The Influence of Cultural Contexts in Learners' Attributions for Success and Failure in Foreign Language Learning

The Influence of Cultural Contexts in Learners' Attributions for Success and Failure in Foreign Language Learning

By

Ana Sofia Gonzalez

To my beloved mother Elvira Gonzalez and daughter Alícia
for all they had to endure during this research.
Love you both a lot!!!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF CHARTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the help, support, good will, patience, and effort of some very important people.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Alan Tonkyn, for all the support, help, relevant feedback, encouragement and patience, for helping me become the researcher I am today, for teaching me so much and for always being there when I needed. I would also like to thank Dr. Marion Williams (my 'adopted supervisor') for the invaluable suggestions and advice, for always being there when I needed, and for being the wonderful person she is. I will be grateful to both of them forever.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Sandro Leidi and Dr. Francisco Casanova for the advice and help with the statistical part of my research, to Dr. Celeste Sambeny for replacing me in my lectures when I had to be away to write, and for all her support, encouragement and love, to Prof. Joan McCormack for proof-reading part of this thesis in such a short time, and to Dr. Teresa Arroteia, who immediately accepted to be my second coder as far as the coding of difficult attributional statements was concerned, and with whom I had very interesting discussions on the matter.

I would also like to thank Dr. Daniel Mingas, Director of ISCED – Luanda, Dr. Mário Pinto de Andrade, Rector of Universidade Lusíada de Angola, Dr. Manuel Correia, Director of the Faculty of Economics and Dr. Marcané Laserra, Director of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. for their generosity, understanding, and support in allowing me to be away from my lectures for some time in order to finish writing my thesis.

My deepest thanks to my parents, especially my mother, for all the support, and for working so hard so that I could have the brightest future I could, and for looking after my daughter while I was way. One thousand apologies to my dearest daughter for all the time I had to be away from her, time that I will most certainly compensate for. I love you all very much.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale for the Study

Motivation is considered to directly influence new language learning and the successful performance of what has already been learnt in that motivated learners will participate in activities thought to lead them to learning, while unmotivated learners will ignore these activities (Schunk et al. 2010). Moreover, achieving one's learning goals will increase one's motivation to set new goals and learn more, so learning can influence motivation in as much as motivation influences learning. The interaction between motivation and learning is, therefore, a dynamic reciprocal process (Ushioda, 1996; Schunk et al. 2010). For this reason, English language teachers have been concerned with engaging their learners in activities which will boost their motivation to learn the language. There has, thus, been an increasing demand for practical classroom activities teachers can use to generate and sustain learners' motivation (Dörnyei, 2001a). Suggestions like fostering cooperative learning, enhancing learners' self-esteem and personal responsibility were presented by Ferlazzo (2011), while Harmer (2012) discussed the importance of positive affect and rapport, challenge, agency, and learner autonomy, to sustain motivation. Dörnyei (2001a) proposed a framework for motivational strategies that included actions to be taken by teachers in order to gather the necessary conditions for these strategies to be put into practice (like rapport, the creation of a supportive classroom environment and establishment of rules to be followed by groups of learners), initiating motivation (promoting intrinsic, intercultural and instrumental values and attitudes, increasing success expectations and goal-orientedness, and shaping learners' erroneous beliefs about how and how fast learning takes place into more realistic ones), sustaining motivation (through the use of some of the strategies mentioned above), and encouraging positive self-evaluation (through encouraging attributions for success and failure that allow for progress to be made, providing realistic, adaptive and specific feedback, and increasing self-worth beliefs) (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011).

One factor that stands out in the framework discussed above is the one related to learners' beliefs and perceptions of their successes in learning, present in three of the stages of this framework. In fact learners' perceptions of their successes and failures have been found to exert considerable influence on motivation to continue learning, and are the focus of a cognitive theory of motivation: attribution theory. Focusing on the factors to which learners attribute their successes and failures in different fields of achievement, more attribution theory research has been conducted in areas other than foreign language learning (Weiner, 1985a; Goudas, et al. 1994; Vispoel and Austin, 1995; Biddle and Goudas, 1997; Vlachopoulos, et al., 1997); Kivulu and Rogers, 1998). This specific area has received increasing attention in the last fifteen years. Researchers have tried to find out if learners attributed their successes and failures more to themselves or to others, if these success and failure causes were more stable or unstable, under learners' control or under the control of others. Still, the main variables researched have been age, gender, language learnt and perceived level of success, and there have been more studies done with children than with adults (Williams and Burden, 1999; Williams, et al., 2002; Williams, et al., 2004). These studies have revealed that learners' perceptions of their successes and failures in foreign language learning differ according to their age group, gender, whether they are more success-oriented or failure-oriented, and depending on the FL they are studying. Nevertheless, there has been a suggestion that the reasons learners present for the successes and failures in FL learning might also differ in terms of another variable: learners' own culture.

The idea that culture and/or context-related factors influence motivation is not a new one. Several scholars have discussed this relationship and have included context-related factors in second language motivation models and frameworks. Gardner's socio-educational model, separating second language acquisition into antecedent factors of gender, age, and learning history, individual difference variables, language acquisition contexts, and learning outcomes, emphasised the influence of context in one's motivation (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1992, 1993). Crookes and Schmidt (1991) discussed the existence of four degrees of motivation: the micro level, the classroom level, the syllabus/curriculum level, and the extracurricular level. Dörnyei (1994) established three levels of motivation: the language level (influence of culture and society), the learner level (individual characteristics), and the learning situation (context-specific motives). In their framework of L2 motivation, Williams and Burden (1997) discussed internal and external factors that influence one's motivation to learn, including 'wider family networks, the local

education system, conflicting interests, cultural norms, and societal expectations and attitudes'[1] (which they called 'the broader context') and time (an element of the learning environment), contributing to the discussion around context and time dimensions of motivation. Ushioda (2009) put forward a person-in-context relational view of motivation that expressed the need to see the learner as part of a context with which s/he interacts and is influenced by. More specifically, peers, teachers, family, school, and socio-economic status have been reported to influence learner motivation (Dörnyei, 2001b; Wentzel and Wigfield, 2009; Schunk, et al., 2010; Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011).

The influence culture (or specific features of particular contexts) may exert on how learners make sense of their successes and failures (i.e. the relationship between culture and attribution theory), has been considerably researched in the 1980s, when researchers working in different contexts conducted studies aimed at establishing the relationship between success and failure attributions in language learning with learners' socio-economic backgrounds (Niles, 1985); Butler, 1986; Misra and Misra, 1986), type of reward structure (Ames and Felker, 1979), level of achievement (Hau and Salili, 1990; Ho, et al., 1999), degree of success expectancy (Murphy-Berman and Sharma, 1986), and degree of Westernisation (Kashima and Triandis, 1986). This influence has more recently been suggested in a small-scale study carried out with teenage students from Bahrain (Williams, et al., 2001), which has shown that learners who come from a culture that considers the teacher as the almighty source of knowledge, and whose ability to deliver knowledge should never be questioned, will tend to be more internal in their attributions for failure and external in their reasons for success. In other words, they could blame themselves more for their failure and consider their success to be a result of teacher competence, for instance. If we think that learners' attitudes towards their past learning (especially if they are negative attitudes), may hinder their progress in their learning of the foreign language, and may even determine whether they will carry on learning the same or another language, the fact that there seem to be learners that are even more vulnerable than others because of their culture is of some concern, and deserves some investigation.

During her fourteen-year English teaching experience in Angola, the present researcher has come across adult learners with a negative attitude towards foreign language learning, thinking they will never manage to learn because they are not good at learning English. She has also observed learners' behaviour towards their teachers, and seen that they consider

[1] Williams and Burden, 1997: 140).

them as the ones that know all. In fact, some Angolan learners believe that if the teacher is so all-knowing, it cannot be his/her fault if a student fails. Moreover, she has witnessed an excessively humble attitude (and occasionally even fear) when facing the teacher, as well as an extra care in avoiding contradicting him/her at all costs. Since this behaviour from Angolan learners resembles the behaviour demonstrated by Bahraini learners in Williams, Burden and Al-Baharna's study (2001), it would be interesting to find out if both cultures would present similar reasons for their successes and failures in foreign language learning, and also if these differ from the ones presented by their Western-European peers mentioned in other recent studies (Williams, and Burden, 1999; Tse, 2000; Williams, Burden, and Lanvers, 2002; Williams, et al, 2004). What is more, my experience in teaching in both public and private universities in Luanda has also shown me that the scenario in private universities is different from the one in the public university, mainly due to socio-economic differences, which also caused some groups to have been more exposed to other cultures (some of which are generally labelled 'western cultures') and, therefore, more influenced by them.

1.2. Aims and Significance of the Study

This study combines the long discussed and intricate concept of culture with the equally complex concept of motivation (Dörnyei, 1998; 2001b). More precisely, it will seek to describe the possible influence of learners' cultural contexts on the sense they make of their past language learning experiences, whether perceived as more or less successful. It aims to add to what is known about attribution theory, by attempting to fill two gaps in its literature: first, the fact that most attempts to relate culture to students' attributions for success and failure have been based on researchers' assumptions concerning the cultures they dealt with, instead of researching and describing the cultures in question; second, the fact that the classification of students' attributions as internal/external, stable/changeable, controllable/uncontrollable, has been made by researchers, according to their own judgement, instead of being determined by the students themselves.

Thus, this study will seek to uncover the reasons to which Angolan learners attribute their successes and failures in English language learning, whether they perceive these reasons as internal or external, stable or changeable, controllable or uncontrollable, and if these attributions differ from the ones presented by learners from Bahrain, Western-Europe, and other cultural contexts. It will also try to investigate differences and

similarities in the attributions presented by learners who have had high exposure to other cultures and by those who have experienced little or no exposure at all, differences and similarities between the attributions mentioned by learners coming from a more traditional background and the ones presented by those coming from a more progressive one, and differences and similarities between the attributions presented by younger and older learners. This study is also meant to discover Angolan teachers' attributions for their learners' successes and failures, how these differ from their learners' and from their fellow teachers in other cultural contexts, in terms of locus of causality, stability and controllability. Moreover, learners' perceptions of their success and failure attributions in relation to their dimensions will be compared to the present researcher's perceptions in a search for differences and similarities.

A lot has been done in the area of motivation, but not much on how culture can influence learners' motivation to learn a foreign language. Since attribution theory is the field of motivation that deals with learners' perceptions of success and failure in FL learning, and if we take into account the influence these perceptions exert on present and future learning of the language, it is important that this gap is filled in, and cultural influences are identified. This study does not intend to produce definitive conclusions in relation to this issue, but rather hopes to be a considerable step towards further development of attribution theory. It also hopes to bring the social and the cognitive traditions of psychology together, encouraging other researchers to include a little of 'both worlds' in their own research. It should also be a valuable contribution to other fields such as social psychology-the field of psychology concerned with the influence of the environment (society, family, school, etc) on the behaviour (habits, beliefs, feelings, ideas) of an individual-and social constructivism (an approach of cognitive psychology that investigates the way people perceive themselves and others, how they make sense of the world, and how they understand their actions and shape their personality when in contact with society and their own environment).

1.3.Defining Terms

Before we get into the heart of this study, a few words of explanation are in order. Since some of the terms used in this work can be understood in different ways, it is important to indicate how they are to be used in this book.

The author would like to start by clarifying what is meant by a concept used in the title of this study: foreign language. It is known that there has

always been a great discussion around the difference between this concept and second language (L2), and that this difference has become smaller and smaller. For the purposes of this study, whenever referring to foreign language, the researcher will mean a language that is spoken as a native language and that is not used in the country where it is being studied as the mean of instruction or as an official language. In Angola, the official language and language of instruction is Portuguese. There are also the local (native) languages that people might use in more restricted circles (family and members of the same ethnic group), but are not currently used for legal or instruction purposes. English and French (whichever the individual chooses to learn) are taught at school from grade 7 onwards as foreign languages. Although a clear line can be drawn between L2 and foreign language, these two concepts will be used interchangeably as synonyms for the purposes of this study. Thus, when referring to L2 the author will mean foreign language.

As previously stated, this study focuses on a theory of motivation. Therefore, it is important that we clarify what we mean by motivation (although this issue will be dealt with in more detail in the following chapter). Much has been said about motivation and many researchers have attempted to define this term, but have never reached a consensus (Dörnyei, 1998). They do agree with one thing though: motivation has to do with human behaviour. For the purposes of this study, motivation is to be considered as the desire of achieving a goal and the force that turns this desire into action, keeping the individual going, ideally until the predetermined goal is reached.

Other concepts that need to be defined are culture and cultural factors. It has been proved over time that culture is one of the most difficult concepts to describe, and a consensus on its definition is yet to be reached (Brooks 1968; Scollon & Scollon 2001; Seelye 1993). For the purposes of this study, culture will be considered as the set of habits, values and beliefs shared by a group of people and construed by them over time in interaction with each other and the environment surrounding them, leading to similar patterns of behaviour. Cultural factors will then be these habits, values, beliefs (i.e. characteristics) that, being shared by a number of people, allow for them to be considered as a cultural group (please refer to chapter III for more information on this issue).

Two cultural distinctions discussed throughout this work are traditional and progressive. It is therefore important to say what the researcher means by these in general terms, although this study also includes an empirical investigation aimed at providing more detailed definitions in relation to its objectives. Also, a more detailed account of the characteristics of these

concepts will be provided in the next chapter, according to previous research. For the purposes of this study, a traditional culture is to be seen as one made of beliefs, moral values, habits, and behaviours, preserved and transmitted from generation to generation, practised for a long time and not open to changes derived from exposure to other cultures. A progressive culture, on the other hand, is to be seen as more open to other cultures, as well as more bound to adopt habits, customs and values of other cultures through constant exposure to them.

The final two concepts requiring clarification are success and failure. In this work, success will refer to the achievement of one's goal(s) (achievement of the whole or parts of it), in a way that pleases him/her. Concerning language learning, success will mean meeting the goal or goals established by each learner in a way that satisfies him/her. This achievement can be in every aspect of the language or in parts of the language (e.g. grammar, vocabulary etc). Failure will be the non-achievement of these goals in a satisfactory way. It is important to say that, one may fail in an aspect of learning a language (for example an aspect of grammar) and succeed in other areas. Therefore, failure will mean not doing well in an aspect of language learning, and not really being unable to learn the language at all.

1.4. Outline of the Book

As previously stated, this research intends to find a connection between cultural factors that are characteristic of specific groups of people and the attributions these people make for their successes and failures in learning a foreign language.

Thus, in Chapter 2, a detailed description of the Angolan context will be presented, including a comprehensive account of the characteristics of more traditional and more progressive cultural groups according to what has been written on the subject, the status of English in Angola, its place in the education system and how English language teaching takes place.

Second, in Chapter 3, an account of the main theories behind this study will be provided. First, a brief account of what social constructivism is and how this approach is related to attribution theory will be provided. Second, some relevant issues concerning L2 motivation will be discussed: what motivation in language learning is, major theories of motivation (including the one that is central to this study–attribution theory), and the place of context in some influential motivation models. Third, issues more particular to attribution theory will be dealt with: the development of the theory through time, attribution dimensions (causality, stability, and

controllability), attribution biases, intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of attributions, the importance of retraining one's attributions, and factors influencing attributions. Fourth, since this study is an attempt to relate students' culture to the attributions they construe, relevant issues concerning culture and cultural factors will be focused on. A fuller account of what culture is will be provided, followed by characteristics and types of culture, elements and syndromes of cultural contexts, and the influence culture may exert on one's behaviour. Finally, a relationship between culture and attribution theory will be established through a description of some studies previously conducted on this matter.

Chapter 4 starts by providing the research questions that guide this research, followed by a description of the places where the research was carried out and the characteristics of the research participants. Moreover, the methods used to collect data and the way it was analysed are described in detail. It is important to say that, since part of data collected (data from focus groups) was necessary to the development of other research instruments (questionnaires), the results deriving from this data are dealt with within this chapter (and not in the findings chapter).

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 show the analysis of the results from the students' and teachers' questionnaires and students' interviews, arranged around the main aims of this research and separated in terms of results on attributions for success and for failure. Chapter 5 will present the results related to learners and teachers' attributions for success and failure in general terms, while Chapter 6 will deal with learners' attributions and how these are influenced by these learners' cultural characteristics, socio-economic background, and age. Chapter 7 will focus on the binary logistic regression analysis conducted to uncover the relationship between demographic and cultural factors and learners' attributions.

Finally, Chapter 8 includes a discussion of the main findings of this study, arranged around the research questions that guided it, followed by the conclusions, implications for teachers and learners, and suggestions for further research.

Chapter Two

Contextual Background

As previously mentioned, this study was conducted in Angola, a southern African country not known by many people, especially those outside southern Africa. Taking into account the little knowledge people outside the region might have about this country and the fact that in order to understand some of the points made throughout this work one needs to be aware of some of the characteristics of this country's people, this chapter will provide some insights into some aspects of this context. First and foremost, some cultural traits of Angolan people, based on information gathered from the little literature published on the subject, will be described. Greater emphasis will be placed on the traits that distinguish more traditional Angolans from more progressive ones. It is important to remember, however, that this will be merely a general account of these cultural traits, made according to what has been written on the subject, whereas the present study also included an *empirical* research study of the cultural characteristics of more traditional and more progressive groups in Angola, to be presented later on in this work. Apart from presenting some cultural traits in general terms, this chapter will also discuss the place of English in the Angolan society, its place in the educational system, and the way English language teaching takes place.

2.1. Culture in Angola and Its Influence in Learning

When it comes to talking about culture as the set of habits, attitudes, beliefs, discourse features and experience of events shared by a group of people within a specific social context, and construed by them over time and through interaction with each other, African countries are amongst the most difficult countries to describe, and Angola is, obviously, not an exception. The reasons for this are threefold. First and foremost, the colonisation of the country put people in contact with a westernised way of living brought (and imposed) by the Portuguese (Oyebade 2007; Chabal 2007; Newitt 2007). Second, the nearly-three-decade civil war forced people (who could afford it) to escape to other countries (both African and

European–mainly Portugal). The war also delayed the development of the country forcing parents (who could afford it) to send their children to do their high school and/or university studies abroad (mainly in countries like Portugal, the United States, England, South Africa, Russia, and Brazil), due to the country's poor educational system and limited number of institutions. Third, the end of the war made Angola one of the most wanted countries in terms of job opportunities, and a byword for easy and fast wealth and prosperity, caused by the need to rebuild the country, as well as the need for development. This, of course, has attracted immigrants from all over the world with their own customs and lifestyles. All of these factors have encouraged the exposure of Angolans to cultures from outside their region and the continent.

Of all the cities of Angola, the one that lives this multicultural situation most is Luanda, not only as a result of being the capital of the country with the government's headquarters, main public institutions and ministries, but also as the one place the war barely reached. Everybody that could, escaped to Luanda in search for safety, and Luanda is now estimated to have a population of 4 million, out of the country's total of about 12 million citizens (Oyebade 2007). This, along with the mixture of different nationalities that can be found in the city, has given rise to a multicultural society, trapped between their own traditional values, and the ones of foreign people. As Oyebade says, "Traditional and modern Euro-Christian western values coexist and define the country's cultural character" (2007: 29).

Many factors are responsible for people's behaviour and attitudes in a number of different situations and contexts, and towards institutions, other people, and society at large. For the purposes of this study, factors that directly or indirectly influence learning and education (Brooks 1968) will be discussed: attitudes to authority, relationship with others, individualism and collectivism, attitudes to personal efficacy and values supported by society at large. Two groups in Angolan society will be distinguished in this thesis: the group of people who remain more attached to Angolan traditions (henceforth referred to as 'more traditional'), and the group of people who have been more exposed to 'western' cultures (henceforth referred to as 'more progressive').

Taking into account Angola's early history in terms of education, aggravated by the war situation, one is more likely to find the group less exposed to 'western' traditions in the public university (because it is free and these people would be less economically advantaged, but perhaps also brighter or, at least, very hard-working, as places in the public university are highly competitive and difficult to get), whereas learners who have

been more exposed to 'western' traditions due to travel opportunities, constant access to international TV channels and living and studying abroad, are more likely to attend private (and expensive) universities. This does not mean, however, that less economically advantaged people do not attend private universities or that more economically advantaged people are not bright enough to attend and/or do not attend public universities, but it is the reason why, in the following sections, points relevant to distinctions between public and private institutions will be made, some of which based on this study's researcher's experience of living in Angola and working in both public and private institutions.

2.1.1. Attitudes towards Authority

Authority has often been associated with power, and power can mostly be observed in people's attitudes, but also in people's discourse. This "... vertical disparity between the participants in a hierarchical structure" (Scollon & Scollon, 2001: 52) and the distance often imposed, especially by the one who represents the highest authority, has been constant in Angolans' lives, probably due to the history of the country itself: first the competition for power between the Portuguese and the Angolan people, then the competition for power between the several Angolan liberation forces (which resulted in years of civil war) (Oyebade, 2007; Chabal & Vidal, 2007). The war made Angolans respect authority mainly out of fear, and this resulted in today's attitude towards people who are hierarchically above you. This attitude is observed at all levels of society: the people in relation to the government, civil citizens to the police, employees to employers, co-workers to higher-hierarchically-positioned co-workers, teachers to course coordinators, students to teachers, children to their parents (Oyebade, 2007). This is expressed even in Angolan arts and crafts. You can find the mask of Cihongo (the spirit of wealth), for example, which is a Cokwe mask, and that represents age, wealth and chiefly power and authority.

As far as the education setting is concerned, two different relationships can be described: the one between lecturers and higher university authorities, and the one between lecturers and students.

Let us first describe the first. In both public and private settings, hierarchy is very much marked, and the attitude of ordinary lecturers towards anyone who holds a high position within the university is one of respect and deference. Even among lecturers who have some sort of position of responsibility, there is always the same respect, especially towards anyone who is hierarchically above them. There is also some

special respect for senior lecturers, especially on the part of junior lecturers who, in some cases, were once their students.

In terms of the authority relationship between students and lecturers, differences in attitude between more progressive and more traditional groups may be observed. Students in the public university come from a more humble background. They tend to be more attached to the country's traditions, perhaps because their contact with the 'western' cultures has not been so great (mainly due to economic reasons). So, they tend to see the teacher as the supreme source of knowledge that should not be challenged; the one who knows. There is total deference to the teacher's authority, also because s/he is seen as the one who has the power to pass or fail the student. All this deference for the teacher's authority is expressed through the use of different linguistic strategies of independence such as apologising, use of titles (mainly 'Doctor'), and minimising threat (Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

Students at private universities tend to see themselves as clients more than really students. They believe that, because they are paying fees, it is the teacher's job to feed knowledge into their minds, and that they are at liberty to come to classes when they want, sit for tests when they want and still have to pass because they paid a lot of money to be there. As most usually come from wealthier (and most often more powerful) families, they tend to consider themselves powerful as well, and tend to recognise little, if any, authority on the part of the teacher. These students usually make sure their lecturers know their family names so they can show they come from powerful families, and intimidate the lecturers. Of course this is most felt in the morning shift, where you can find younger students, but afternoon and evening students (usually mature students, and usually with a professional life already) feel more at liberty to challenge the lecturer than students in the public university, because they are paying fees. So here social class exerts a certain degree of influence on power and authority relationships, and on who people consider to hold the power of authority. It is important to say, however, that although the teacher's authority might not always be recognised by students in private universities, their parents' authority (especially the father's authority) is very much respected, as well as feared.

2.1.2. Relationships with Others

Some of these relationships have already been summarily presented above, but it is important to examine relationships in more detail.

i. Kinship

The most important relationship in an African society (and Angola is no exception) is the one you have with your family (Oyebade, 2007). The concept of family in Angola is quite different from the western one. Western family units are often made up simply of parents and children. This does not mean there are not other relatives, but they tend to live their own lives apart from the rest of the family, getting together only on special occasions. In Angola, on the contrary, you find the concept of the extended family. Everybody in the family tends to live close to one another and you can find many family members sharing the same house, in addition to just parents and their children. While in western families one considers as family usually only the most immediate relatives, in Angola, even the most distant cousin of a cousin of a cousin is a close relative. And family does not only get together on special occasions. They usually meet at weekends for late Saturday or Sunday lunch (that usually lasts until late in the evening). But perhaps the most important aspect of the Angolan culture as far as family is concerned (and the most relevant for this research) is the respect Angolans have for the elderly.

The oldest people in a family are seen as wise and are usually asked for advice, especially when there is a problem. And one person's problem becomes the family's problem, and family members get together to try to solve it. Of course, nowadays, the degree of family interference in family members' problems depends on the degree of exposure to other cultures (like 'western' ones), but it is still present. This practice has been inherited from the days when everybody was a member of a village and each village had a 'soba' (the headman, usually the oldest member of the community) that looked after all the community members and to whom people would go to if they had a problem – whatever that problem was. The 'soba' would then advise and in many cases decide on what should be done. Sobas were also responsible for the education of the youngsters through proverbs, legends and storytelling around bonfires. In fact, one of the most important symbols of Angola is 'O Pensador' (The Thinker), a sculpture usually produced in wood, usually thought to be the image of a soba, and one that represents the wisdom and knowledge of the elderly (Oyebade, 2007). One can also find masks (part of the most traditional Angolan art) that usually represent the spirit of lineage, clan or family ancestors. Therefore, in Angolan society, the elderly are expected to have an important part in the education of young family members.

It is also important to briefly consider the relationships with friends and co-workers. For Angolans, friends are a very important part of their

lives, and when they are really close, they do everything together, share each other's lives and are considered as part of the family. As far as work is concerned, although there is usually a good relationship between team members, a fellow co-worker is usually seen as a competitor, and competition is usually very high, encouraging individualism (which contradicts, to a certain extent, the spirit of collectivism that is inherent of the Angolan society, as discussed later in this chapter).

ii. Responsibilities and Duties

Talking about responsibilities and duties in the Angolan society takes us to the issue of gender roles. As Oyebade says, "In the Angolan household, as in most families there is shared responsibility based on gender and age" (2007: 121). Although much has changed in terms of gender roles, some beliefs still remain part of the society's conscience, and as Oyebade declares, factors like western culture and religious influence, together with the civil war have

> "... not totally obliterated traditional beliefs and practices, marriage patterns, and gender roles. Angolans still cherish the family institution and kin relationships; marriage is important, the bearing of children is considered essential, and importance is placed on gender roles and division of labour" (2007: 114).

So, although men and women are now considered as equals in that they both work and have their own salaries and professional careers, the man is always seen as the head of the family, and the one who is responsible for supporting the family, the woman has the main responsibility of looking after the house: cooking, washing and making sure the house is clean and well-organised. As stated in Oyebade (2007: 121),

> "As head of the household, the man is the principal decision maker in practically all matters (...) the man is the main provider of financial security for the family (...) [he has] to see to the education of his children (...) [and has] the responsibility of imparting discipline to children...".

As mentioned before, no matter whether Angolan children come from a more traditional or more progressive background, their respect for and fear of their father is great, as discipline is mainly left on his hands. The woman, on the other hand, is responsible, not only for the house, but also for raising the children, as well as for making sure they learn how to look after themselves, especially in terms of cooking, cleaning the house and washing their clothes (although this is much more imposed on girls than