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Competencies for a Fair Play in Organizations: a Phenomenographic Analysis of Managers' Conceptions

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ABSTRACT

This is a phenomenographic study with the objective of mapping the variations in a group of managers' conceptions about the meaning of Fair Play, in order to identify the competencies associated with these conceptions. The purpose was to understand the experience of these actors so as to meet the demands of an organization that establishes Fair Play as a general guideline. As its main results, the research revealed three central ways of conceiving of Fair Play: as a rule, as transparency and as justice. The managers' competencies represent the materialization of these conceptions. The study reinforces that learning about the differences in conceptions can be a path towards achieving more assertive practices for developing Fair Play competencies.

Keywords: Competencies. Ethical and value. Fair play. Managers. Phenomenography.

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1 INTRODUCTION

A whole generation of studies about human competencies at work and their development has been conducted with the primary purpose of attaining positive and growing economic results. Although in the last few decades research in this field has begun to point to the need for discussing the ethical, political, societal and environmental dimensions of competencies (CHEETHAM; CHIVERS, 1996; DESPLACES et al., 2007; CHEN, 2008; PIES; BECKMANN; HIELSCHER, 2010; BRUNSTEIN; BOULOS, 2011), investigations of this nature can still be considered incipient.

Despite the spread of good corporate governance ideals, supported by an ethically and socio-environmentally sustainable business policy, little is known about how these anchor-principles are interpreted by organization subjects and transformed into competent actions in management daily life. As a result, there is also a need to deepen the discussions about how to develop managers in order to move them towards competent management in the ethical, societal, environmental and political sense. This qualitative article aims to contribute to addressing these matters. As Brand and Slater (2003) stress, qualitative studies about ethics in business, based on in-depth interviews, are rare and necessary. Even with all the contributions of quantitative research in this area, the authors believe qualitative methods have an important contribution to make to understanding ethics in organizations.

Organizations use different terms to refer to ethical, uncorrupted purposes, such as those mentioned above. One is the concept of Fair Play (FP), which this study is based on. The expression Fair Play was born in the sporting world and refers to a way of acting in a competitive environment, where fairness is expected in every scope, both on and off the field. Commans (2005) states that Fair Play is not merely related to following rules, but refers to a pro-active attitude taken on by people, resulting in respectful behavior.

The concept of Fair Play entered the organizational environment as the market began to demand more trust in companies, product quality and ethics in business (COMMANS, 2005). Fair Play is manifested in consistent behaviors, whether individual or collective, which serve as proof of loyalty and trustworthiness. The term's use has been expanding in the universe of organizational studies, as this author's work shows. Therefore, a study that aims to analyze how managers appropriate the concept, attribute meaning to it and transform it into competent actions is justified.

As we are living through a moment of great antinomies, that is, the conflict between establishing general guidelines (for example, ethics, values, sustainability) and their operationalization, we can presuppose that the study of the contradictions, dilemmas and paradoxes that managers are immersed in can help to reveal the advances, limitations and possibilities we are experiencing in the organizational environment, so as to break with these antinomies.

In relation to competencies, this study is supported by the work Jörgen Sandberg has been developing since 1994, in partnership with other authors such as Dall'Alba and Tagarma (2006; 2007). The author aims to show that the way the understanding of work is discussed can help organizations adopt alternative organizational practices, replacing the rationalist approaches which, according to Sandberg and Tagarma (2007), lock the concept of understanding into a 'black box'. These authors aim to describe the content of this box, promoting a discussion about competencies that differs from the mainstream.

Sandberg and Tagarma (2007) state that it is fundamental to discuss the different ways of understanding work when a paradigm shift is the goal. In other words, management should focus on the way employees understand their work, with the purpose of debating them. Thus, new ways of reaching organizational goals would be established, avoiding what is known as the trap of rationalist practices. One way to study the understanding of work is to start by analyzing the variations in the way it is conceived of, a practice researchers have carried out through the exercise of phenomenography.

Therefore, this work aims to map the variations in the conceptions of a group of managers about the meaning of Fair Play, with the purpose of identifying the competencies associated to them. Our purpose is to understand, in the light of phenomenography, the experiences of these corporate actors in meeting the demands of an organization that establishes Fair Play as a general directive. In the end, we aim to present a set of reflections that contributes to advancing the discussions about developing management competencies for a clean game.

2 THE MEANING OF ETHICAL COMPETENCIES AND VALUES

It is important to understand how competence literature has been engaging with ethical debates. The fact that constructs such as ethics and values are beginning to be considered in competence models presupposes, in theory, a concern with developing capabilities related to goals and principles that go beyond maximizing shareholder profits. In addition, it also signals that the organization and, more specifically, the human resources area is concerned

with measuring and/or evaluating individuals considering their ethical performance and their adjustment to the organization's values.

The first authors we know of who included ethics and values in a professional competence model were Cheetham and Chivers (1996; 1998), who claimed that little attention was being given to this important dimension of work. Although they cite the efforts of Steadman et.al. (1994) in discussing ethical competencies and values in British occupational standards, as well as Ozar's (1993) arguments about the importance of ethics and values in professional development processes, Cheetham and Chivers were the ones who designed a holistic competence model considering four fundamental pillars for professional action: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) behavioral competence and; 4) competence in ethics and values.

However, the authors do not go deeply into this discussion and define this competence in a fairly normative way: as possession of appropriate personal and professional values and the capacity to form judgments by considering these values. By personal values they mean adherence to laws and moral or religious codes; and sensitivity to the needs and values of others. By professional values, they are referring to the adoption of appropriate attitudes; recognition of professional codes of conduct; self-regulation; ecological sensitivity; recognition of the limits of their own competence; efforts to stay up to date; willingness to help new professionals; judgment of rumors about colleagues; etc. (CHEETHAM; CHIVERS, 1996, p.27).

It can thus be seen that this competence dimension, in this model, incorporates all kinds of ideas that vary in scope, relevance and pertinence. Despite the value of the authors' initiative, the lack of a denser discussion about the content and significance of this competence dimension leads to an extreme simplification of a goal that depends on profound changes in the mentality of a whole generation of professionals and management models.

However, more recent research in the management field brings a less functionalist perspective to dealing with ethical/moral competencies in the corporate world. Three aspects are considered in this literature. Firstly, executive education in terms of ethics is criticized for having assumed a merely technical perspective, which is deemed insufficient (SWIERCZEK, JOUSSE, 2014). Alternatively, more value is placed on *creating collective spaces for reflection and experiential learning*, where the participants involved in these formative programs share their personal histories. Storytelling and continuous reflective dialogue, for example, help them explore and stimulate the question of morality in managers' thoughts and

actions (SWIERCZEK, JOUSSE, 2014; SEKERKA, GODWIN; CHARNIGO, 2014; WITTE; DALY, 2014). Secondly, this literature discusses the need to *develop ethical competencies based on a positive and constructive agenda.* Despite the importance of tackling risks, causes and needs for improvement, the main focus is on creating an environment where managers can learn to reflect on the causes and conditions of their success or failure in ethical questions. It is about the need to stimulate managers' moral curiosity in order for them to develop an inquisitive habit in ethical and moral questions, thus constructing a collaborative and proactive ethical discourse. Once again, this moves away from the focus of traditional training practices which are much centered on prevention, on tackling problems and violations with threats, rules and policies, leading to few actual advances. The primary purpose of training programs is to prevent problems, not to stimulate a desire to engage in ethical questions (SEKERKA, GODWIN; CHARNIGO, 2014). This stimulation of moral curiosity in training programs tends to promote a deeper understanding of ethical questions and, therefore, to develop better competencies in this area. Thirdly, the research indicates that executives *do not consider or even relate performance to competencies such as trust creation, ethical leadership or values-based decision making* (SWIERCZEK, JOUSSE, 2014). Nonetheless, competencies of this kind are beginning to be seen as a moral compass to guide performance. In this sense, there is a need for formative experiences that stimulate not only values such as confidence, concern with others, justice and reciprocity, which support what Swierczek and Jousse (2014) define as Right Vision, but also what they call Right Action, requiring disciple, effort, enthusiasm, concentration etc. This implies, for example, that the classrooms of courses such as MBAs should discuss not only questions such as "what is the right thing to do", but "what will I do to most effectively deal with ethical conflict?" (GENTILE, 2010 apud INGOLS; SHAPIRO; 2014, p.423). By provoking reflections of this order, which stimulate managers to define a course of action when faced with situations that demand it, performance is strengthened. Another way of stimulating transformational leadership which considers ethics in business is to encourage professionals to engage in voluntary work, providing service to the community. Students who participate in programs that incorporate ethical values in decision-making have a better understanding of their civic responsibility, greater multicultural awareness and stronger leadership skills (EVA; SENDJAYA, 2013). Business training spaces, as well as higher education institutions and MBAs (SWIERCZEK, JOUSSE, 2014; INGOLS; SHAPIRO, 2014), must assume a relevant role in this process and be willing to link performance to the competencies of social and ethical responsibility. Future leaders need to be sufficiently equipped to make difficult ethical decisions, and business training

programs have not been adequate in this sense. The study by Gentile (2010 apud INGOLS, SHAPIRO, 2014) reveals that students expect to encounter conflictive values in the workplace but feel that MBA programs do not prepare them for this.

Other critical aspects can be found in the studies dealing with the need to develop ethical and values competencies:

a) ***The creation of new discourses directed at a value creation logic***: one of the central points of ethical competence studies is the capacity to construct new guiding discourses which redefine courses of action. Competence deals with the individual or collective capacity to stimulate the transition from an abstract profit principle to a value creation logic. The capacity to listen and establish dialogues is a high point stressed in this kind of literature (PIES et al, 2010).

b) ***The capacity to build dialogues with stakeholders in a multicultural society***: reinforce the importance of cultural competence for the advancement of ethics in business in a global and multicultural society. This capacity involves, say the authors, the understanding of clients' and stakeholders' cultural context and the ability to build a dialogue with them (JOUTSENVIRTA; UUSITALO, 2010)

c) ***The ability to make decisions and put them into practice based on moral judgments***: Virtue and morality are also considered in discussions about ethical competencies and values. Desplaces et al. (2007), for example, discuss the concept of moral competence. After reviewing the literature, they reached the conclusion that a component of moral judgment competence is moral reasoning. This is defined as "individual or collective practical reasoning about what, morally, one ought to do" (p.74). Another component is the ability to make ethical decisions when the situation involves moral judgment. The authors also call attention to the fact that the organizational situation and environment strongly influence the moral development stage and, therefore, the capacity to make ethical decisions. Emphasis is not only on the capacity to make decisions and proceed to moral judgments, but also to act in accordance with these judgments.

d) ***The development of metastrategies not guided by the logic of destroying the competition***: the studies that refer to ethical competencies on the strategic plane must also be mentioned. Park (1998) vehemently argues that ethical education in business requires the development of metastrategic competence. Metastrategic thinking is different from conventional competitive strategy, which seeks supremacy over competitors. It contrasts with

the competitive strategy that precedes the monopoly of profit. The goal of metastrategy is to create a competitive competence that does not harm others, but which builds competitive advantage capable of creating barriers for competitors and generating obstacles to imitation (PARK, 1998). It is about a new stage of competitive strategic thinking, which reduces the presuppositions of opportunism and self-interest. In the metastrategic logic, rather than trying to destroy the competitor's confidence, the organization seeks to reinforce its own confidence.

e) ***The ability to find solutions to environmental problems as part of ethical competence***: Chen (2008, p. 533) proposes the construct of green core competence, defined "as the collective learning and capabilities about green innovation and environmental management in an organization". It is a more functionalist view of competencies, but one which draws attention due to its attempt to include green goals in the conventional literature about strategic competence.

Another important question emerges in the debate about ethical competence and values. Regarding the relationship between virtue and competence, Macaulay and Lawton (2006), wrote an article entitled *"From virtue to competence: changing the principles of public service"*. They explain that, historically, good governance was framed by ideas about virtues and good citizens, but bureaucratization has led to an emphasis on management efficiency over virtue. When trying to counterpose these two constructs, the authors explain that virtue encompasses ideas about morality and offers perspectives that shape a person's way of being. In this case, virtue is part of being, while competence is in the field of action, of externalization of capabilities and attitudes. Macaulay and Lawton (2006) also state that the theoretical delineation of these two constructs contributes to the idea of separation between virtue and competence. This is because virtue commonly belongs to moral and philosophical studies, while competencies belong to the management area. However, when the subject is studied in greater depth, the authors maintain that the two concepts are close to each other, since competencies encompass certain values and virtues require competence in order to be successfully implemented through virtuous actions. They argue that this convergence makes two approaches possible:

1. The two concepts should be kept apart: to compare virtues and competencies is to compare irreconcilable themes.

2. As a challenge, we can look to a future where both concepts will be considered symbiotic, in the recognition that many management competencies possess virtues.

In these authors' research, virtue can be externalized in the form of explicit or implicit competencies, as particular qualities that can be demonstrated. The crucial point in this reasoning is that virtue should have a practical application, or it is meaningless (MACAULAY; LAWTON, 2006). Like competencies, virtues exist in the domain of human action. Relevant virtues associated with management practices can, therefore, be interpreted in competence terms. As a conclusion, Macaulay and Lawton, in 2006, state that competencies will not replace virtues. Competence, as management excellence, inevitably incorporates the notion of virtue. Similarly, to have any meaning and significance, virtues must have some competence quality in order to be put into practice. To sum up, virtue and competence are equally valid routes for the successful implementation of an ethical culture that is considered socially and historically pertinent.

There is, therefore, a look at competencies on multiple levels of analysis and theoretical perspectives, all of which draw attention due to their emphasis on pursuing actions that consider the collective and the construction of new discourses and courses of action in the business world.

But how does this view of competence relate to the idea of Fair Play, the central theme of this investigation? And what does Fair Play mean? The next item deals with this theme

3 FAIR PLAY

From the ontological and epistemological point of view, Fair Play in this work will be considered as a historically and socially constructed concept, that is, a construct which has developed from the interpretation and interaction between multiple actors and transformed over the course of a historical process.

The term originates in the practice of sports and, as Commans (2005) explains, **Fair** means just, free from favoritism or self-interest, and **Play** means game, a state where action is possible in specific ways. Thus, the term Fair Play can be understood as playing or behaving according to the rules and in a just manner. Coomans (2005) argues that, in sport, talking about Fair Play is more than simply respecting the rules of the game, it is a pro-active attitude, constantly assumed on and off the field by the athlete and the subjects involved in the sport. It results in behaviors that are respectful of the 'sporting spirit'.

When transposing the concept to the organizational context, Coomans (2005) discusses the duty of leaders, managers and employees to incorporate and act according to this concept in all operational strategies and decisions, as well as to insert it in their daily behaviors and in

communications in general. He stresses that, apart from clearly exposing its guidelines and rules, it is necessary to practice Fair Play in long-term attitudes, proactively, with the purpose of building respect (a climate of trust) and corporate values (trust capital).

If trust is a pillar on which Fair Play is structured, credibility is identified as a condition that precedes the development of trust, as Caldwell and Clapham (2003) explain. The authors argue that for there to be organizational credibility it is essential for there to be interpersonal credibility. Thus, it is presupposed that employees must act consistently with what the company believes and desires to communicate to the market.

Here we reach another important pillar of Fair Play, consistency, that is, logical consistency between discourse and actions – which will lead the company to a level of credibility. The trust of stakeholders and the market must be continuously built and preserved. This means that ethics are seen as strategic tools that lead to loyalty and Fair Play and, consequently, create credibility. Consistency is thus needed in the message identified and shared by the company and its stakeholders, via behaviors and actions that can be observed daily. Consistency can be understood as a "trust test" (Commans, 2005).

Fair Play, as a competence, is not limited to meeting standards established by the organization, as it implies a change in mindset, that is, a model of thought and proactive action, with the purpose of establishing a climate of trust.

Despite the challenges of developing a Fair Play sense in the world of sport (PERRY; PETER; LEE, 2013), and the still incipient literature on the subject in the world of business (WITTE; DALY, 2014), there is a clear sense that fostering it involves cognitive and experiential learning which broadens the narrow and technical focus that formative programs generally bring to the theme, as has already been discussed in relation to ethical competence studies. Promoting critical reflection which leads to transformative learning experiences requires discussing the tenets of FP as a universal and multicultural concept (WITTE; DALY, 2014). Witte and Daly (2014), looking at finance teaching at management schools, have investigated how ethical, cultural and citizenship goals which foster FP can be attained in meaning-production and problem-solving experiences in the classroom. Thus, management professionals are stimulated to debate the dilemmas implicit in the established rules, consider the demands of different stakeholders, examine current social responsibility practices, reflect on them, question them and assess them with decision-making in mind. This process enriches and strengthens competence development and works towards fair play in organizations.

To sum up, if we wish companies and their managers to develop competencies and act on the basis of ideas and values that reflect Fair Play, it is important to discuss what this guideline means to corporate actors and what its implications are for management action. The experience of the managers who were the object of this study will be analyzed with this scenario in mind.

4 PHENOMENOGRAPHY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF COMPETENCIES FROM AN INTERPRETIVIST VIEWPOINT

Phenomenography should not be understood only as a methodological procedure, but also as a way of understanding learning processes and developing competencies at work. Phenomenography was born in Sweden, in the early 1970s, as an approach to understanding learning processes. It originated at Gothenburg University's department of Education and Educational Research. The interest was in investigating *how* and *why* people learn, in order to explore the learning process and increase the quality of their experiences. It was Marton's work, in 1975, which marked the beginning of phenomenography by questioning why some students were more capable of learning than others. His study focused on two main questions: what does it mean to say that some people are better at learning than others, and why does this differentiation occur (MARTON, 1984).

Phenomenography's focus is on understanding how the world is experienced, which gives this methodology a non-dualistic ontology, distancing it from a positivist and objective approach that is independent of human interpretation. In the same way, it is also not limited to a purely subjective approach, exclusively focused on the subject's internal constructions around a given theme. The interest is not limited to understanding what a person thinks, but rather, to what experiences are and have been for the subject in situations where it was necessary to deal with certain aspects of the world (SANDBERG, 2000).

What people think and externalize is not always clear, but the experiences a subject undergoes are very revealing and help to understand the phenomenon we are interested in learning about. This way of understanding reality is phenomenography's main contribution to interpretivist studies (MANN et al., 2007).

Phenomenographic researchers assume that the ways a person experiences a phenomenon result in a single way of interacting with and understanding this phenomenon. Allowing interviewees to recount their experiences and say what they thought and did in given situations makes the researcher understand what is interwoven with real situations (for example, when they had to solve a mathematical problem). Bowden (1994) conducted

research to understand how students comprehend the basic concepts of physics, with the intention of offering elements that could help teachers to teach physics with more promising results in terms of student learning.

Phenomenographic studies seek, thus, to identify the different forms in which people conceive a phenomenon, which leads to different learning responses. The basic belief is that, by identifying subjects' conceptions, it is possible to intervene more assertively and promote better development of individuals (BOWDEN, 2005).

The use of phenomenography in the study of competencies, in the organizational universe, has its mark in Sandberg's work (2000), in research performed at Volvo. The author's objective was to explain the difference in performance among workers and understand the factors that explained why one professional was more competent than another, given the same working conditions. In this case, the use of phenomenography consisted in identifying the different ways in which a group of engine optimizers experienced and understood their work activities. After that, there came an analysis of the way these conceptions and experiences related to how the engineers acted at the company.

From the interpretivist viewpoint, the concept of competencies takes into account the experience, context and meaning attributed to work, instead of considering competencies as a set of generic attributes (knowledge, skills and attitudes – KSA) activated when needed by people, as the field's more functionalist literature teaches.

This way of understanding individual competence fills the gap left by most studies in this field. In general, studies that follow the American tradition to identify competencies (McCLELLAND, 1973; BOYATZIS, 1982; SPENCER; SPENCER, 1993) sought to describe knowledge, skills and attitudes to perform certain activities. This approach can be seen in different areas as entrepreneurship (PHELAN; SHARPLEY, 2012), education (BORGES et al., 2014), human resource management (GANGANI; McLEAN; BRADEN, 2006). However, these studies ignore that individuals performing the same activity can understand it in different ways, leading them to identify and develop different attributes to perform it (SANDBERG; TAGARMA, 2007).

To Sandberg (2000), the understanding of work constitutes the basis for competence, and not only the attributes. The activation of attributes, knowledge and skills is driven by the meaning people give to their work and how they understand it.

Sandberg (2000) maintains that the concept of competencies became conditionally linked to an attribution phenomenon; therefore, the development of competencies was limited to the efficient transmission of knowledge, skills and attitudes in traditional directive logic.

In the author's research at Volvo, the use of phenomenography identified three distinct conceptions, which synthesized three different ways in which engine optimizers performed their activities. He thus observed that the different conceptions that engineers had of their work, engine optimization, led them to develop and hierarchize different attributes (knowledge, skills and other capabilities). He also found out that the engineers who were considered by their peers and superiors as "more competent" were precisely the ones who presented a deeper conception of what it meant to be an engine optimizer.

A first group of engineers linked engine optimization to the idea of *optimization by stages* – the worker delimits and organizes optimization in terms of process phases, confronting the quality standards expected for each phase. A second group understood *optimization in the interaction of stages* – the worker delimits and organizes optimization of all work phases as a set and confronts the quality standards expected for the set. A third group understood *optimization in the clients' perception* – the worker compares the engine quality standards reached and confronts them with the client's desired performance.

The worker's conception of work displays a hierarchy in the way work is understood, as well as a competence hierarchy. In the Volvo case, Sandberg (2000) demonstrated that the workers who didn't have a superficial conception of work (optimization as completing stages) and saw it in a deeper way (they understood optimization from the client's viewpoint) were precisely the ones who were considered most competent by their peers.

The author concludes, thus, that a person's conception of work is an element which explains that individual's competence in the exercise of his attributes. Therefore, the specific conception of a worker, or group of workers, defines which competencies are activated to perform their tasks. In addition, Sandberg (2000) explains that attributes have no fixed meanings, but can change each time the worker comes into contact with his work.

As a result, in subsequent studies, Sandberg and Tagarma (2007) advocated the idea that developing competence depends on the ability to make workers advance from a more superficial conception to a deeper one. Advancement in the understanding of work may signify only a refinement in the way of thinking, which implies improved competence or, on the other hand, it may reflect a rupture with an old way of thinking, replacing it with another.

In this last case, competence is renewed. In any case, to refine or renew competence, reflection about work and its meaning is crucial. Competence development experiences should, therefore, act on the basis of understanding.

A study conducted in Brazil has shown similar results. Amaro and Brunstein (2013) conducted a phenomenographic research with young entrepreneurs and found three different conceptions of enterprise that lead to distinct forms of entrepreneurial competence.

It is following this line of thought that this study intends to map the variations in the way Fair Play is conceived of in organizations, understanding the competencies associated to each conception and their implications for whether or not this guiding principle will materialize in the daily life of management.

The methodological procedures that guided the research will be described below.

5 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Consistent with the interpretivist/phenomenographic theoretical model used in competence studies (SANDBERG, 2000), the methodology employed for data construction and analysis in this paper followed the qualitative approach. Out of the two modalities for conducting phenomenographic studies, 'pure' phenomenography – which has the primary purpose of mapping variations in conception (MARTON, 1984) – was chosen, to the detriment of 'developmental' phenomenography, which would require field intervention actions (BOWDEN, 2005). However, even with the 'pure' methodology, the results of this research are expected to allow inferences for development purposes.

The data was mostly constructed via interviews, as according to Mann et al. (2007), the construction of phenomenographic data leans particularly on in-depth interviews. Document analysis and unsystematic observation were also performed, to complement the information. During the whole investigation period visits were made to the company, in Brazil and its headquarters in Sweden, to proceed with interviews and strengthen contact with managers participating in the study, in the hope of building trust and better understanding their daily universe.

The purpose of the interview was to reveal the experiences of a set of managers who act in a specific work environment in relation to the phenomenon being studied. The managers were encouraged to reflect on the way they experience Fair Play in management daily life.

Phenomenographic analysis focuses on the relationship between the interviewee and the phenomenon as the transcripts reveal it. The phenomenographic interviewer's task is to direct

the discussion towards the phenomenon being studied in order to understand how conceptions are being created (BOWDEN, 1994). Open questions are frequently used and accompanied by additional questions such as, for example: 'What do you mean by that?' or 'Could you explain that a bit more?' This type of questioning encourages interviewees to reflect on what they have said and explain their understanding in more depth.

In the case of this research, the interview was related to the conception that managers of a given organization have of the Fair Play concept and their actions in connection to a clean game. Two questions were asked, for the researcher to capture the conceptions of the phenomenon: *a) Based on your experience, what does Fair Play mean to you? b) What does being a competent manager mean to you according to the principles of Fair Play?*

The interviews were sound recorded, with the participants' permission, with a guarantee of confidentiality of personal data and the recorded content was faithfully transcribed as text. According to Mann et al. (2007),

> Phenomenographic studies require a clear purpose from the earliest stages, in order to identify the research subjects according to the relationship they establish with the phenomenon to be studied. The individuals were selected with a view to obtaining the greatest possible number of variations in experiences.

As mentioned in the introduction, similarly to phenomenological studies, phenomenographic studies are also directed at a group of individuals who share a same experience. Thus, 12 professionals who worked at the company being studied were interviewed, all of them having occupied a management position for over a year at the time of research.

The interviews sought to include managers in different positions of responsibility in the organization and on various hierarchical levels. This criterion was intentional, as it was considered that positions with different levels of responsibility presented specific contexts that could provide variations in Fair Play experiences.

Characterization of research subjects

As can be seen in the table 1, the managers who participate in this study have worked at the company between 2 and 35 years. They have occupied their current positions for a period of 2 to 9 years. There is great variation in the number of subordinates, which ranges from 1 to 130. The positions occupied by the interviewees show that most of them are responsible for teams. One third (1/3) are women, therefore, most of the interviewees are men. This can be

explained by the fact that the company has a strong background in the engineering area, which traditionally has been mostly occupied by men.

Table 1 - Information about the Interviewed Managers

GENDER	POSITION	TIME IN CURRENT POSITION (YEARS)	TIME AT COMPANY (YEARS)	NUMBERS OF SUBORDINATES
Male	Human Resources Coordinator	2	13	4
Female	Human Resources Manager	2	2	3
Male	Sales Director	9	30	90
Male	Legal Manager	3	6	4
Male	Industrial Manager	2	35	47
Female	Human Resources Manager	2	2	5
Female	Corporate Communication Manager	3	30	1
Male	Logistics Manager	4	13	25
Female	Business Controller	9	25	13
Male	President	3	13	90
Male	Industrial Manager	3	24	130
Male	Sales Managers	4	11	11

Source: the authors, based on the interviews

To Mann et al. (2007), the analysis process is considered a discovery at the same time that it reveals itself as a construct. The results are not known in advance and tested, but will be discovered or will emerge from the transcripts and will be constructed when these are revisited. In this way, phenomenographic analysis occurs from the bottom up, in an inductive way of working with data, until the results are reached, rather than acting from the top down, with the goal of constructing and testing hypotheses.

Also according to these authors, the category descriptions are clarified with constant reference to the transcripts as a whole. During this process, the researcher should constantly question if there is another way of interpreting that statement.

In the case of this research, the categories were defined in successive reviews and some alterations and adjustments were made during the hierarchization process, a fundamental stage of phenomenography. Thus, we could observe a category's adherence to the logic of the previous category and, at the same time, verify how each category conferred a broader understanding to the preceding one.

After this work, three different conception categories were reached: Fair Play as a Rule; as Transparency; and as Justice. It was also seen that each category contained sub-variations within it. Rules, for example, were understood in different ways by the managers.

The final stage of the phenomenographic analytical process involves the construction of relationships between the categories, forming what is known as the outcome space. It was thus shown how each category revealed the phenomenon being study within itself and in relation to other conceptions.

6 RESULTS

The first observation that can be made is that the Fair Play concept is relatively easily expressed by the interviewees, which reveals that the managers have a certain familiarity with the term. In addition, they are capable of formulating examples of ways they have carried this guiding principle into daily management, whether in the decision-making process or in the way they conduct themselves with their work team. This seems to indicate that it is not a value merely espoused by the company; there are signs that, in some way, individual discourse is connected to an anchor-conception of the company.

The objective, in the analysis that follows, was to identify and discuss the variations in managers' conception of Fair Play, that is, to understand the basic structure of the meanings the interviewees give this anchor-idea, as well as the competencies associated with them. According to the first main question directed at the managers to define Fair Play: "considering your experience, what does Fair Play mean to you?" it was possible to understand the fundamental variations in the conception of the phenomenon being studied.

From the set of these narratives, three qualitatively different conceptions were reached. These conceptions will be presented separately, following the hierarchical arrangement that was observed, as phenomenographic analysis suggests. Thus, we begin with the most superficial conception, rules, and move towards the deeper one, justice.

Table 2 – Conceptions of Fair Play

CONCEPTIONS	MANAGERS (M)	TOTAL (%)
(1) Fair Play as a rule: Knowing, understanding and following internal rules and institutional guidelines presented via current legislation, the code of conduct and norms, considering the rights and duties of individuals and the organization.	M1, M6, M8	25
(2) Fair Play as transparency: Ensuring that company guidelines are clear, leaving no margin for ambiguous and erroneous interpretations. Acting so that attitudes can be made public without this inconveniencing individuals and the company.	M2, M4 M5, M7, M9	42
(3) Fair Play as justice: Giving people equal treatment, whether inside or outside the organization. Listening to others and considering the collective when taking decisions, acting with common sense and impartiality. Always dealing with the professional aspect by taking into account the situations and not the people who may be involved. Favoring a balanced relationship in negotiations and agreements as a whole, respecting diverse interests without harming others. Acting justly in spite of any possible financial loss.	M3, M10, M11, M12	33

Source: the authors, based on the interviews

The table above signalizes that the major part (2/3) of managers interviewed conceives *Fair Play* at more comprehensible superficial levels, that is, understands it as a group of rules, or as transparency. There is a qualitative leap for FP understanding by only four executives of the interviewed group (1/3). This scenary indicates that, in thesis, great part of the actions and decisions in favor of FP hardly potentialize the materialization of more significant competencies**.** Next, each conception will be specifically analized. In the sequence, there is a discussion on how a conception is related to the others in order to, at the end, apoint the practical and theoretical implications of the current research.

a. Fair Play as a Rule

A common conception a group of managers has of Fair Play is that which is associated with the idea of *rules* to be followed. The emergence of such a conception is not strange, as the organization widely distributes materials that reference Fair Play as a code of conduct. The managers translate and interpret Fair Play as alignment and compliance with established rules. This form of understanding applies to external regulations, whether legislation or responsibilities the company assumes in society. In this case, Fair Play refers to obeying the law.

> So it's a question of legality, of laws, of oversight, environmental matters, how concerned the company is with environmental matters. Fair Play is how much I know about this, how much I help it to happen.

Competence, in this case, refers to the manager's knowledge of norms and macro-environmental themes and his capacity to contribute to these regulations being followed. However, even within the notion of adhesion to rules and norms, there are still subvariations in the way managers understand them. For example, some narratives show that the managers not only understand rules with a dichotomic logic (a choice between right and wrong), they also attribute a civic connotation to the concept, considering both the external and the internal environment of the organization. In this case, competence is revealed in his own capacity of making judgments according to a civic, community standard, differentiating 'right' from 'wrong'.

> If you translate the term Fair Play it means playing correctly, something like being on the right side, not harming anyone, bringing equal opportunities, with a kind of civic concept or meaning, right? The company, within the community, following laws, following rules… There are a number of things. It's working in the right way, following established rules, both internal and external.

In the discourses, following rules is not just associated with the relationships that the company and managers maintain with their external public, but also relates to the internal public. There is an emphasis on the connection between the rights and duties of the set of corporate actors in the web of relationships that spans all hierarchical levels. Rules are not understood as one-way streets, where the company must act in a given way, considered politically correct by its employees; the managers' narratives emphasize reciprocity between the employees and the company, in order for there to be equal responsibility in agreements.

On the individual level, compliance with norms and the rigor of such a process are parameters for recognizing a competent employee within the scope of Fair Play guidelines. This positioning is made clear in the interviews, when the managers point to those who act rigidly in Fair Play matters as examples of conduct, with no room for debate. The manager is responsible for clarifying and giving guidance when there is lack of knowledge or lack of alignment with the rules. On the collective plane, competence is also mentioned in association with Fair Play in terms of the organization and its capacity to institute rules of conduct.

The second conception found in this work is *transparency.* It is important to remember that these conceptions complement one another, which means that the transparency conception encompasses the rule logic.

b. Fair Play as Transparency

For another group of managers Fair Play was associated with the idea of transparency, understood both as ensuring clarity about rules established in the corporate game and as the

possibility of fluid and open discussion of actions performed by the company, internally or externally.

It is important to clarify the Fair Play logic for organizational actors, and it is implicit that a competent manager discusses the consequences of actions broadly, whether through informal mechanisms – a direct conversation with those involved in an impasse, argument, negotiation, etc. – or by activating formal mechanisms such as in the legal area, for example.

> Firstly, it is to always talk about the values and clarify the reasoning and logic behind Fair Play. Secondly, when the decision doesn't seem to me like Fair Play, it is warning the individuals that they may be facing legal action. If a decision is taken […] in a certain way for an employee, the same has to be done for others in a similar situation.

Fair Play, to these managers, demands constant reflection about the consequences of the actions and decisions they have taken. Fair Play as transparency relates not only to the existence of rules and their dissemination, but also to textual clarity, that is, norms that leave no space for misinterpretations that could confuse, damage or even favor an interested party.

> People talk between the lines. You talk in an ambiguous way and, when you talk in an ambiguous way, the person also understands ambiguously. So, it has to be 'it's like this'. 'What do you mean?' It has to be clear and transparent.

The transparent attitude, which inspires trust and stimulates the desire to negotiate and close deals, is the fruit of consistency between discourse and action. Fair Play, from this point of view, relates to the idea of consistency, and competence is associated with a manager's integrity.

> I want to negotiate with him, because he inspires trust; I can trust what he's saying, that he's transparent and sincere, that he does things correctly, both in attitude and in speech.

On the other hand, gossip, 'talking behind people's backs' and harming others are behaviors not in keeping with Fair Play, but which happen all the time. This means that, regardless of whether the game is a big negotiation or an almost banal 'hall conversation', once again we see the notion that Fair Play is supported by the idea of transparency. The idea here is this: if there is something that cannot be said openly, this might indicate an attitude which contradicts the principles of Fair Play.

In the eyes of the interviewees, a competent manager, one who acts in the name of Fair Play conduct, will not admit benefits in his own favor and expresses this in his professional relationships by refusing any favors that come in an individual scope and not a group or organizational one. Transparency here is manifested in the clarity with which benefits and favors are treated, even when they seem very simple. The manager in the narrative below

talks about a supplier who wanted to take him out for dinner when a partnership was established between them:

> I told the supplier: 'I don't buy the packaging for myself, I buy it for the company, so instead of you taking me out for dinner why don't we do this: we buy some pizza for everyone here, for the whole company, and we eat pizza, socialize, you feel good about treating us and my staff will feel good about being treated.' So, I mean, it's not a one-on-one relationship, because everyone feels good'.

Transparency is also associated with the decision to report any actions and information that compromise a clean game, regardless of what hierarchical levels may be affected. The competence associated with this conception is the ability to do what is considered right at the company in spite of the powers and people involved in the situation.

> You must report situations and say: 'Here we're going the wrong way, right? Here we're going down a path which is not what the company determined', regardless of the hierarchical level and who the person involved in the situation is.

We then move on to the third conception found in this work; justice.

c. Fair Play as Justice

Fair Play understood as a dichotomic, right and wrong relationship is not merely associated with the idea of adhesion to rules, but is also present in the managers' narratives in reference to the notion of justice. According to a third group of managers, right and wrong do not refer to 'an agreement' with established norms, as observed in the first conception analyzed (Fair Play as a rule), but is a judgment about what is considered correct and can, therefore, be understood as just.

Acting justly means being able to judge, in social interaction, what is considered right or not, independently of written rules. Fair Play is discussed as a code which goes beyond written rules and is therefore subjective. The comments below describe a reflection exercise which suspends the context of organization, leadership and family and evokes an intimate conversation between the manager and his conscience and values.

> I see Fair Play as justice: because Fair Play, translated literally, means being just. I think it is conduct alignment, a society standard. You have a society standard, which is not written, but you know there are some things that you can't do. So, you know that cursing is doing the wrong thing, fighting is wrong, whether it's written or not.
>
> When you don't know what to do in a given situation, you need to think about if it was just you, without the company, without a boss or family, what would be fair? The voice of your conscience should prevail.

From another perspective, acting justly relates to established actions, so that no one feels they have been harmed. In this case, the manager's competence lies in his capacity to promote balance between different interest groups and establish conditions that are considered

fair for different stakeholders. Here it is a case of emphasizing the impacts of actions and looking at the collective, where others, the community, must be considered in each action.

> Fair Play represents the best way to live in a group, whether it's a smaller group or a larger group […]. 'Fair Play' makes everyone's life easier.

Justice is also associated with the notion of forming all judgments with impartiality. It refers not only to critical situations, such as dismissal, but to promoting equal opportunities for development and growth. Being impartial is the capacity to listen to others, to offer the same treatment and use the same rules to make decisions, thus ensuring that some will not be privileged to the detriment of others.

> You might like this person more or that person less, and there's a normal tendency to try to give the simpler task to the person you like more and the more complicated task to the one you like less. And Fair Play goes against that; so it means treating everyone the same.

The managers also described Fair Play as justice when it favors sharing opinions, making decisions in a participatory way and seeking consensus with team members. In this case, it is ensured that everyone can be heard and their points of view considered. This type of dialogue and consensus framework minimizes the occurrence of feelings of injustice.

> All discussions for making decisions happen in a group. Then, in the group, we discuss things to exhaustion, until we reach a shared conclusion and nobody feels they are being treated unfairly.

Another aspect the managers consider is that their actions, according to the logic of Fair Play, are performed independently of context. For example, one of the directors claims he did not receive a bribe at the company, nor give a police officer money to escape being fined for a traffic infraction.

Finally, just treatment was described by the managers as a way of acting that is not guided merely by financial concerns and which involves company results:

> You have to play the game with the buyer, to do business […].You're paying a price, because you're not selling. You have to play the game with the customs guy, so that he frees up the part you need to make your machine run. You don't do this, based on Fair Play. Your production stops. So, you're paying a price.

The table below summarizes the managers' statements:

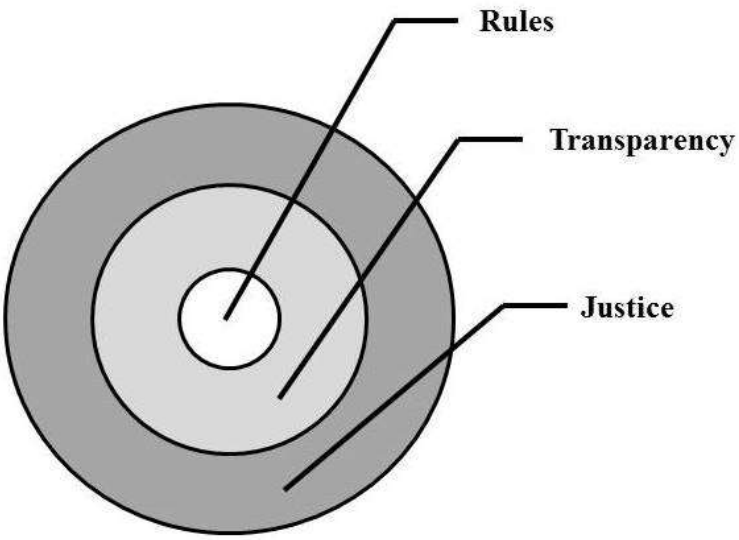
RULE	TRANSPARENCY	JUSTICE
Acting in accordance with the rules...	**...With actions that are transparent and can become public...**	**...Using impartiality and sense of justice.**
The powers associated with this concept is expressed in knowing and following the rules. When considering the rule, the manager should ensure that this has been publicized so that people have contact with regulatory guidelines and can practice them and integrate them into the repertoire of their actions in their daily work . Clarifies the rule and shows its importance as well as its logic , as an important part of their management , which aims to ensure compliance. Another competence management is always to act when there is a possibility of diversion or a real shift in behavior related to the established rules.	The power associated with this view is expressed in the narratives as the ability to , on contact with conduct that does not meet the Fair Play expectations, elucidation of the event and strengthen the company's guidelines , discussing its consequences. It means dealing with the facts as they present themselves without trying to minimize problematic situations , make sure that the Fair Play logic is understood, leaving no room for biased interpretation. It means giving transparent treatment to people inside and outside the company and sharing information , discussing and seeking consensus and making public decisions .	The skills associated with the concept of Fair Play as justice are expressed by the ability to hear people question the events that occurred and help the child to understand his mistakes , problems and solve them. Promote equal rights and fairness . Consider other points of view and act assertively when the principles of Fair Play are committed . Favor equilibrium situations in relationships. Make your actions consistent with his speech, regardless of the context in which they are .

Table 3 - Manager Competence associated with the conceptions
Source: the authors, based on the interviews

One important outcome of phenomenographic research involves representing the categories of description in an outcome space. It means to portrait the relationship between the conceptions that emerged in the managers' speech.

7 DISCUSSION: THE OUTCOME SPACE

The categories represent different ways of perceiving the same phenomenon, in this case Fair Play, and the internal relationships within them are, in a way, expected. Early on in the analysis it became clear that the conceptions presented a hierarchical arrangement, where a conception could be added to the preceding one. This means that the last category contains elements of the preceding ones. And for that very reason, it can be considered the deepest one.

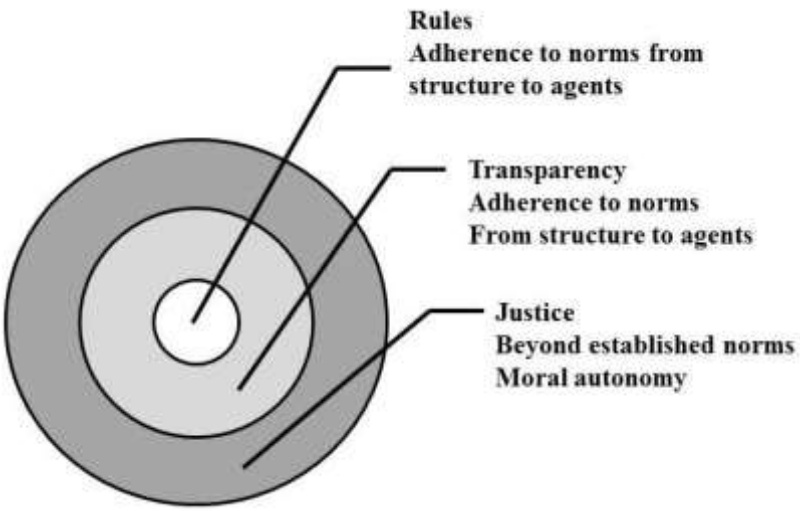


In the hierarchy of categories, there is a clear relationship between the two first conceptions, rules and transparency. The Fair Play logic is related to rules at the same time that any actions and decisions set in motion by the managers can and should be made public.

The third category, justice, while it contains the previous ones, makes a significant leap. It presupposes that rules must be followed justly, impartially, providing a more balanced power relationship between the people involved in a given situation.

The first two conceptions (*rules* and *transparency*) refer to adherence to norms, following a logic where individual action moves, overall, from structure to agent, with a fairly heteronomous motion. Managers tend to meet the behavioral expectations that the company has for the organizational actors' attitudes.

In the justice conception, the reports clearly point to conduct that goes beyond established norms, in a much more autonomous movement, as an individual acts in search of a justice ideal, considering others and the situation, regardless of whether the rules have been formally defined in codes of conduct. Here the managers' discourse approaches what Piaget (1932) calls moral autonomy. It is understood that moral autonomy is not synonymous with unfettered freedom, but means considering relevant facts in order to act in the best way, which implies considering the points of view of others. This also relates to the discussions by Desplaces et al. (2007) about moral competence.



Furthermore, while the *justice* category incorporates the others, it also differs from the other conceptions as it refers to 'a clean game' independently of context. While the *rule* and *transparency* conceptions look at Fair Play in strict connection with the demands imposed by their professional and legal environments, *justice* transcends this space.

With all these considerations, Fair Play, in its deepest sense, can be defined as *the capacity to enforce established rules and decisions and make them transparent, balance interests with justice and act consistently in the various situations the manager finds himself involved in, inside and outside the organization.*

But what are the implications of these findings? Sandberg and Tagarma (2007) stress that leaderships need to think more about the *understanding* of work as a concrete form of development of competencies. In this case, few managers interviewed at the company referred to the need of not only making conduct deviations clear, but also of discussing Fair Play logic. As an example, there is the case of the manager who says he asked his boss for clarification on how to proceed when suppliers offered gifts, questioning if this would interfere in Fair Play, and his superior answered with another question: "*With what intention would you receive the gift?*" The central point of the problem, which the boss presented to his subordinate, was not the gift being offered by the supplier, but the intention of the person accepting it. Based on this reflective dialogue (SANDBERG, 2007), the manager altered his understanding. This questioning exercise, this reflection the manager provokes in his subordinate, is what strengthens understanding and action towards ethical behavior (PIES, et.al, 2010; SWIERCZEK; JOUSSE, 2014; SEKERKA; GODWIN; CHARNIGO, 2014; WITTE; DALY, 2014). Another example of efforts to assimilate the significance of Fair Play more completely, searching for a clearer or more profound meaning for a certain experience: a manager reported her experience when she questioned the company's Swedish matrix about

Fair Play and received the answer that the term relates to *anything that can be done publicly*. The manager thus started to include this in her repertoire, that is, in her understanding. When these stories are shared and collectivized they become repertoire, a conduct reference for the organization, and are transformed into organizational learning. This is why it is important for development areas to open collective spaces for reflection anchored in the practices and experiences of managers' daily lives. Experiences shared by colleagues, discussions held among members of the organization, the need to clarify to subordinates what Fair Play is or is not in a given situation, and identifying people considered examples of Fair Play in the company are shared moments which nurture understanding and promote refinements in the conceptions of Fair Play at times, and more significant changes at other times. The degree to which the environment, the managers and the company as a whole nurture these experiences and add quality to this discussion is what determines the possibility of developing competencies in this field. But it is important to observe that notwithstanding of Fair Play is a broadly disseminated concept in the company's official documents and training material, we did not observe, on the company's side, a more decisive movement towards Fair Play as defended by Park (1998); the need to develop new management and competence models that lead to a mentality shift, which values competitive competence that does not harm others over a strategy of supremacy over competitors. The company's action does not reflect a change in the management model.

In any case, when the managers were faced with situations which presented dilemmas, they took attitudes consistent with their understanding of Fair Play, as in the case where they rethought their procedures with clients, questioned behaviors adopted with their teams, etc. To some extent, Fair Play has already been incorporated in the company's daily life.

Thus we arrive at this study's principal contribution. Following the works of Ozar (1993) and Cheetham and Chivers (1996, 1998), competence research in the world of work began to consider ethics and values. Various studies have documented that ethical competencies are liable to development (SWIERCZEK; JOUSSE, 2014; SEKERKA; GODWIN; CHARNIGO, 2014; WITTE; DALY, 2014; INGOLS; CHAPIRO, 2014; EVA; SENDJAYA, 2013). However, these studies reveal the inefficacy of dealing with the development of these competencies from a purely pragmatic, rule-based perspective. Swierczek and Jousse (2014) showed that formative spaces in business schools and companies have a predominantly preventive agenda focused on error and risk, on the problem and not on the stimulation of moral curiosity. For this reason, some authors have proposed

that these formative spaces should emphasize: reflection and action; dialogue; the exercise of individual and collective questioning; experience and practice, going beyond cognitive concern, with a generic content of ethics in themselves. In addition, as ethical competencies can be linked to all sorts of questions, whether environmental, social, political or cultural (JOUTSENVIRTA; UUSITALO, 2010; CHEN, 2008), studying them has become a complex task.

The findings of this phenomenographic research can therefore make an important contribution to this debate. They make it possible to study professionals' mentality in depth and to analyse the nature of their conceptions, clarifying the notion of how managers conceive ethical questions individually and collectively. This will enable understanding of how specific conception groups rival and excel one another, producing varied actions/competencies. Phenomenography is therefore a methodology that permits this type of mapping, which can be confirmed, reviewed and expanded in future research and be at the service of development practices.

8 CONCLUSION

The different conceptions coexist in the organizational context and will be put to the test continuously. Depending on the strength with which the Fair Play anchor-conception is incorporated, debated and problematized and becomes the object of attention and of development ideas, one logic will prevail over another.

It can be asserted, however, that the degree of awareness or even the level of understanding about the meaning of a 'clean game' in companies does not in itself guarantee that competent measures are in course in all decisions: from the highest hierarchy to the lowest levels, in large or small cases – from hall gossip to product purchase. There can be no illusions that companies immersed in unequal societies can become islands of excellence in good conduct. Nevertheless, they cannot escape the responsibility of constantly fighting for better conduct and developing protection mechanisms against measures that hurt Fair Play.

The important thing is that the understanding of Fair Play significance, which is what ultimately nurtures competence, is being put to the test and questioned on a daily basis. Discussing Fair Play is, after all, examining the impacts of decisions and actions: who wins, who loses and how much is lost or gained. Gains can be competent form the financial point of view, on the one hand, but incompetent from the Fair Play point of view, on the other.

But what are the implications for development experiences? The degree of attention and priority the company gives to Fair Play development is what is in question. The different ways in which managers give meaning to Fair Play – as a rule, transparency or justice, if they attribute their conduct to innate behavior or not, is less important than ensuring the different conceptions are being debated, confronted, in other words, problematized.

Thus, we must first ask, what kind of development does the organization itself want to promote? What is the relevance of Fair Play in the organizational context? If it is just about following rules, then informative training can be sufficient, but if the idea is to advance towards the ability to make just judgments, then the development experiences must be of another order. If the 'clean game' is understood, as Commans (2005) says, as being 'on and off the field' (in this case, inside and outside the company), then developing managers for a clean game cannot be limited to training experiences that consider only the professional – they must consider the subject, the individual beyond organizational boundaries.

In the case of the organization studied in this research, part of the managers' conceptions already represents advancement in the way of understanding ethical competencies and values beyond the organizational environment, in the attempt to promote a clean game, independently of the context in which these managers are acting. In this sense, it is important to note that competence development experiences, in general, are limited to the company universe, not considering the need for a more complete education of the organizational actors.

To sum up, this study shows that knowing the different conceptions can contribute towards making Fair Play development more assertive and advanced. That was what happened at the time this research was resumed at the Brazilian branches where the study had been carried out. The discussion over the meaning of FP was resumed specially talking about the actions of training, above all, which turned to have as objective strengthen the idea that a clean political game does not limit to the execution of rules. Phenomenographic studies allows this type of intervention, as it enables understanding the current social dynamic in a work context, by specific groups who share the same experience.

It is worth considering a limitation of this study which presents, at the same time, an opportunity for new investigations. This study can be classified as pure phenomenological research, for it has sought to map the different conceptions of a given phenomenon (BOWDEN, 2005). New research could use developmental phenomenography (SANDBERG; TAGARMA, 2007), which has the fundamental purpose of designing formative projects that

develop more profound conceptions of fair play, thus helping individuals learn new competencies.

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