

The Organizational Dynamics of the Catholic Church in the field of social care.

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Abstract

This article aims to present reflexive questions on the identities of charitable Organizations, taking into consideration the relationship between values and principles of its complex nature and the models and management process, as well as the impact of introducing professional practices in a field staked out by charity.

Taking as main theoretical reference the Theory of Structurion of Anthony Giddens (2000), the concept of “agency” was used through qualitative research methodologies to try to characterize and to understand the models and their organizational dynamics and the ways of action of Social Workers operating in the scope of the Parish Social Centers in Lisbon.

This way we found a complex field of organisational models where there is an implicit tension caused by autocratic models of management based on a moral conception of the social problems and a logic of exercise of the power that generates spaces which are non propitious for participated and reflective processes of decision; a non reflexive “agency”, based in a professional autonomy more subordinated than critical, very constrained by factors and characteristics of the structures.

Keywords

Organizational Dynamics, Catholic Church, “Agency”, Reflexivity, Charity, Social Care, Social Work.

Theoretical issues

As mentioned before the main theoretical reference was the Theory of Structuration of Anthony Giddens (2000), the concept of agency was used through qualitative research methodologies to try to characterize and to understand the models and their organizational dynamics and the ways of action of Social Workers operating in the scope of the Parish Social Centers in Lisbon.

Based on the principle that “*Agent*” and “*Structure*” have a dialectic relation (Giddens, 2000), the goal was to understand the way the organizational dynamics of Parish Social Centers are processed as Organizations of great relevance in the field of Catholic social care in Portugal. Here, action is in accordance with the following values and underlying principles: Social Justice, Charity towards the Person considered as the “beginning, individual and aim” of the action, universality and subsidiarity (Conferência Episcopal Portuguesa, 1997:22; Encíclica "Centesimus Annus" in Stilwell, 2002).

So, we have two main arguments:

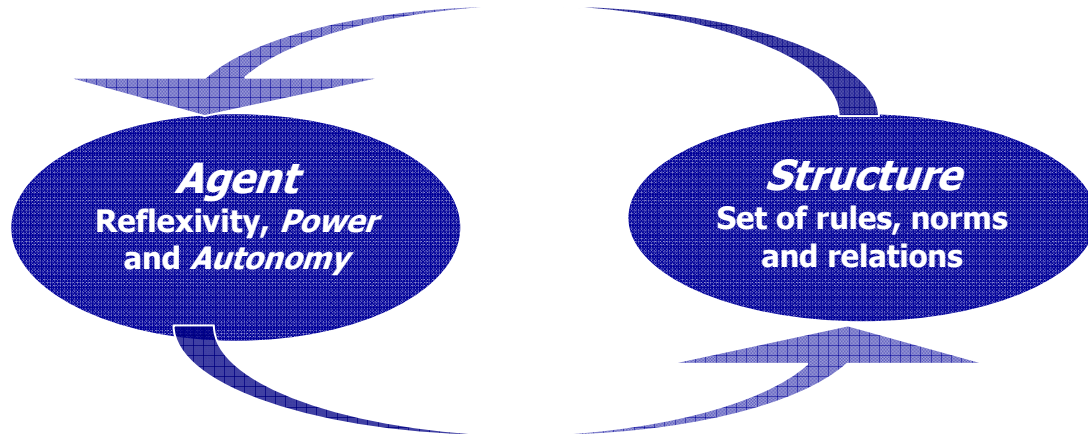
- The organizational dynamics, which is characterized predominantly as a “monocratic” model of administration, has strong influences and limits on the Agency of the Professional;
- The professionals have responsibility in the practical and reflexive orientation of their own professional *agency* between possibilities and constraints of the structures;

To clarify some concepts it is important to refer that for this research, by *Agency* we understand the “*Continuous flow of the behaviour*” – the “*vector of the professional action in a structuralized totality that organizes and it materializes in institutions (...)*” (Giddens, 2000; Nunes, 2004).

And by *structure*, we understand the set of rules, norms or set of transformational relations and simultaneously condition and result of the agent’s *agency*; which is simultaneously a factor of constraint and possibility of the professional agency (Giddens, 2000; Nunes, 2004).

As Giddens refers, “*Agent*” and “*Structure*” have and live in a dialectic relationship (Giddens, 2000), and in other words, the professional, namely the Social Worker, “*acts simultaneously in a world of citizens and systems, therefore it acts submitted by contingencies*” (Andrade, 2001).

For this reason, it was important to observe the professional agency dimensions like *reflexivity*, the use of the *power* and the professional *autonomy*. This is important because to become a reflexive professional it is necessary, at least, to permanently test the relation between our theoretical principles and the results of our action. It is also necessary to have feedback from colleagues and users of the services. On the other hand, it is relevant to know that the *power* can generate dependence and/or autonomy - the most autonomous agent has dependence relations; the most dependent agent has always some kind of autonomy (Giddens, 2000; Nunes, 2004). As a consequence, in this analysis it was very important to look at the professional autonomy as a process and not as a result to reach; a process built by the professional in action, assuming its role as a permanent reflective practitioner (Nunes, 2004).



Summing up, we can say that to be reflective, autonomous and a powered agent, it implies to know to act, to want to act and to be able to act. And this is very relevant because this kind of agent, or the contrary, can legitimate or can change the logics of action into the organizational environment.

In this approach to organizational dynamics, the main reference point was the work of Jean Afchain who basically considers Organizations to be fundamentally constituted by

three systems: the Organizational System, the Institutional and Political System and the System of Values, proposing a notion of Social Action Organization (Jean Afchain, 2001). This author offers us a very interesting typology to look at the organisations based on the kind of the Organisational Project they possess.

For this purpose, the type of leader, the power structure, the decision and evaluation process, organizational projects, the existence of opportunities for training and reflection and the impact of the more individual dynamics on the action of the different agents nominated Social Workers were all subject of analysis.

Methodology

We can say that our methodology was based on a “combination strategy” between qualitative and quantitative data. But data collection was fundamentally carried out by a “*case study*” methodology.

The cases were selected for their importance to the context and this selection was based in a set of criteria: to be known as organisations with good practices; significant dimension of human resources (professionals and volunteers); the kind of services offered and the geographic scope of this investigation was the Dioceses of Lisbon.

Techniques such as interviews and observation were the main resources used. We did 12 open and not programmed “standardized” interviews. This type of interview consists of a set of questions minimally ordered and set in a very similar form for two types of interviewees, but with free and open answers (Bericat, 1998; Valles, 1999).

To begin with, a set of exploratory interviews we made to privileged interlocutors. After that 12 interviews were carried out – 6 leaders (Priests and laypeople) and 6 social workers (the professional with more experience in the organisation). For analysis of the confrontation of the speeches we opted for a qualitative analysis methodology with MaxQda program. To have a better knowledge of this field, we had tried to analyse some statistic data but this same kind of data was neither updated nor trustworthy.

Some results to final considerations

The Social Centers in Portugal are very recent organisations (the first one was created in 1935) and represent around 25% of the universe of the “*Instituições Particulares de Solidariedade Social*”. This universe of organisations represents at the moment 4% of the National Product. They support around 85% of the people who need some kind of care or help and the main activities are focused on child and elder care, with a low level of innovation.

As set of results, a range of aspects were identified:

- tension and dissonance relative to the purpose and Mission of this type of Organization, which extends from charitable action as a reflection of the nature and values of the Catholic Church to a conception that defines this organisational type as lenders of services in a market logic acting in response to the self-financing requirements,
- tense and ambiguous relations with the Government,
- some kind of ambiguity between the definition of the Mission and the organisational objectives,
- low rotation and alternation levels and poor democratic participation in the election process as well as in the internal decision process, of course delimited, in general, by a vertical organizational structure as much in form as in content,
- a moral vision of social problems by leaders, incompatible with the professional execution,
- management models, in which planning and evaluation are not greatly valued to those increasing a logic of exercising power that generates non propitious spaces to reflective and participative decision making processes,
- a low level of innovation and low levels of internal and external participation,
- A non-reflexive *professional agency*, characterized by a subordinated, more than critical, autonomy and with a weak evaluation of the legitimate and possessed power; an *agency* strongly limited by the characteristics of the structures,

- This type of *agency* marked by: a low professional investment in spaces of training and individual and collective reflection; the predominance of individual strategies of action and negotiation and not as a collective force; an insufficient reflection and preparation to understand the organisational dynamics while an action space, and an unmotivated behaviour.

Final Considerations

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, we are thinking about a specific organisational environment, with a culture and history marked by a set of values and principles very close to the Christian charity values. We saw very vertical structures of management marked by a very personalized style in non-participative contexts of work, and with some traces of ambiguity about its Mission and about its relationship with other organisations, namely, the public services and the Government. On the other hand, we saw, in general, a non-reflexive *professional agency*.

So, the question is “Why does this happen? And how can these kind of organisations grow up and rise some different models of management without losing their natural Mission and values?”

In our opinion there is a very favourable set of factors to legitimate the *status quo* but not propitious to innovate and to increase more adequate services to the people who they serve. As Afchain says they are more “*administrative organisations*” than true “*social care organisations*”. They need to introduce, very quickly, some new instruments of management, but with a big and necessary care because they aren’t normal enterprises, and they have a specific nature and a specific mission.

One problem can be the “*dialogue of deaf but not dumb people*” because we have two sets of *agents* with different types of discourse. In other words we can conclude about the existence, at least, of two different logics of action. On the one hand, we have the leaders, in general Priests, who have a set of values, principles and practices and who expect from the professionals some kind of behaviour based on love, compromise, mission and voluntarism. On the other hand, we have the professionals, namely, Social

Workers, who have a very “*technician*”, and some times very common sense discourse, with a more “*submitted*” than “*critical*” *agency*.

Furthermore, they haven’t (leaders and professionals) a significant set of skills to manage this kind of organisations in the present context with the present challenges.

For the future, it is necessary to study more deeply these *logics of action*, because we believe that they have very complementary aspects extraordinarily important to increase some innovator models of management in this field of charity organisations. Maybe based on “*love*” and “*donation*” they can go further because the concept of “Person” confers another sense to the action. But, at the same time, with an action more based on “*Justice*”, they can have a less *assistencialist* practice than in the past.

Maybe it is necessary to rethink the present *social economy* concept to increase a *solidarity economy* concept based on a *non-equivalent reciprocity practice*. In this sense it is necessary to implement more participative and dialectic models of management, based on: the true Mission of this field; a *servant leadership* model, using new instruments of management, after carefully adapted; and where the different kinds of stakeholders have their place and their participation to a common goal, to the common good, after all to have individual and collective fulfilled happy Persons.

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