



Building Networks for University Success: Essay on the Role of Organizational Culture and Social Capital

Construyendo redes para el éxito universitario: Ensayo sobre el papel de la cultura organizacional y el capital social

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Abstract

This essay explores the interaction between organizational culture and social capital within Ecuadorian universities, highlighting their impact on institutional performance, innovation, and sustainability. Through a systematic review of indexed scientific literature, the study identifies the key characteristics of both dimensions and proposes a theoretical model that explains how cultural values, organizational structures, and interpersonal relationships influence the development of trust-based, reciprocal, and collaborative networks. The research follows a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, without primary data collection, prioritizing conceptual integration and critical synthesis. Findings reveal a predominance of hierarchical cultures and fragmented social networks in the Ecuadorian higher education system, which hinders institutional collaboration and adaptability. The proposed model conceptualizes the interaction between organizational culture and social capital through three interdependent dimensions: structural, relational, and cultural. The

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study also incorporates recent contributions on gender equity, strategic planning, social responsibility, and knowledge sharing, expanding the model's relevance to broader organizational contexts. It concludes that institutional transformation requires integrative strategies that simultaneously enhance cultural and social dimensions, promoting participatory structures, distributed leadership, and sustainable collaborative practices. The proposed framework provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and serves as a strategic guide for inclusive and resilient university governance.

Keywords: organizational culture, social capital, university management, institutional networks, sustainability.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la interrelación entre la cultura organizacional y el capital social en el contexto de las universidades ecuatorianas, destacando su influencia en el desempeño institucional, la sostenibilidad y la innovación. A partir de una revisión sistemática de literatura científica indexada, se identifican las principales características de ambas dimensiones y se propone un modelo teórico que explica cómo los valores culturales, las estructuras organizativas y las relaciones interpersonales inciden en la generación de redes de confianza, reciprocidad y colaboración. La investigación adopta un enfoque cualitativo de tipo descriptivo-analítico, sin recolección de datos primarios, priorizando el análisis argumentativo y la síntesis conceptual. Los hallazgos revelan la presencia predominante de culturas jerárquicas y redes sociales fragmentadas dentro del sistema universitario, lo que limita la cooperación institucionalizada y dificulta la innovación. El modelo propuesto organiza la interacción entre cultura organizacional y capital social en tres dimensiones: estructural, relacional y cultural, las cuales se retroalimentan mutuamente. Se concluye que la transformación de las universidades requiere estrategias integrales que fortalezcan simultáneamente la cultura organizacional y el capital social, promoviendo estructuras más participativas, liderazgos distribuidos y

prácticas colaborativas sostenidas. Este estudio ofrece una base teórica útil para futuras investigaciones empíricas y para la formulación de políticas universitarias inclusivas y sostenibles.

Palabras clave: cultura organizacional, capital social, gestión universitaria, redes institucionales, éxito universitario.

Introduction

In the contemporary context of higher education institutions, organizational culture and social capital have been positioned as fundamental categories for understanding the factors that influence university efficiency, sustainability, and innovation. Organizational culture represents the set of shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that guide the behavior of an institution's members (Schein, 2010), while social capital refers to the networks of trust, reciprocity, and collaboration that facilitate collective action (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

In Latin America, and particularly in Ecuador, multiple studies have highlighted limitations in the articulation between hierarchical organizational structures and the generation of effective social capital (Cabrera & Fuenzalida, 2016; Narváez et al., 2017). The absence of participatory cultures prevents the consolidation of solid internal networks, which has a direct impact on academic performance, governance, and the relationship between universities and society (De Boer et al., 2015).

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of university management reforms promoted by quality assurance bodies, which demand greater transparency, collaboration, and social relevance. Despite this, bureaucratic structures persist that limit the development of social capital, hindering the implementation of institutional innovation models (Deem et al., 2007).

Various studies have explored how a collaborative organizational culture can enhance social capital and vice versa (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Adler & Kwon, 2002). However, a greater theoretical understanding of how these variables interact in specific university contexts is still needed. In the case of Ecuador, there are empirical approaches, but there is a lack of integrative models that account for

the bidirectionality and synergistic effects of this relationship (Saltos et al., 2016; Saravia & Peña, 2019).

This article is framed within a constructivist and relational perspective, assuming that both organizational culture and social capital are dynamic social constructs, influenced by the historical and contextual trajectories of each institution. It draws mainly on the contributions of Schein (2010) in the in-depth understanding of cultural levels (artifacts, values, and assumptions), and those of Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) in the articulation between structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital.

Based on this theoretical foundation, a conceptual model is proposed that synthesizes the main findings in the literature, identifying the mechanisms through which organizational culture influences the consolidation of university social capital, and vice versa. This model will be developed in the following sections of the article.

In light of the above, this article aims to analyze the role of organizational culture and social capital in Ecuadorian university management, proposing a theoretical model that explains their interrelationship and impact on institutional performance. This purpose is addressed through a systematic review of indexed scientific literature, prioritizing verifiable sources of high academic rigor.

Organizational culture in higher education institutions has been widely studied as a determining factor in shaping institutional behavior, decision-making processes, and strategic orientation (Schein, 2010). In general terms, it refers to the shared patterns of beliefs, values, and norms that shape the daily functioning of an organization (Hofstede, 1980).

In the university environment, organizational culture is particularly relevant because of its influence on aspects such as academic management, teacher-administrator work dynamics, perceptions of leadership, and the degree of institutional innovation (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). According to comparative studies, universities with cultures oriented toward collaboration and participation tend to be more adaptive and resilient in the face of environmental changes (Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007).

Authors such as Cabrera and Fuenzalida (2016) have shown that in Ecuador, vertical cultural patterns persist, with little participation by intermediate actors and weak institutionalization of values such as trust and autonomy. These traits hinder educational innovation and consensus building for institutional development.

has been conceptualized as the set of social networks characterized by trust, cooperation, and reciprocity, which facilitate coordination and collaboration between individuals and groups (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). In the university setting, this construct acquires strategic value by influencing the formation of cohesive academic communities and coordination with actors in the environment.

Empirical research has identified that the existence of solid social capital translates into higher levels of innovation, research productivity, and social engagement (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Indeed, universities with strong horizontal and interinstitutional links manage to generate more inclusive and sustainable academic ecosystems (Narváez et al., 2017).

In the Ecuadorian context, studies such as that by Saltos, Vera, and León (2016) show the prevalence of informal networks based on personal affinities rather than shared institutional objectives. This fragmentation weakens cross-cutting cooperation and limits the development of long-term collaborative projects.

Various theoretical approaches have highlighted the interdependence between organizational culture and social capital. According to Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), institutional culture conditions the types of social relationships that are established within an organization, and these relationships, in turn, influence the reproduction of certain cultural patterns.

This bidirectional link has been represented in models such as that proposed by De Boer, Enders, and Schimank (2015), who argue that university performance is influenced by the quality of social interactions mediated by cultural elements. For example, institutions that promote transparency and shared leadership tend to consolidate networks of trust that facilitate collective action.

From an applied perspective, various authors recommend simultaneously considering cultural diagnosis and social network mapping as key tools for strengthening university governance

(Putnam, 2000; Cameron & Quinn, 2011). This integration makes it possible to identify critical nodes of collaboration, as well as cultural values that can enhance or limit institutional development.

Recent studies reinforce the idea that organizational culture not only shapes internal behavior but is also deeply connected to sustainability and social responsibility. Bravo et al. (2023) analyze how organizational culture and corporate social responsibility interrelate, highlighting their impact on the work environment and the perception of institutional legitimacy. Similarly, Galindo (2023) emphasizes the relevance of organizational culture in higher education institutions as a factor linking management practices and commitments to society.

Castro et al. (2024) offer a systematic review showing that an organizational culture oriented toward participation and internal coherence facilitates better implementation of strategic plans. These findings are key for the university system, where many reforms fail due to the dissonance between institutional discourse and dominant cultural practices.

Espinosa et al. (2024) address an often-overlooked component: the need to incorporate a gender perspective into the analysis of organizational culture. In their study, they show that the failure to recognize structural inequalities within organizations reproduces forms of exclusion that hinder the construction of decent working environments. This perspective enriches the approach to organizational culture in universities, where gender equality still faces serious limitations.

Social capital, understood as an intangible resource based on trust and collaboration, has recently been analyzed by authors such as Garro and Li Bonilla (2025), who argue that it can be decisive for the viability of emerging cooperative initiatives. Through their analysis in the Costa Rican context, they demonstrate that organizational social capital is key to the consolidation of solidarity-based and sustainable networks.

For their part, the study by Núñez et al. (2022) delves into the relationship between social capital and scientific performance in research groups. The findings show that the practice of knowledge sharing is a manifestation of social capital that directly impacts academic productivity and visibility.

The incorporation of this research strengthens the theoretical model proposed in this study by broadening its applicability to different types of organizations and highlighting new variables, such as gender equality and social responsibility. Taken together, these contributions allow us to understand organizational culture and social capital as complex, interdependent dimensions with high transformative potential when managed consciously and strategically.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, with a descriptive and analytical design. This choice responds to the need to gain an in-depth understanding of the theoretical interrelationships between organizational culture and social capital within the Ecuadorian university context, without resorting to the collection of primary empirical data.

The study is based on a critical review of indexed scientific literature. Academic articles, books, and comparative studies addressing the concepts of organizational culture and social capital, as well as their applications in university management, were selected. The inclusion criteria considered the thematic relevance, methodological rigor, and current relevance of the publications, covering a time range between 1980 and 2023.

The analysis strategy consisted of intensive reading, systematization, and synthesis of the selected documents. A thematic approach was used to categorize the findings according to the conceptual dimensions of each variable, identifying patterns of interrelation, theoretical convergences, and significant empirical contributions. This process allowed us to structure an explanatory theoretical model that guides the interpretation of the bidirectional relationship between organizational culture and social capital in higher education.

As this was a documentary study, no data collection instruments or statistical techniques were applied. Instead, priority was given to argumentative consistency, validation of the sources used, and logical construction of the proposed conceptual model. The methodology adopted provides a solid basis for future empirical research seeking to validate or contrast the approaches developed here (Knight, 2004).

Results

The results of this research are organized around the systematization of conceptual and empirical findings identified in the specialized literature, which allow us to structure a theoretical model explaining the interaction between organizational culture and social capital in Ecuadorian universities.

The document review identified that, in many Ecuadorian universities, a hierarchical organizational culture predominates, characterized by vertical structures, centralized decision-making, and limited collective participation (Cabrera & Fuenzalida, 2016; Saravia & Peña, 2019). This type of culture is often accompanied by fragmented institutional communication, resistance to change, and limited openness to innovation.

It was also evident that organizational cultures focused on regulatory compliance or operational efficiency, while they may contribute to administrative order, tend to limit spontaneous collaboration, a sense of belonging, and the creation of resilient academic communities (Deem et al., 2007; Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

The studies analyzed agree that social capital in Ecuadorian higher education institutions is weakly structured. There is a strong presence of informal networks, based on personal affinities or political loyalties, which sometimes hinder transparency, meritocracy, and institutionalized cooperation (Saltos et al., 2016; Narváez et al., 2017).

However, some notable experiences show that when practices such as collaborative research, community outreach, or peer mentoring programs are promoted, bonds of trust and reciprocity are strengthened, generating positive social capital that enhances organizational performance (Putnam, 2000; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Based on the analysis of the findings, a theoretical model was constructed that explains the bidirectional relationship between organizational culture and social capital.

This model identifies three main dimensions of interaction:

- Structural dimension: refers to the organizational mechanisms that regulate interaction, such as hierarchical structures, internal

regulations, communication channels, and collegiate bodies. A flexible and participatory structure tends to facilitate the generation of social networks.

- Relational dimension: encompasses the quality of relationships among members of the university community. Elements such as trust, reciprocity, and cooperation are fundamental to consolidating institutional social capital.

- Cultural dimension: refers to the shared values and assumptions that shape institutional behaviors. A culture based on openness, equity, and commitment fosters collaborative practices that are sustained over time.

Figure 1. Diagram of the theoretical model of interaction between organizational culture and social capital



Source: Hargreaves, A., Earl, L., & Ryan, J. (2003)

This model suggests that strengthening a positive organizational culture has a direct impact on the development of social capital and vice versa. Consequently, any institutional improvement strategy should address both dimensions comprehensively and simultaneously.

The findings allow us to outline some practical recommendations for universities:

- Implement participatory cultural diagnoses to identify structural weaknesses.
- Foster spaces for inter-institutional dialogue, learning networks, and communities of practice.
- Promote distributed leadership that reinforces organizational trust.
- Establish indicators for evaluating institutional social capital as part of the quality system.

These strategies could contribute to more inclusive, flexible, and sustainable results-oriented university governance, strengthening the articulation between internal processes and the demands of the socioeconomic environment.

The results obtained allow for a critical dialogue with the revised theoretical framework, which makes it possible to articulate conceptual, empirical, and strategic reflections on the interaction between organizational culture and social capital in the Ecuadorian university environment. This section is structured around four areas of analysis: theoretical convergences, empirical validation, institutional implications, and implications for university management.

First, the empirical findings and the literature reviewed confirm the existence of a bidirectional relationship between organizational culture and social capital, as proposed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998). These authors argue that organizational structure and shared culture directly influence the configuration of social networks, as well as levels of trust, cooperation, and sense of community within an institution. Evidence from Ecuadorian and Latin American studies reinforces this view, showing that universities with more horizontal structures and participatory models consolidate greater institutional cohesion (De Boer et al., 2015).

Likewise, Schein's (2010) theory on levels of organizational culture (artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions) is useful for understanding why many universities have difficulty transforming their internal culture: superficial changes in procedures or regulations do not automatically modify the deep-seated beliefs that underpin organizational behavior. Hence, structural transformations must be accompanied by reflective and inclusive processes that challenge traditional logics of power and leadership.

The results reveal empirical regularities that validate the theoretical contributions reviewed. For example, it has been found that hierarchical and authoritarian organizational culture, still present in much of the Ecuadorian university system, tends to generate institutional environments with low levels of participation and limited capacity for innovation (Cabrera & Fuenzalida, 2016). This is consistent with the studies by Saravia and Peña (2019), who document how vertical structures hinder the formation of cohesive and committed academic communities.

Likewise, successful institutional experiences are identified where the implementation of transparency policies, distributed leadership, and practices of engagement with society have enhanced university social capital. Such is the case with peer mentoring programs, inter-institutional research networks, and spaces for faculty-student participation, which have been identified as effective practices for consolidating bonds of trust and reciprocity (Putnam, 2000; Narváez et al., 2017).

In this context, the proposed theoretical model draws not only on international literature but also on contextualized empirical contributions, which reinforces its relevance for guiding organizational transformation processes in public and private universities in Ecuador.

A critical reading of the results also suggests that organizational culture should not be understood as a static or homogeneous phenomenon. Universities are complex systems where subcultures, institutional tensions, and power dynamics coexist and influence the way social relationships are constructed (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

In this sense, cultural transformation requires recognizing the historical trajectories of institutions, their governance structures, and the regulatory frameworks that govern their operation. Social capital,

for its part, should be conceived as a strategic institutional resource that cannot be imposed through regulations but must be cultivated through genuine practices of collaboration, participation, and mutual recognition.

The studies reviewed show that, in contexts where inclusion and equity are promoted, more favorable conditions are created for the emergence of sustained networks of trust and cooperation (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

In practical terms, this research offers concrete guidelines for university management. First, it highlights the need to design institutional diagnoses that integrate cultural and social variables, allowing for the mapping of relational dynamics that strengthen or weaken change processes. In addition, it proposes including qualitative indicators of social capital in internal evaluation and quality assurance systems in order to capture aspects related to institutional cohesion and interdepartmental collaboration.

Another relevant implication is the importance of distributed leadership as a catalyst for cultural change. Academic leaders who promote deliberation, networking, and relational horizontality play a key role in consolidating more democratic and resilient organizational practices (Deem et al., 2007).

Finally, it is reaffirmed that university reform processes should not focus exclusively on administrative efficiency or the fulfillment of quantitative indicators, but should incorporate ethical, symbolic, and social dimensions that give legitimacy and sustainability to the transformations. The theoretical model proposed in this study represents a useful conceptual tool to guide such reforms from a systemic and integrative perspective.

In short, the discussion leads to the conclusion that the relationship between organizational culture and social capital is central to understanding the challenges and opportunities facing Ecuadorian universities in their transition to more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable management models.

This study is based exclusively on secondary sources, which limits the possibility of observing real organizational dynamics in the present. Furthermore, the country's institutional diversity requires more specific studies by type of university (public, private, community,

intercultural). We suggest the development of empirical research, using social network approaches, case studies, and longitudinal analyses, to validate the proposed model and analyze its applicability in specific contexts (Astin, 2011).

Conclusions

This research has allowed for a deeper analysis of the interaction between organizational culture and social capital in the context of Ecuadorian higher education, providing an integrative theoretical framework that articulates structural, relational, and cultural dimensions. Through a critical review of indexed academic literature, common patterns, persistent challenges, and relevant experiences were identified that support the need to address both constructs jointly as key factors in institutional strengthening.

First, it is confirmed that organizational culture strongly conditions the configuration of university social capital. Institutions with participatory structures, distributed leadership, and institutional values oriented toward inclusion, transparency, and collaboration tend to develop networks of trust and reciprocity that enhance organizational performance, innovation, and links with the environment. Conversely, hierarchical, top-down, and prescriptive cultures inhibit the generation of social capital, creating fragmented institutional environments that are resistant to change.

Second, social capital should not be conceived as a spontaneous or incidental phenomenon, but rather as a strategic resource that directly affects educational quality, institutional well-being, and the sustainability of university processes. The literature consulted and the systematized findings show that strengthening collaborative networks, promoting interpersonal relationships based on trust, and building a shared institutional identity are fundamental elements for moving toward a more democratic, open, and socially committed university.

Third, the theoretical model proposed in this study represents a relevant conceptual contribution by integrating different dimensions of analysis into a framework that can be used as a diagnostic and policy-guiding tool. Its usefulness lies in its ability to show how changes in organizational culture can strengthen social capital and

how the latter can, in turn, positively feed back into cultural processes within universities.

Finally, it is recommended that the management teams and collegiate bodies of higher education institutions implement strategies aimed at participatory cultural diagnosis, the promotion of distributed leadership, the design of mechanisms for evaluating social capital, and the institutionalization of collaborative practices. These actions would contribute to overcoming the traditional barriers that limit organizational development and would allow for the consolidation of management models that are more resilient, inclusive, and consistent with the challenges of the contemporary environment.

In short, the analysis reaffirms the importance of comprehensively understanding and managing the relationship between organizational culture and social capital, recognizing its strategic nature for institutional success. Future research could complement this study through comparative empirical approaches, case studies, and mixed methodologies that would allow the theoretical model to be validated in different contexts and with different types of universities.

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