Gender and Diversity in the Workplace: Introduction to the special issue

Research on gender and diversity has taken longer than usual to develop in Portuguese academia. Different explanations can be provided for the apparent lack of interest in these matters. Comparative cultural studies have depicted Portuguese culture as scoring high on femininity (Hofstede, 1991). «Femininity pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap» (p. 82) and it may have an influence on people's attitudes towards 'the other' and the role of men and women in the organisation, and in shaping the individual's behaviour and attitudes towards equality and diversity. On the other hand, Portuguese society likes to portray itself as a homogenous society (Cabral-Cardoso, 2002). Taken together, these factors may partly explain why gender and diversity issues have failed to make it to the top of research agendas in Portuguese academia. The limited number of papers included in this special issue and focusing on the Portuguese context still reflects that state of affairs.

Overlooking gender and diversity matters is not a specific feature of Portuguese research in organisational behaviour and management. Traditional management theories have assumed a homogeneous workforce. Taylor is the usual target of such criticism but, to be fair, that viewpoint was shared by most of the 'founding fathers' of management and organisation studies. Taking into account individual differences was perhaps the most important contribution brought to management by organisational behaviour. However, much of the empirical research and theorising conducted within the framework of organisational behaviour was, in fact, about men and their work, though presented as gender neutral. 'Gender blind' is perhaps a better description, meaning that gender was not taken into account. And the same could be said about other diversity dimensions.

Management has been portrayed as a masculine concept. «Practically all organisational behaviour, analysis, and theory is about the male world. The topics that preoccupy it are topics which preoccupy men – power, leadership, technology, stress, the world of the (mainly male) manager and the work he does…» (Wilson, 1999: 2). By default, the manager is supposed to be a man. A white man, that is.

In the last decade, attention to gender issues in organisational behaviour became apparent. «No longer can all textbooks be described as gender blind, although many remain gender myopic», admits Wilson (2001: 5). Regardless of the way gender is conceptualised, an increasing proportion of scholars have, in fact, managed to integrate the gender perspective into their OB research frame-

works. In some cases, overdoing it and falling in the trap of 'gender reductionism' when «everything becomes a matter of gender and not much else» (Alvesson & Billing, 1997: 13). The risk of gender over-sensitivity is real particularly when research is geared towards advancing the political agenda at the expense of academic respectability. But one has to acknowledge that political neutrality is a rather questionable standpoint in social research, even more so in gender studies. Gender research is inherently a political project. «Gender research (…) intervenes in the negotiation of how gender is understood and thus in the (re)production of gender relations in society» (Alvesson & Billing, 1997: 11). On the other hand, attempts to undervalue gender issues in organisational settings have also been made suggesting that male and female individuals should be treated as 'individuals'. Such a perspective has gained some ground particularly in contexts where praising diversity has become trendy among academics and practitioners.

In the management literature, concern for diversity is relatively new. The management of diversity has emerged in the nineties trying to emphasise the difference between individuals rather than suppressing it. It reflects to some extent the neo-liberal and post-modernist reaction against the view of organisations as made of homogeneous groups assumed by equal opportunities and affirmative actions approaches that had prevailed since the sixties. The management of diversity takes into account the multiple identities in the workplace and takes better advantage of the growing cultural pluralism that results from the internationalisation of business organisations, the development of world markets, the growing workforce mobility, and the increasing awareness of individual differences.

In the diversity perspective, the individual is seen first of all as an individual and not as a member of a social group. The contribution of each and every individual to the organisation is valued for his/her own merit regardless of sex, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation or religious faith. In an increasingly globalised society where collectivist values have been replaced by individualism, such a view has found the right ground to grow and soon became part of the mainstream. Its popularity among the business community comes from the assumption and increasing empirical evidence that valuing diversity may become a source of competitive advantage, increase the quality of organisational life and ultimately be good for business (Cassell, 2000).

The business case for diversity deserves obvious attention, and mainstreaming gender and diversity issues represent a considerable challenge to management practices in general and particularly to human resource management. But reducing questions that ultimately lay in the human rights sphere to their managerial dimension is a dangerous path to pursue.

The papers included in the current issue of **Comportamento Organizacional e Gestão** cover a wide range of topics and contexts and are, in a sense, representative of the diversity of theoretical and methodological traditions in the field. The papers differ in approach and focus but taken as a whole, they illustrate the relevance and richness of the contribution of organisational behaviour to the study of gender and diversity.

A reference was made above to the importance of context when studying gender and diversity. In the first paper, *Elisabeth Wilson* stresses the contextual nature of these issues examining the different meaning of equality and diversity across cultures. Five countries in four different continents are used in this comparative study.

The second paper by *Jeff Hearn* and *Wendy Parkin* is a critical view of the very concept of 'gendered organisation' and how it has been understood and conceptualised since the seventies.

Two other papers address gender issues at the management level. In one case, by *Janne Tienari and colleagues*, an attempt is made to deconstruct the gender equality discourse that appears to prevail in Nordic countries. In the other paper, by Caroline Essers, the experience of ethnic minority female entrepreneurs in the Netherlands is examined. Once again, the relevance of context is apparent.

The next three papers cross the work-nonwork boundaries to look at what goes on behind the scenes and its implications in the workplace. The 'unspoken work' of managers' female partners is the topic addressed by *Cristina Reis*. The lack of research in this topic is a good illustration of how the literature has mainly focused on the male world while neglecting the other key players. Gender differences in perceptions of work-family conflict are examined by *Ana Maria Pinto*, drawing on results from a Portuguese study. The third paper, by *Gina Santos* and *C. Cabral-Cardoso* looks at the importance of work-family relationships in academic careers.

The last paper, by *Jim Barry, Elisabeth Berg* and *John Chandler* stays in the academic context and addresses the gender implications of the managerial reforms that have been introduced in higher-education. The U.K. and Swedish contexts are analysed in the paper, but similar questions could be raised in other countries where legislation along the same lines is being put forward. Portuguese readers of this issue will appreciate the warnings!

As expected, the papers included in this Special Issue illustrate the diversity of topics, frameworks and methodologies that are available in the field. They also confirm that organisational behaviour can give an important contribution to the understanding of issues of gender of diversity. **Comportamento Organizacional e Gestão** hopes to inspire its readers to take these issues further and present new contributions to the study of gender and diversity in the workplace.

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CARLOS CABRAL-CARDOSO