

Research Paper

Resistance to Change in the Public Sector: A Modern Concept?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The public sector is undergoing profound changes aimed at making it more efficient and closer to its citizens. However, the changes are not always well received by those involved in the processes. This can lead to a phenomenon known as resistance to change. It is in this the most common reasons that lead to the emergence of this phenomenon. Thus, the study of the reasons that lead to the emergence of this phenomenon gains relevance.

Methodology: Through documentary analysis, we sought to understand the main causes behind this phenomenon of resistance to change, particularly in the public sector. In this way, organizations can be better organizations can be better prepared for this event. The process begins with a search of the Scopus database, using previously defined criteria, which will yield a substantial set of results. They will then be analyzed according to different criteria in order to better understand the current study of the subject, as well as the causes that may be associated with this topic. With the criteria selected, it was possible to analyze the entire history of articles, so no time period will be left out of this analysis.

Results: It is understood that there are internal and external reasons, as well as individual and organizational reasons, which will affect the organization at different levels of intensity. It is also understood that the study of the subject has been focused particularly on articles, and that recent years have seen a greater number of studies, thus making it clear that this is a subject that is considered to be current.

Research limitations: The breadth of the words chosen throughout the study, as well as the specificity of some terms that may be used in other studies, may mean that some of these same studies were not reached during this research. Terminologies used specifically in certain countries, in particular the use of a language other than English, led to their exclusion from this research.

Practical implications: With this study, it becomes clearer how resistance to change can manifest itself, thus helping organizations to better adapt to the phenomenon in order to make it less impactful on the life of the organization.

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Originality: This study seeks to reach a sector with a unique importance in society, insofar as it is responsible for managing and carrying out the expectations and needs of society as a whole. It is therefore important to study how a phenomenon such as resistance to change can manifest itself, in order to be able to minimize its negative impacts, as well as provide solutions to overcome it.

Keywords: *Public Administration; Public Policy; Resistance to change; Public sector; Documentary analysis.*

1. Introduction

The only constant in the world is change. Every day there are changes in the most varied organizations, whether they are directly promoted or indirectly, as a result of the actions of third parties. The public sector is no different and has the concept of reform very close to its lines of action (McTaggart & O'Flynn, 2015). As it strives to improve its services, it also promotes recurring changes to its processes through the implementation of public policies. Despite the importance that policy implementation has in society, the reality is that there is not a wide range of studies that address the issue of implementing changes in public bodies (Fernandez & Rainey, 2017). What is also understandable is that, whether we are talking about a public or private body, not all the changes implemented will be well received by the organizations, which may put obstacles in the way of their implementation. This concept is called resistance to change. It is therefore important to study it in order to better understand what leads to this happening, so that it can be better controlled in the implementation of public policies.

Authors such as Castillo, Val or Fuentes are important to mention insofar as their studies and projects help to better explore the concept of resistance to change, defining it in a complete way. Their definitions follow the current considered to be the most conventional among the various scholars.

However, Ford and colleagues (2008) add other perspectives to the conceptualization of resistance to change that may be interesting, insofar as they depart somewhat from the mainstream of the studies carried out, namely for their ability to open up horizons for the study, defending the positivity that the concept can have in an organization.

This work will be innovative in that it compiles in a single article what other studies have developed over time. By reading this article it will be possible to understand what has been studied and identified as the main reasons for resistance to change in organizations.

In this way, the aim of the article is to analyze various articles that address the issue of the reasons that cause resistance to change, in order to compile the main reasons in a single article and thus have a more complete and comprehensive view of the problem. In other words, there will be a primary objective, which is to understand potential causes for the concept of resistance to change, an objective that will be achieved through a study that seeks to understand how and in what ways the subject has been studied over time.

Thus, this article will be relevant in compiling a whole set of reasons and possible symptoms of resistance to change, rather than having to search through a whole set of sources that look at the subject in a more specific way, focused on a specific sector or organization. This comprehensiveness will also be a strength at a theoretical level, in that it lists several causes of resistance to change in a single article, rather than focusing on one case study, as is the norm in articles on this subject.

In structural terms, the article will follow the most classic form. Firstly, a literature review will be carried out on the concept of resistance to change, initially in general terms, and then approaching the public sector in particular, so that the reader can become more familiar with the topic in a more sequential manner. After this first phase, the methodology will emerge, which will consist of analyzing articles from the main databases, such as Scopus or Web of Science, that explain the reasons that lead to the emergence of resistance to change. In this way, it will be possible to compile the main reasons. Finally, there will be a short section on conclusions, which will mention, for example, the main limitations of this article, as well as suggestions for future articles that may arise from this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reforms in the public sector

Society is constantly changing. Part of the responsibility for these changes is attributed to the public sector, which is seen as a central element in promoting and ensuring that all change occurs in line with expectations (Pereira and Correia, 2020, 2024). To achieve this goal, it has to be constantly adapting to ensure that it puts the needs of citizens first (Maia

et al., 2023, 2024). So, as you can understand, not everything is an easy challenge. Some changes entail risks and bring major challenges that make the work of the Public Administration complex (Pereira & Correia, 2022, 2024). Every day, the world's population feels the need to adapt, either of its own volition or as a result of the actions of others. So do organizations, particularly with the aim of growing in today's competitive market. Themes such as globalization, the popularization of the concept of "trends" or technological tools (which are increasing in number) are a constant feature of their lives, something that didn't happen as often as before (Rehman et al., 2021). In this sense, change is constant and necessary in order to adapt to the demands of an increasingly competitive market (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). It is for reasons such as these that major organizations, whether public or private, appear to be in a state of continuous change. When talking about change, they are not always referring to major changes. They can be simpler changes, such as minor alterations to procedures (Brunsson, 2017), but they can have some influence on the organization's performance.

When trying to conceptualize the concept of organizational change, studies tend to put two sides on the table. On the one hand, they look at change as a process, i.e. how the change will take place; on the other hand, they look at the content, i.e. what the change actually consists of, in terms of understanding what will change with these changes (Barnett & Carroll, 1995). Other authors, such as Helms-Mills and his other research colleagues (2008), present a more unilateral definition, saying that organizational change can be seen when a central pattern of behaviour in the functioning of organizations is altered. Both definitions have their strengths, and it could even be argued that they complement each other, in that one seeks to directly define what an organizational change consists of, while the other seeks to find the detail of the process that develops throughout the changes promoted in organizations. Changes in organizations can therefore occur for various reasons. As a general rule, a change is never promoted on the basis of a single reason, but on the basis of a set of reasons which, taken together, lead to the need for change. On the other hand, Weick and Quinn (1999) argue that change is not something linear, something that begins and ends, but rather something more natural and continuous, so organizations' concern with change reflects that they are aware of the continuity of this concept. The same authors also provide a conceptualization of the changes made in organizations, saying that they can be defined as episodic or continuous. According to the authors, "Episodic change follows the sequence unfreeze-transition-refreeze, whereas

continuous change follows the sequence freeze-rebalance-unfreeze.” (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

If changes in a private organization are not easy to manage on their own, the public sector has the added difficulty of acting on behalf of society, and its actions must be guided by the pursuit of the common interests of the community (Resende & Correia, 2023, 2024; Pereira & Correia, 2020, 2024). Particularly in recent years, this whole issue has become more relevant as the concept of accountability for results has gained a lot of interest among scholars of the public sector, seeking to be more critical and achieve higher rates of success and performance as a result of the evolution of this concept of accountability (Costa et.al, 2023, 2024). A combination of factors is therefore needed to create the capacity for change in the public sector, and this is one of the main challenges facing the leaders of these organizations. Concepts such as “public service motivation”, the relationship between management and other members of the organization, as well as the image that the members themselves have of the organization are important factors in defining the capacity for change that these organizations have (Homberg et al., 2019). On the other hand, the range of stakeholders in the public sector is much wider than in the private sector, which adds to the difficulty of change processes in the public sector (Leich & Davenport, 2003).

What should also be mentioned, and which highlights the importance of conceptualizing this concept, is the fact that, in recent times, the changes promoted in organizations are increasing in number, and also in unprecedented magnitudes (Hallencreutz & Turner, 2011). Looking at the introduction of technology in organizations, for example, it has been something that has taken over the agenda of organizations, which seek to include these tools in their daily lives, leading to a new and challenging need to adapt. On the other hand, issues such as sustainability have led to the need for a multi-level approach, capable of combining a whole range of factors in a process of change (Sroufe, 2017).

2.2 Resistance to change – Conceptualization

Now that the subject of organizational change has been duly introduced in this study, it is important to bridge the gap between the previous subject and the subject that will be addressed next, the conceptualization of the subject of resistance to change. Both concepts go hand in hand in the life of organizations, and the success of the first usually depends

on the ability to control the next. This is because, in fact, what studies conceptualize is that when the changes that are tried to be promoted in organizations are seen as unfavourable to their employees, they provoke an emotional defence mechanism, known as resistance, which will put up barriers to the normal implementation of the intended changes (Castillo, 2022). In this sense, it is important for organizations to be aware of the concept and to pay attention to it when taking the initiative to promote change in their organization (Val & Fuentes, 2003). The action should be specific and targeted, duly planned so as to be able to anticipate possible reactions resulting from the change to be promoted (Lozano, 2013; Dent & Goldberg, 1999). The pioneering studies also argue that the active participation of the various members in planning changes, as well as communicating the reasons for the need for change, will help to reduce the way in which individuals react negatively to change (Coch & French, 1948). In this way, it will be possible to promote changes capable of producing effects that, on the one hand, keep the organization dynamic and competitive and, on the other hand, promote progress in the organization and in the performance of its employees (Darmawan & Azizah, 2020).

It is for all these reasons that it is understandable that the subject of resistance to change has been of interest to academics since the 20th century, either with the aim of finding ways to overcome it or to better understand the motivations that lead to this phenomenon (Bareil, 2013). This is because, according to various studies, two out of every three attempts to change end in failure (Caldwell et al., 2008). It will therefore be essential to understand why, as well as to manage the entire change process in such a way as to ensure that it achieves what was proposed (Anikan, 2018).

Therefore, the concept of resistance to change can be conceptualized as any behaviour aimed at hindering a change in order to maintain the process as it was before (Val & Fuentes, 2003). In other words, for every change that is tried to be promoted, there will always be a risk that the members of the organization, identifying with the previous way of doing things, will defend that same point, thus resisting change (Heinze & Weber, 2016). From another point of view, we can look at change from a broader perspective, i.e. this concept can be subdivided into three dimensions: behavioral, which consists of understanding how members react to change; a cognitive dimension, which consists of understanding what individuals think about the change that is taking place and, finally, an affective dimension, that understands how they feel about change (Erwin & Garman, 2010; Oreg, 2006; Piderit, 2000).

Although the main studies related to the theory look at resistance to change as a behaviour taken by members of the organization when they perceive something unfavourable to them, Ford and his colleagues (2008) present a different theory, more complete according to them, in which they argue that the agents of change, in the course of their actions, will have an impact on the emergence of resistance, thus not being something as linear as certain studies try to make it seem. Furthermore, resistance can be a positive factor for change (Ford et al., 2008), as it will allow the change to be adapted to its members, making it more effective. On the other hand, Malhotra and the other researchers (2021), have an interesting point of view, which although it is close to the mainstream, brings a new point of view, saying that sometimes the members of the organization themselves, despite valuing the change that is being made, resist due to the fact that the new working logic conflicts with the previous one. This state of confusion can be the basis of resistance, thus proving that there doesn't have to be opposition as the basis of conflict.

According to several authors in their studies, resistance to change tends to be lower when organizations (and their employees) are faced with a crisis or a strong external challenge (Fernandez & Rainey, 2017), as they just want to see the difficulties overcome and are therefore more accepting of the changes that need to be made. The most recent studies related to changes in organizations and resistance to change are very much focused on the still recent COVID-19 pandemic, which was an external challenge to organizations and forced them to make profound changes at a procedural level, with serious consequences at an economic level. During this period, it was essential for organizations to be able to understand the reaction that their employees were showing, namely resistance to change, so that their success was not further jeopardized (Li et al., 2021). It was essential that the entire organization followed a single course and was able to maintain productivity at the levels possible, in order to minimize the impacts of the pandemic. For the public sector, the challenge was even more complex, as it had to find a way for services to remain as operational as possible, in order to serve society and meet its needs in a way that had never happened before (Mazzucato & Kattel, 2020).

This concludes this review of concepts, which aimed to explore the theme of resistance to change in the concept of organizational change. It is understood that change is, in fact, a constant in the life of organizations, which either on their own initiative or in response to external factors, are forced to constantly adapt. In the public sector, everything is made more complex by the fact that we are dealing with organizations that aim for something

more than profit (something that is considered the norm in the private sector). Regardless of the sector or organization we're talking about, any change that is promoted can be met with resistance to change on the part of the organization's members. In this sense, change must be managed in such a way as to control this phenomenon and achieve the initial objectives.

Therefore, the following chapter will be relevant in that it will seek to understand possible reasons that lead to the emergence of resistance to change. In this way, they will be factors to consider in future changes that organizations want to promote.

3. Methodology

The main aim of this study, as you can understand from the previous pages, is to look at the concept of resistance to change, a phenomenon that could jeopardize the normal course of implementing a public policy as it was intended. Therefore, the most practical part of this article will apply a study carried out by González and colleagues (2022), which consists of promoting a systematic review of the literature that allows us to learn about various concepts related to the main theme of resistance to change. In this sense, the same scheme will be applied with the aim of understanding, after analyzing the various articles, the main causes that lead to the emergence of resistance. Thus, the question that will guide the more practical part of this article, and which also guided the literature review previously carried out, will be: "What are the causes that lead to the emergence of resistance to change?".

The methodology applied in the aforementioned article will be reproduced here in the Scopus database, and each article will then be analyzed in order to achieve the proposed objectives. Of the various articles found, the abstract of each one will be read in order to understand which ones actually study what is intended to be achieved and which follow the line of the research question of this study. All the steps that guided the study will be presented, so that it can be replicated, somewhat along the lines of this article, which partially replicates an existing study.

3.1 How was the research carried out?

In the first phase, the major challenge was to narrow down the research topics in order to ensure that the results were as close as possible to the objective set for this study.

To guide this study, a set of objectives have been established that will guide this research. These are

Objective 1- How have studies about resistance to change developed over time?

Objective 2- What kind of studies have been conducted about resistance to change?

Objective 3- What are the main causes of resistance to change highlighted in existing studies?

The search was therefore refined, based on the article by González and colleagues (2022). By replicating the criteria they considered, 74 articles were found. Some restrictions were then applied, particularly in terms of the article's field of knowledge and language. This resulted in 52 articles, which were considered the basis of the study. The following table shows the criteria used in the search, so that the study could be replicated by other authors.

Table I: Criteria used in the research

| Database | Criteria |
|----------|--|
| Scopus | TITLE-ABS-KEY("sources of resistance to change" OR "causes of resistance to change" OR "factors of resistance to change" OR "determinants of resistance to change" OR "antecedents of resistance to change" OR "resistance-to-change sources" OR "resistance-to-change factors" OR "resistance-to-change causes" OR "resistance-to-change determinants" OR "resistance-to-change antecedents") AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE,"English") OR LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE,"Spanish") OR LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE,"Portuguese")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"DECI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"MULT") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"ECON") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"MEDI"))) |

Source: Own authorship.

Next, it is important to establish the criteria to be used to analyze each of the results. These are divided into two large blocks, one of which is descriptive and seeks to analyze the type of document present, as well as the date of publication. On the other hand, the second block is more analytical, and seeks to understand the context of the study, namely to understand what objective it had, and whether it points to causes for resistance to change. If the answer is positive, the third question arises, which seeks to find out what causes are pointed out in this article.

Throughout the analysis process, we will try to carry out an analysis that initially aims to understand and describe the number of existing studies, as well as the type of studies. This will make it possible to establish a kind of descriptive framework for the study of the subject. Only then will it make sense to move on to a more detailed analysis of each article, in order to see if they are related to the research objectives. If this is the case, it will then be possible to analyze and understand the main reasons for resistance to change.

4. Results

4.1 Result Analysis

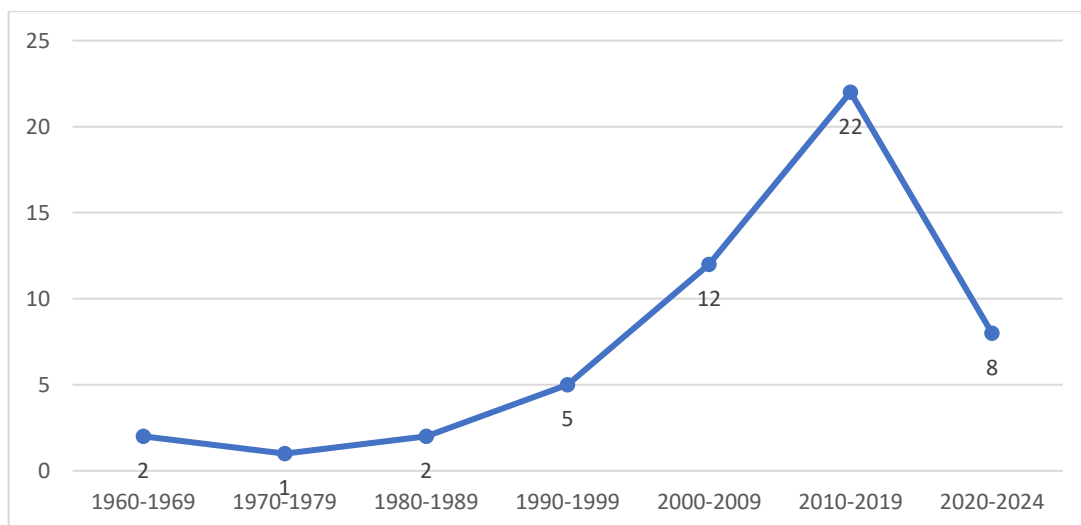
The purpose of this section is to respond and follow up on the previous point by analyzing the results of the research carried out.

Firstly, the more descriptive characteristics of the documents found will be analyzed. Here we will find data on the type of publications made, namely whether we are looking at articles, books, among others; on the other hand, we will present a graph that identifies the number of publications analyzed over the various years. In a second phase, the various articles will be analyzed in an attempt to obtain data that will provide clues as to the causes behind the phenomenon of resistance to change.

4.1.1 Date of Publication

The first objective is to understand the time frame of the documents obtained. The results are shown in the graph below:

Graphic 1: Number of publications per period



Source: Own authorship.

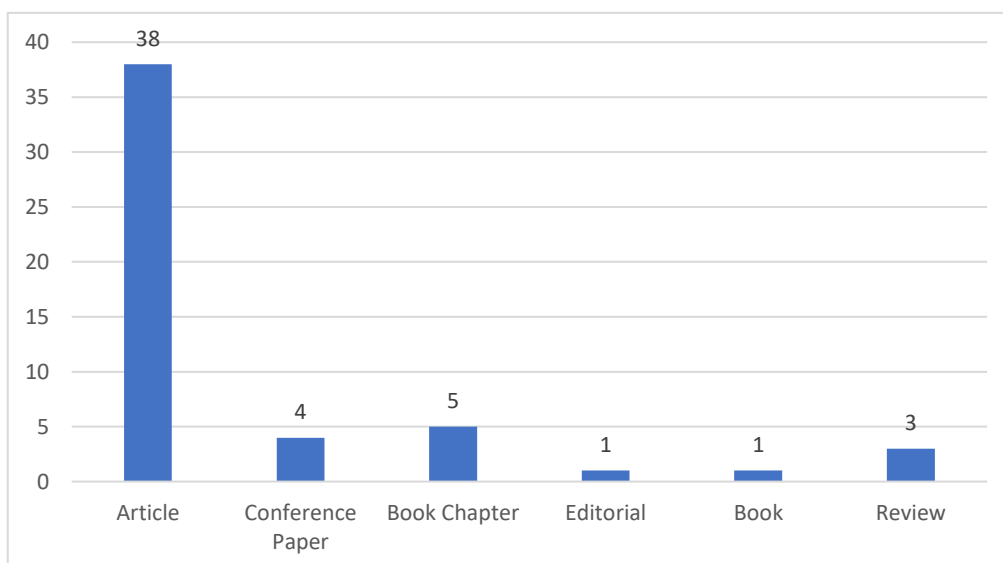
When analyzing the data presented here, it immediately becomes clear that the study of the subject is not new. Since the 1960s, in particular 1965 (the date of the first publication considered), studies have focused on the subject. What also seems clear when analyzing the subject is that the turn of the century has also brought an increase in interest in studying the subject. The trend has been growing and although the 2020-2024 period has reversed the direction of the curve, this may not be significant as there are still around 5 years to go until the 2020-2029 period closes. The fact that psychology-related topics have gained more attention in recent years could also be behind this increase. There used to be a certain taboo regarding the study of these topics, but this has been broken down over the last few years, so it's only natural that there are more studies on psychological topics.

It will be interesting to understand how the pandemic may have influenced the number of studies on the subject, as this may be a factor that leads to some kind of resistance to change. Other conclusions can then be drawn, namely whether the pandemic has reversed the pace and quantity of studies published in the area.

4.1.2 Type of Publication

The next stage of this analysis, which aims to understand what kind of publications have been made on the subject of resistance to change, will be based on the criteria used by the Scopus platform for publication types. The results are shown in the following bar chart:

Graphic 2: Type of Publication



Source: elaborated by the authors.

The results obtained are quite clear. There is a strong preference for writing scientific articles over the other types, which was to be expected given the database being analyzed. However, the low number of conference papers may be surprising, given that the interest that has been shown in the subject could be an incentive to hold more conferences on the subject, which would consequently lead to more conference papers on the causes of resistance to change.

The fact that there aren't many book chapters or books on the subject is also a surprise. However, given the number of existing articles, it's to be expected that there will be books on the subject in the meantime, since nowadays there have been several books compiling articles on the subject. It will be interesting to see how the topic develops in the scientific community.

4.1.3 Are there any causes of resistance? If so, which ones?

When analyzing the articles selected for this case study, it is immediately clear that not all of them focus their attention on the causes that lead to the emergence of the phenomenon being studied here. Even so, the vast majority address the issue and end up following a common line, which defends the existence of external and internal reasons that lead to the emergence of resistance to change, as well as individual and organizational reasons. As far as the difference between internal and external reasons is concerned, the former are subdivided into individual and organizational, while the latter are the result of external impulses, such as the lack of incentives to promote change. In order to better understand the issue, the following table seeks to illustrate what can be understood by external and internal reasons.

Table II: Reasons for resistance to change

| Individual Reasons | Organizational reasons |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Cognitive rigidity | Culture and tradition of the organization |
| Fear of change | Poor vision of change, based on previous experiences |
| Sentimental reactions | Dynamics of organizational groups |
| Lack of interest | Lack of communication |
| Lack of learning capacity | |
| Lack of alternatives to change | |

Source: Own authorship.

When analyzing individual issues, it is clear that the personality of individuals can have an important impact on the issue. The fact that individuals have an aversion to change, or personal interests above the rest, reveals personality traits that are incompatible with the

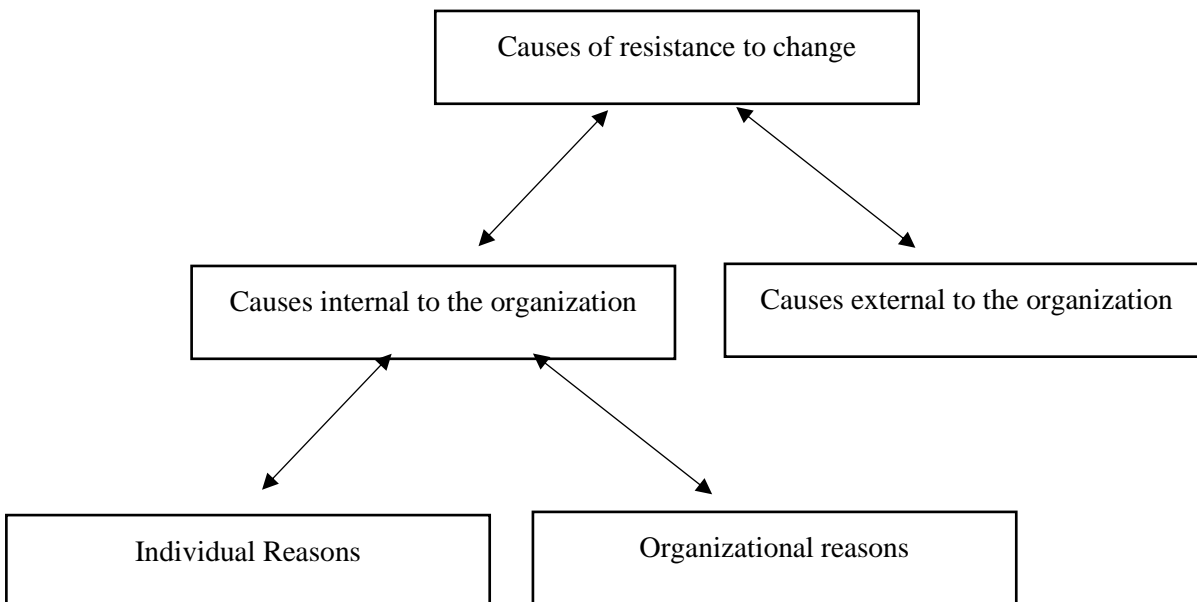
change process they want to implement. It will therefore be important for change agents to recognize the personality traits of their members so that they can take action to reduce the impact of change. On the other hand, when the individual reasons are of a cognitive nature, namely the inability to learn the new ways of working, it is the responsibility of the organizations to prepare and train their members so that they are as prepared and confident as possible for the changes that are coming.

On the other hand, when we talk about organizational issues, the problem may be different. If an organization's culture follows one course and the changes are intended to follow another, the process becomes incompatible. That's why it's important that the organization's culture is recognized and that the changes follow a similar line. Attempting radical changes could result in unintended results, leading to a loss of resources for the organization.

5. Discussion

By analyzing the previous table and making a bridge to what is being analyzed here, it is possible to establish a scheme that illustrates the various causes of resistance to change.

Figure 1: Summary diagram of the causes of resistance to change



Source: Own authorship.

With the analysis duly conducted, it is time to say that the three objectives have been duly met. As far as the first objective is concerned, it is understood that recent times have promoted a number of studies in the area, which may indicate that the topic is gaining popularity among researchers. The second objective was also met, with articles being the main form of study in the research, which proves that the subject has been properly studied. Finally, the third objective was also met, with the conclusion that resistance to change can be caused by issues outside the organization, as well as by internal issues, namely organizational issues or individual issues relating to each member of the organization.

This study carried out here has made important contributions, which will be very relevant for the future. From the outset, it is clear that the study of the subject is not new, although recent years have seen an increasing number of studies. In addition, the studies analysed show that resistance to change can result from external stimuli, as well as internal stimuli from within the organization itself, such as customs and organizational culture. As far as internal stimuli are concerned, they are divided into individual and organizational, both of which are sources of resistance to change.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this study we have tried to understand, through a review of articles, what has been studied in the area of resistance to change. It is understood that resistance to change can be a difficult obstacle to overcome when implementing changes in organizations, so the issue should be looked at seriously in order to understand how best to approach it in future organizational changes.

In theoretical terms, this study, by following the line of a previous study, reinforces that with small methodological changes, results can be achieved that are more focused on the scientific objective of each study. Furthermore, by including a detailed methodology, this article can be replicated in the future and adapted to other studies that seek to study variants of the theme, or just replicate the study in the future at other time intervals. In practical terms, the article helps us to better understand what the literature says about resistance to change, particularly in terms of the reasons that cause it, and is therefore useful for better understanding the concept, as well as overcoming the adversities that arise from it.

However, this study is not without its limitations. Studies that attempt to compile other studies may not always be totally complete, as the criteria used are rarely capable of including all the studies on the subject. The breadth of the words chosen throughout the study, as well as the specificity of some terms that may be used in other studies, may mean that some of these same studies were not reached during this research. Terminologies used specifically in certain countries, in particular the use of a language other than English, led to their exclusion from this research. Even so, in the future it might be interesting to replicate this study, in order to understand whether the growing trend of studies on the subject continues until the end of this decade. Other terms could also be used to see if the results obtained are in line with these.

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