribarne, 1989, 1997, 1998, 2009).

Paying special attention to the adjustment of MNC to the cultural specificities of the countries they operate in, Hall (1959) and Hofstede (1991) are also remarkable references in most of today's studies on culture.

According to Hall, culture communicates below the level of consciousness, in "silent languages" such as time, space or things (Hall, 1959). Initially inspired by Hall's work, though with abundant criticism, Hofstede's contribution also remains an important point of reference in studies on the impact of cultural dimensions on MNC. With privileged access to data on more than 100,000 IBM workers in 50 countries, combined with due control for the effect of other variables, the author concluded that, in the same company, the response to common everyday problems can have country variations according to concrete cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1991).

Following these approaches, different studies have associated the country of origin of MNC with specific business features or operational characteristics. This means that even when formally defined as a 'multinational' company, the country where they were first established has a central role in the definition of its general configuration. North American companies are frequently associated with a formal management style, with tight control from the central management to its subsidiaries (Quintanilla, Susaeta, Sanchez-Mangas, 2008). Japanese companies are often portrayed as obtaining efficiency

through the reduction of transactional costs, investing in long-term labour relations and collectivist orientations (António, 1988; Graham, 2001; Urakami, 2003; Pina e Cunha, Rego, Cabral-Cardoso, 2007). In their turn, Swedish companies are regarded as having a management style that encourages team work, open communication and consensus in decision-making (Hayden and Edwards, 2001). Other examples are readily available.

However, recent advances in cultural research in organisations have been supporting the need to adopt a more comprehensive definition of culture. Criticism has resulted not only from problematic methodologies, usually derived from Hofstede's comparative quantitative approach (Dupuis, 2014), but also from an outdated idea of culture as a fixed and invariable notion (Sackmann and Phillips, 2004). For instance, research is still being carried out on the general assumption that individuals from a certain country will tend to share values, meanings and behaviours that distinguish them from other individuals, neglecting the cultural heterogeneity of modern societies (D'Iribarne, 2009, Søderberg and Holden 2002, Sukumaran, 2007). Accordingly, various authors point out the need to consider a more dynamic approach to culture, with context and cultural interactions being taken into account (Dupuis 2014, Sackmann and Phillips 2004, Søderberg and Holden, 2002).

This is closely connected with the need to debate the plurality of work identity construction processes in globalised labour markets. If we consider identity as the degree of identification of a worker with the work organisation, measured by the way he/she is defined in terms of the characteristics of the organisation (Cox and Tung, 1997), MNC with an organisational culture that strongly integrates the national culture of the country of origin reconfigure the processes of identity construction of the workers, who, by nationality, do not share that same culture. It is possible that the recognition of self and

the construction of meaning is stronger for workers who feel close to the dominant national culture.

Poster's study (2007) on the Indian call-centre workers of American MNC gives a clear example of how the intensification of international business activities are contributing to the redefinition of identities. In these work contexts, located in India but responsible for the client support services of American companies, the author identified concrete strategies of "national identity control": workers are required to shape their national identity and, in some cases lie about it, specifically through the adoption of American names, the masking of their Indian accent or the learning of American mannerisms in order to draw closer to American culture (Poster, 2007: 273). According to the author, by incorporating the cultural components of a country into another national context, MNC have introduced a new set of effects on identity construction, which can be placed between the global homogenisation of identities, especially towards their "Americanisation", on the one hand, and the fragmentation or renegotiation of identities in cases of resistance, on the other (Poster, 2007).

But these transfers do not always occur in the form of direct identity control at the individual level: it is possible to identify more refined organisational strategies to maintain a certain national culture as the predominant point of reference in a specific organisational setting. One case is the use of nationality as a facilitator for career progression – it is well known that some companies still tend to grant positions of trust primarily to their own national professionals; another is the adoption by some companies of their country of origin's language as the main working language (Tung 1993, Cascio 1986). When expanding business activities to other countries, a company is often required to adapt its *modus operandi* to different legal and institutional frameworks, while still transferring some of its inner structures and procedures. In this process, certain elements

of the national culture in the company's country of origin may also be transferred and imposed on local employees, leading to a reverse adaptation process (Luo 2016). In cases where a company's country of origin is associated with a public image that is beneficial to the company, the use of nationality as a marketing strategy is also common.

The fact of considering the complexity and diversity of the notions of culture does not imply, however, neglect of the existence of common shared elements between individuals. The same holds true in the definition of culture in academic research, which counts with a certain degree of shared understanding between authors (see for e.g. Doherty, 2000). As D'Iribarne points out in this debate, there is still "something" that is shared by citizens of the same country (2009: 312), and this can still be called national culture even in increasingly diverse contexts. This is the idea that seems to underlie the organisational strategy of the company we are presenting here, which, though strongly internationalised, still promotes an image that is visibly rooted in concrete notions about its country of origin. In our article, we look at how this culture is perceived by managers of two different countries.

Methodology

The analysis was based on a case study carried out in the Swedish origin MNC IKEA, and in its Portuguese subsidiary.

As a company, IKEA needs little introduction. Operating in the retail sector, it has over 50 years' history, 315 stores in 27 countries and around 140,000 employees (IKEA, 2017a). Often presented as an example of fast and significant internationalisation (Korsgaard, Rask and Lauring 2007), the company started expanding to other countries in the 1960s. The organisational structure of the multinational group is rather complex, involving a number of countries and ownership relations that are hard to define. Today,

three main business groups form IKEA: the IKEA group, the Inter IKEA group and the IKANO group. In our study, research was focused on the first, which is responsible for the stores and the general definition of the company's strategy and overall orientation. The organisational structure does not vary significantly between countries. All national units have a country manager who is responsible for the departments (finance, HR, marketing, expansion and stores). Generally, every store is organised around the areas of sales, logistics, communication, customer relations, food and HR. They each report to the store manager.

One of our reasons for choosing this multinational group to carry out the study was its strict and well known standardisation of products, procedures and practices, which are presented by the company as resulting from the "Swedish heritage". In terms of human resources practices, in which it attempts to enhance the workers' well-being, the company has been able to develop an internal climate based on institutionalised practices that aim to reduce hierarchical barriers. For instance, the use of academic titles is restricted in daily interpersonal relations and most employees wear uniform regardless of their hierarchical position.

The organisational case study took place in one of the IKEA stores in Portugal and in two IKEA stores in Sweden. In-depth interviews were held with 16 managers (heads of department and section managers). We focused on managers in the assumption that they play a central role in the process of transmitting and maintaining an organisational culture (see Robbins, 1989). Seven interviews were held in Portugal, where all interviewees had Portuguese nationality, and nine interviews took place in Sweden, where eight interviewees had Swedish nationality and one had British nationality. We managed to obtain a certain gender balance, as well as some homogeneity regarding age

(average: 32 years). Most managers had been working in the company for two or three years.

Following a semi-structured model, the interviews started with an open question, where interviewees were asked to talk about their personal and professional lives, educational trajectories and previous work experiences. References to the connection between organisational and national cultures appeared spontaneously in most of the interviews, not only when the interviewees were reflecting about their present work lives, but also when they were mentioning previous work experiences or ideas about living and working in different countries. In the cases where the topic of culture was not fully developed, the interviewees were asked to expose their visions on the rationale for concrete practices as well as general ideas about ways of working and living in their home country and in other countries. After the full transcription of the interviews, the data was thematically categorised and analysed.

The labour markets of Portugal and Sweden, the chosen countries for this research, present significant differences. Sweden usually represents a northern European model of societal organisation, with an ideally universal system of social security, industrial relations that are strongly centralised and independent of the state, generally high educational levels for the working population, a fair distribution of income, and low levels of social inequality within the European framework. In contrast, Portugal usually embodies a southern European model, which includes an under-protective system of social security, an industrial relations model that is still centralised and state-dependent, significant levels of lowly educated workers on the labour market, and one of the highest levels of social inequality in Europe. A comparison between countries with this degree of dissimilarity was considered appropriate for the research objectives and, as we will

explain further in this article, these differences were associated by the interviewees with broader conceptions about the ways of working in the two countries.

“Swedishness” at work. Perceived cultural transfers amongst managers in Portugal and in Sweden

At IKEA, it was around the 1970s that the concern over organisational culture started to be noted. In 1976, Ingvar Kamprad, the company founder, wrote “A furniture dealer’s testament” (Torekull, 1998), a document stating the principles and values of the company. This document became the manual for the internal training sessions aimed at forming “cultural agents”, who would be responsible for spreading the message to their colleagues (Bartlett and Nanda 1990). The socialisation of the workers in an organisation is directly related to the implicit and explicit learning (Reber, 1993, *in* Chao 1997) of a set of elements in the organisation’s life: how to do the job, who’s who within the company, who has the power, and what the objectives, values and history of the organisation are (Chao *et al.*, 1994). At IKEA, this learning process is carried out at specific points in a worker’s trajectory in the company, such as in recruitment or training and in the culture promotion campaigns that generally take place every five years in all units of the group (Korsgaard, Rask and Lauring, 2007).

When recruiting, some companies apply the strategy of hiring individuals who share their values, on the assumption that many professionals could fulfil the technical skills required for the job but only few would fit the company’s culture. Following this strategy, IKEA implements a “cultural fit quiz”, available at its website, where potential candidates can assess how far they would adapt.

In its daily activities, the company commonly uses stories and rituals to reproduce its culture and encourage the learning of its way of operating. Symbols are also important

in these processes of cultural transmission. These are used to reflect the organisation's culture, values or internalised norms (Rafaeli and Worline, 1999). The symbols at IKEA are learnt in a very explicit way, with the help of manuals specially created to disseminate and explain them. Some of these symbols can be perceived by external observers as well, particularly the company colours, which have been the same as the Swedish flag since 1983.

According to the official view of the company, two crucial elements have determined IKEA's success: the business idea and the organisational culture (Anders Dahlvig, IKEA's former CEO, Kling and Goteman, 2003: 35). Specific assumptions about the Swedish national culture contribute to the articulation of these two aspects and are present in the daily life of the company. On the one hand, the business idea is strongly based on the promotion of a "Nordic life style" (Korsgaard, Rask and Luring, 2007: 2), integrating elements of Swedish history and culture. For many years, the organisational strategy was highly oriented towards the preservation of 'what is Swedish'. Until the 1990s, for example, the managers in all countries were encouraged to learn Swedish in order to reach a better understanding of the organisational culture and make progress in their careers (Korsgaard, Rask and Luring, 2007). The company's branding is also strongly based on the presence of Swedish symbols, used as tools to promote an analogy between the supposed quality of its products and the "quality" of Sweden as a country, in particular regarding its social model, the internationalisation of its companies and the quality of the products (Zarkada-Fraser 2001). On IKEA's webpage it is possible to find these statements:

"The IKEA concept, like its founder, was born in Småland. This is a part of southern Sweden where the soil is thin and poor. The people are famous for

working hard, living on slender means and using their heads to make the best possible use of the limited resources they have. This way of doing things is at the heart of the IKEA approach to keeping prices low. But quality is not compromised for the sake of cost. Sweden has an international reputation for safety and quality you can rely on, and IKEA retailers take pride in offering the right quality in all situations.” [IKEA, 2017a]

Since branding is strongly present in recruitment and pervades the worker’s trajectory in the company, this relationship between organisational and national culture obviously appears in the discourses of our interviewees. Other aspects, such as each product’s Nordic name, the typical Swedish food in the store’s restaurants and the celebration of *midsommar* in all of the company’s units, stimulate a certain type of “Swedish presence” in the countries where the company operates. This strong connection is embedded in preconceived ideas about Swedish ways of working. In our study, Portuguese interviewees systematically associated some of the internal practices of the company with its Swedish origin, contrasting them with what they considered were typically Portuguese ways of working. This was especially evident regarding work organisation and time management. Swedish management style was seen as being practical and time-effective, while its Portuguese counterpart was considered rigid and bureaucratic. The importance of avoiding these “typically Portuguese” ways of working was even pointed out to support the need for a more “international” workforce in the Portuguese subsidiary. In this regard it is important to note that, at the time of our study, 91,5% of the Portuguese company workforce was composed by Portuguese nationals, while in Sweden, the proportion of Swedish nationals was slightly inferior (84% and 87% in each store).

“I think it would be a waste if we started to “aportuguesar” [make Portuguese] the company in terms of working time, for example (...). Today we only have two stores and this culture is alive but when we have six or seven, maybe we won’t know each other that well, maybe we won’t have as many foreigners as we have today working here, maybe we’ll have more Portuguese, we have to be careful. We have to maintain this culture alive, this Nordic culture, alive. (...) Usually when I’m at work, I’m working. This is how the Swedes work. We don’t waste any time. Because we are very informal, we have meetings of five or ten minutes. We leave the meeting room and things start to happen immediately. We don’t have that formality, all those rules... we are anti-bureaucratic.” [Hugo, department manager, PT]

“This is a Swedish company. We have a lot of foreigners. It is good that we are not only Portuguese and have other cultures around. So, we arrive early, have lunch early and leave early. In other companies, and I know from experience, there is this tendency to start working later, instead of arriving at 8am, arriving at 9 or 10, and then, obviously, you can’t do everything by 6pm, so you stay until 7 or 8.” [Linda, store manager, PT]

Following the company’s approach regarding the association of Sweden with high quality standards, managers tend to assume quite openly that there is a common impression about Sweden that needs to be preserved and disseminated.

“We have to reinforce the quality profile that exists in Swedish culture. Usually we tend to associate the Swedish and Nordic populations with something of quality (...) I have to transmit what we call the “Swedishness”, which means, transmitting this idea of developed countries, which have greater quality, so that people can associate this quality with the company.” [Hugo, department manager, PT]

But the relationship between supposed Swedish cultural elements and the company’s practices was also present in other areas. For example, the company’s practices in seeking to obtain an egalitarian and gender-balanced workforce and promoting a good balance between work and family were explained as a cultural inheritance and a way of drawing the employees’ living and working patterns closer to those in Sweden. The company presents itself as a family-friendly employer, implementing policies of flexible working hours, allowing for part-time work and facilitating the articulation of work with personal life. The company also offers a symbolic gift each time a worker has a child. In Portugal, the company gives workers the possibility of extending parental leave beyond what is set out in law, as well as providing a financial benefit on the birth of a child and establishing protocols with nearby kindergartens so that workers can enjoy better prices or better conditions of access. Some of these practices are internalised as being strongly associated with preconceived ideas about work and life in Sweden and the Nordic countries.

In the interviews with the Swedish workers, the relationship between the company and the national culture was not always associated with a typically Swedish way of working. Some of the company’s internal practices, for example regarding time management, were also common in other companies in Sweden, so they were often

omitted in these professionals' narratives. At the same time, some of these managers had previous work experience in Swedish companies with very different practices from IKEA's, in particular regarding the support for family life.

“Before joining IKEA I was working as a manager in a bakery and I felt that that employer wasn't as good as I had hoped. The working conditions were not good and the company only looked to their own good and not to the wellness of their employees. (...) I had two colleagues that were a couple and when their kid was sick they weren't allowed to stay at home with the sick child. That's not a healthy environment and that's also breaking the law. These things kept happening and that created an environment where people were not happy”.

[Elsa, department manager, SW]

This weakens the argument that these practices are common to all or most Swedish companies. Consequently, the references to Swedish culture in the interviews with Swedish workers came up in a more symbolic manner, with the association of the brand with the country's history:

“There is this lovely example... a kid was jumping on the couches and a worker said “Please, don't do that”, and the father said, “I don't pay my taxes not to be able to jump on couches.” “Yes, but we're not a government company. We're private.” This shows how connected to IKEA the Swedish people are.”

[Ebba, store section manager, SW]

Discussion and conclusions

The company that we have presented can be regarded as a typical case of the integration of a national culture into the culture of an organisation. Its organisational approach to culture started to develop in the process of internationalisation, spurred on by the impulse of organisational culture studies appearing around the 1970s. Consequently, the brand has always been associated with the Swedish national culture and has been able to benefit from the good image that Sweden has acquired in terms of economic growth – in particular with the proliferation of international businesses – and social development, specifically by the establishment of a universal social model. This ‘marketing of the national model’ is frequently used not only as an instrument to disseminate products and services but also a tool to transfer internal practices. Workers from all the countries where the company operates have frequent contact with some of the elements of the organisational culture that are presented as typically Swedish.

Our results show, firstly, how the link between national and organisational culture is strongly incorporated into the public image of the company, particularly by the way the company presents itself to the general public, whether through its Swedish symbols or explicit association with Sweden in the presentation of its history, products and business. Secondly, we were able to confirm the association of some of the company’s practices with a supposed Swedish way of organising work, which is especially present in the discourse of the non-Swedes and presented as contrasting with different ways of working in other countries. In our specific case, practical, open, informal methods of management and control, together with a concern for the workers’ personal lives and families, were associated with a Swedish working culture, while hierarchical and bureaucratic practices and long hours were assumed to be typically Portuguese ways of working. Consequently, culture was regarded as a rationale for the adoption of certain work practices. Finally, through an analysis of the managers’ discourses, we could confirm the strong assimilation

of the interconnection between national and organisational cultures. Both the Portuguese and the Swedish interviewees recognise a close association between the Swedish and the organisational culture in the company, though the Portuguese tend to manifest the “Swedishness” of the organisation more strongly than their Swedish colleagues.

Instead of a process of cultural negotiation, resistance, or national identity control, this case shows a rather articulated relationship between the founding culture, in this case Swedish, and that of the host country, Portugal. While some organisational practices are justified as being associated to specific Swedish ways of functioning, cultural elements of the host country, namely the working language or the national festivities in Portugal, remain preserved. In fact, IKEA seems to be a case of cultural integration, with what Cox and Tung (1997) identified as the attraction to a culture, in this case Swedish, with a degree of preservation of the cultures of the other countries, in particular regarding language, food or national holidays. This attraction lies in a formalised organisational strategy that uses specific elements of a national culture as a unifier and as a tool to strengthen the organisational culture among the different workplaces in the world. The association of the company with its Swedish origins, especially by the non-Swedish workers, though also by the Swedes themselves, reveals part of the strategy’s effectiveness. Given that the image of Sweden as a developed country and model to follow persists in broad sectors of European public opinion, we were able to observe that the assimilation of these Swedish cultural elements is positively accepted by the Portuguese managers, even functioning as an element of social distinction from other companies and workers in the country. This is not surprising, especially if we consider that the work practices presented as Swedish are mostly beneficial to the Portuguese workers.

Together with these processes of cultural integration, our study opens up the discussion of particular processes of identity redefinition in the hosting countries. According to the narratives of the Portuguese managers, there was a clear adoption of a perceived “Swedishness” in their work practices.

Our case is a good example of the association between national and organisational cultures, but this strong combination only works for the benefit of the company due to a set of structural patterns that Sweden, as a country, enjoys. This is true for marketing purposes, but also for the acceptance of these cultural elements by non-Swedish workers, especially in less developed national contexts.

The use of a supposed Swedish lifestyle as an instrument for branding and marketing purposes comes as an acknowledgement of its effectiveness in today’s global markets. In fact, several organisations, in different sectors of activity, often use the social representations and the historical background of their country’s national culture to promote and market their products. This is the case, for instance, of the car industry in Germany, or the wine sector in Italy. Design is surely one of the industries for which the Scandinavian countries are best known, and for that reason, the strategic association between the country of origin and the quality of the company’s products is not surprising. However, when this rationale is used to justify organisational practices, its acceptance is highly dependent on the different positions of power, whether economic, political or symbolic, between the countries involved.

Portugal and Sweden represent two different models of institutional functioning and economic development within the European context and in the global economic market as well. The reputation of the Swedish design sector and the history of internationalization of Swedish companies give this organisation undeniable authority regarding business implementation. Moreover, the levels of socioeconomic development

of the country, which include the general functioning of the labour market, but also work organisation and working conditions, legitimate, to a large extent, the implementation of certain organisational practices.

The positive acceptance of the company's "Swedishness" by Portuguese managers and its use as a mechanism of social distinction in relation to other companies operating in Portugal, contrasts with the normality of their execution in the Swedish establishment. Although the Swedes recognize the association between their country's national culture and the history of the company, the justification of the organisation's internal practices as "typically Swedish" is easily deconstructed in their discourses, through references to previous work experiences in Swedish companies with significantly different practices. This underlines the strategic dimension of the uses of culture in organisations, but also the relevance of studying country-specific cases to understand variation in the processes of cultural exchange. We were thus able to emphasise the importance of context in the analysis of the processes of culture formation, transmission, dissemination and reception in multinational settings, contributing with a specific case for which the history and characteristics of the company and of the countries involved are crucial, namely the unequal power relations grounded in the countries' material and symbolic circumstances.

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