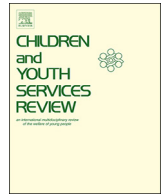




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Key variations in organizational culture and leadership influence: A comparison between three children's mental health and child welfare agencies

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present qualitative research results from a multiple case study on variations in organizational culture and leadership influence between three children's mental health and child welfare agencies in Ontario, Canada. Organizational culture is central to organizational effectiveness and performance given the government context of increasing accountability and efficiency, and leaders are key players in establishing the culture within their agencies. The results indicate significant variations between the agencies regarding: mission, vision, values; organizational structure; trust and safety; communication and sharing information; staff recognition and wellness; performance management and discipline. Contributing internal and external pressures are noted as contextual influences. Practice implications for leaders in children's service organizations are highlighted: living mission, vision, values in practice; creating flexible organizational structures; cultivating trust and safety; sharing information and open communication; meaningful staff recognition and wellness activities; and strength-based, consistent performance evaluation.

1. Introduction

Effective leadership and a responsive organizational culture are critical for human service organizations to survive the current government context of increasing accountability and efficiency (Hasenfeld, 2010). Organizational culture is considered central to organizational effectiveness and functioning, and leaders are key players in establishing the culture within their agencies (Lewis, Packard, & Lewis, 2012). A supportive culture, inspirational leadership, and trust have been proposed as preconditions for staff empowerment and motivation, ultimately leading to improved organizational performance (Hardina, Middleton, Montana, & Simpson, 2007). For the purposes of this article, organizational culture is defined as the underlying shared values, beliefs and assumptions that influence how members think, feel and behave (Schein, 2010). This differs from organizational climate, which is defined as the shared understanding of policies and procedures staff experience and expected behaviours (Schneider, Ehrhart & Macey, 2013). Organizational effectiveness varies depending on the type of organizational culture; for this article it will include employee satisfaction/wellbeing and work performance/commitment (Schneider et al., 2013; Toscano, 2015).

However, organizational culture has not been studied sufficiently to develop new concepts that support theories (Schein, 2010). As well,

there is sparse empirical research on the relationship between leadership influence and organizational culture, and a need for qualitative research focused on complex behavioural processes and contextual influences (Schneider et al., 2013). From this vantage point, a key question is what type of organizational culture are leaders fostering in children's services currently? To answer this question, this article will present qualitative research results on key variations in organizational culture and leadership influence between three children's mental health and child welfare agencies in Ontario, Canada. Comparing differences between these two agency contexts is recommended in future studies of organizational culture (Spielfogel, Leathers, & Christian, 2016). These results are extracted from a broader multiple case study with multiple methods that focused on leadership practice, organizational culture, leadership development, and the external environment see (Vito, 2016).

Previous research has supported the influence of leadership and organizational culture on organizational effectiveness (Schneider et al., 2013). Specifically, transformational leadership has: positively predicted staff commitment and negatively predicted staff turnover intention in a child/family organization (Toscano, 2015); positively influenced organizational culture, and in turn NGOs' effectiveness in India (Mahalinga, Shiva & Suar, 2012); and was positively related to strong cultural consensus in non-profits (Jaskyte, 2010). In mental

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health services, transformational leadership differences in leader and follower ratings were related to organizational culture (Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, Sklar, & Horowitz, 2017); and it had a strong positive association with organizational climate and working alliance with clients (Green, Albanese, Cafri, & Aarons, 2014). In child welfare a systematic review of organizational culture and climate on outcomes found inconsistent results requiring further research (Goering, 2018); different subgroups had varied perceptions on organizational climate and culture depending on their role (Spielfogel et al., 2016); and senior managers perceived a less rigid culture, and more engaged/functional climate compared to staff perceptions in children's services (Silverwolf et al., 2014). Notably, all the above research studies used quantitative methodology, and there are calls for more qualitative research (Schneider et al., 2013). The sole qualitative study highlighted articulated organizational vision/values, and a culture with communication, reflection, feedback, learning and support (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016).

There are also calls for studying the broader organizational context in future research. McBeath et al. (2014) explain that in child welfare, agency structure and management practices are known to impact policy and practice innovation but considering the impact of external demands and organizational adaptations is also required. These authors present a theoretical model which includes external factors, such as increasing accountability and funding changes, that impacts organizational structure and norms, fiscal and human resources, management practices and leadership expertise, all of which are relevant to the current study. How leaders adapt to these external and internal contingencies is key and ultimately influences service delivery and client outcomes. These authors also recommend future research comparing child welfare and other human service agencies to identify differential factors, including management practices, which provides support for the inclusion of children's mental health agencies as a comparison in the current study. They also recommend qualitative, comparative case studies which allows for interorganizational comparisons and analysis to inform larger studies, which provides support for the current multiple case study design.

2. Materials and methods

The methods were similar for all articles emanating from the broader study, and some material is reproduced here from an earlier article with permission see (Vito, 2017). A multiple case study design was used, to examine organizational culture as a complex issue in a real-life context, and to allow for a comparative analysis across different agency contexts (Campbell, 2010; Yin, 2009). Children's mental health and child welfare organizations were selected because of their contextual variations and external challenges. Agencies were selected through a blend of convenience and purposive sampling (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Emails were sent to provincial associations (PART and CMHO) to explain the research study and invite agencies to participate. Interested agencies were screened for inclusion and three agencies were selected. A brief overview of agencies and participants is provided in Table 1.

Multiple research methods were employed to provide rich information for data analysis (Creswell, 2007; McCracken, 1988) and triangulation of information (Yin, 2009). Methods included: 14 semi-structured, audiotaped, individual interviews with directors; 5 semi-structured, audiotaped focus groups with supervisors; 26 supervisor questionnaires; 7 observations of management meetings; and extensive agency document review. Written guides were developed for each method, with prepared questions and probes based on the research questions and literature review (McCracken, 1988). The specific research questions posed for the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires for this part of the study were, how does your leadership practice influence organizational culture? How does the organizational culture influence your leadership practice? Participants were requested to include examples with both answers. During the observations of

management meetings, the organizational structure and culture was assessed by paying attention to the content and process of meetings, and the relationships between directors, supervisors and staff. For a detailed review of methods for the broader study, see (Vito, 2016).

All audiotaped interviews and focus groups were initially transcribed using a computer program (Dragon Speaking), to produce edited transcripts. The edited transcripts were then analyzed, following the phases of thematic analysis to organize the data according to emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lapadat, 2010). The data from each agency was analyzed separately, and then compared across agencies to discover larger themes (Campbell, 2010). The emerging key themes for each agency were sent to each director and supervisor group for initial review and feedback, as part of member checking (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). A coding system was also developed to help maintain continuity in reporting (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). This coding system specified each agency and participant in numerical sequence (e.g. Agency 1, Director 1 = A1D1; Agency 1, Focus Group 1 = A1FG1). Detailed agency reports were written for each agency, integrating information from all data sources, and were sent to the executive directors for initial review. Follow-up presentations were provided to two agencies, as another opportunity for participant feedback.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB), contingent on full disclosure of a potential conflict of interest with one agency. A written informed consent statement was reviewed with participants prior to data collection, and they were assured anonymity of identity and confidentiality of information (Wallace, 2010). Standards common to qualitative research were followed to ensure methodological rigour, including credibility, transferability of findings, and confirmability through an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

There were some limitations to this study, as the data was based mostly on self-report measures with some direct observations, gathered over a short time on dynamic organizational processes, restricted to senior and middle management levels, and comprised of a small sample. Despite these limitations, the multiple-case-study design allowed for identifying common patterns and variations across the three different agency contexts (Campbell, 2010; Yin, 2009). Future researchers may want to extend these findings by generating a larger sample, including more direct observation over a longer time period, broadening the levels of participants and examining the impact on client service outcomes (McBeath et al., 2014).

3. Theory

According to Schein (2010), organizational culture is both a dynamic process that is created through interaction with others and a stabilizing force on social order with prescribed rules for behaviour. There is a strong reciprocal link between organizational culture and leadership influence, and congruence between these is therefore essential for organizations to function effectively (O'Connor & Netting, 2009). Schein explains that leaders influence culture through their values and behaviour; they set the tone by embedding the culture in the organization. Leaders' influence includes 'primary mechanisms': what they pay attention to, reward and respond to; how they react to crises and critical incidents; how they allocate resources and rewards; their role modelling, teaching and coaching; and how they promote and discipline others (p. 236). Leaders' behavior can also be shaped by organizational culture, which provides structure and meaning but also constrains their leadership practice. This influence includes 'secondary mechanisms': organizational design and structure; systems and procedures; symbolic rituals; physical space; stories about people and events; and formal statements of organizational values (p. 236). Further research on the impact of these 'culture-embedding behaviours' has been recommended (Schneider et al., 2013). The common elements of organizational culture that arose from this theory and helped to shape the current study were: mission, vision and values; organizational structure; trust and safety; communication and sharing information; staff

Table 1
Agency and participant demographics.

	Agency 1	Agency 2	Agency 3
Type	Child welfare services	Children's mental health services	Children's mental health services
Mandate	Legal mandate, protect children 0–16 years	Outpatient, residential services children 0–14 years	Day treatment, residential services, youth 12–18 years
Funding/Budget	MCYS, 19.1 million (CAN) annually	MCYS, OPR, 9 million (CAN) annually	MCYS, OPR, 7.3 million (CAN) annually
Governance/union	Board of Directors, unionized	Board of Directors, unionized	Board of Directors, unionized
Management	Senior management team (Executive Director, two Directors of Service, Director of Human Resources, Director of Finance, Manager of IT)	Senior management team (Executive Director, two Directors of Service, Director of Finance)	Senior management team (Executive Director, 2 Program Directors, Manager of Human Resources, Manager of Finance) Supervisor team (6)
Structure	Supervisor team (13)	Supervisor team (15)	
Staff	125 staff, mostly white, female social workers (BSW/MSW)	130 staff, mostly (CYW), therapists (MSW)	120 staff, mostly CYW, some MSW
Clients served	700 families, 200 children annually	1200 children and families annually	700–800 youth annually

Participants (overall): 41 total: 14 directors, 27 supervisors. **Gender:** 2:1 ratio females to males. **Race/ethnicity:** mostly white, 7 culturally diverse. **Age:** Directors most (8) 50–60 years, supervisors most (14) 40–50 years. **Education:** most bachelor (BA/BSW) and/or master's level (MA/MSW). **Years in position:** Split between new to position (7 directors, 9 supervisors, 1–5 years), and long-term (2 directors, 6 supervisors, 6–10 years; 3 directors, 9 supervisors, 11–20 years). **Previous experience:** directors' management experience, most (7) 11–20 years, supervisors' direct service experience, most (8) 6–10 years, (11) 11–20 years.

recognition; and performance management. Each of these cultural elements will be described further below.

A clear mission statement focuses on the primary purpose the organization exists (Lewis et al., 2012), and when consistent with workers' professional goals increases their commitment (Zeitlen, Augsberger, Auerbach, & McGowan, 2014). The vision describes the organization's ideal future, and the values provide desired behavioural guidelines, both of which are core aspects of leadership and organizational success (Lewis et al., 2012; Stanley & Lincoln, 2016). To ensure relevance, the vision should be developed in collaboration with staff, the values should reflect principles that both management and staff are willing to abide by, and they should be shared broadly with staff to ensure commitment (Lewis et al., 2012).

Organizational structures vary in human services between 'traditional' bureaucratic organizations with formal hierarchical structures and control as the goal, to more flexible 'serendipitous' organizations with a network of relationships and connection and collaboration as the goal (O'Connor & Netting, 2009, p. 79–81). Hierarchical structures may include functional departments or divisions for efficiency, while networks of relationships may include complex matrix structures for shared authority (Lewis et al., 2012).

Establishing trust and safety is important because organizational cultures based on mutual respect, trust, and recognition of members' contributions create a feeling of ownership, leading to more work dedication, better decision-making, and higher levels of effectiveness (Mahalinga et al., 2012). A culture of respect, listening and supporting workers is also linked to staff retention (Zeitlen et al., 2014). By building trust and facilitating relationships, leaders foster collaboration with staff, who are more likely to produce extraordinary results (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Clear communication processes are considered fundamental in human service organizations, yet they are often neglected. Formal communication mechanisms, such as newsletters and meetings, are essential to keep employees well informed; otherwise rumors may develop (Lewis et al., 2012). Organizations that are successful include a culture with communication, reflection, feedback, learning and support (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016), as clear lines of communication are linked to worker satisfaction and retention (Zeitlen et al., 2014).

Staff recognition, through recognizing contributions and celebrating accomplishments, is a transformational leadership practice that is positively related to strong cultural consensus, i.e. congruency between organizational culture and values (Jaskyte, 2010). Staff recognition is important for leaders to foster because it is linked to staff retention, when staff feel valued and appreciated for their hard work by the organization. Despite this importance, variable levels of staff support and recognition have been reported in child welfare (Zeitlen et al., 2014). Finally, performance management is related to ensuring staff use their

time well to meet service outcomes, funding requirements, contribute towards a supportive organizational culture and quality work-life (Lewis et al., 2012). Staff desire consistent performance management, and effective workload management contributes to positive culture (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016).

Organizations also need to effectively adapt to their external environment and carry out their core mission and values, and leaders play a critical role in managing this; leaders also need to foster internal integration in organizations (Schein, 2010). To address these external and internal requirements, a 'Competing Values Framework' or (CVF) of organizational culture developed by Cameron and Quinn (2006, in O'Connor & Netting, 2009) will be used, as it is the "most comprehensive test" to examine the relationship between organizational culture and performance (Schneider et al., 2013, p. 373). This framework recognizes that culture can vary along two dimensions: an internal focus on integration or an external focus on differentiation; and a stability focus on control or a flexibility focus on adaptability. The CVF framework provides four different cultures with varying assumptions, beliefs and values, behaviours, and criteria for effectiveness (Schneider et al., 2013). The four cultures include: *hierarchy culture*, which has formal rules and procedures and is focused on internal control and stability; *clan culture*, which has a family atmosphere and is focused internally on teamwork and consensus; *adhocracy culture*, which is entrepreneurial and is focused externally on flexibility, risk taking and innovation; and *market culture*, which is results based and is focused externally on competition and customer service (O'Connor & Netting, 2009). While elements of each of these four cultures can exist simultaneously within an organization, conflict arises when there is a clash in cultures, based on different underlying values. Leaders are encouraged to engage in "multi-paradigmatic practice" by identifying the underlying values and assumptions being used and being able to move flexibly among the varied cultures and ways of thinking. This is especially important given the complexity of human service organizations and diversity of staff perspectives (O'Connor & Netting, 2009, p.58). These varying organizational cultures and practices will be applied to the analysis of findings.

4. Results

The elements of organizational culture varied considerably among the three agencies. Therefore, each element will be presented separately, comparing the results between the three agencies, highlighting the unique themes that arose along with strengths and challenges. The agency cultures will first be identified, in descending order of congruence with their leadership influence. Agency 2 (children's mental health, 0–14 years) was distinguished by a *clan culture*, which has a

family atmosphere and is focused internally on teamwork and consensus (O'Connor & Netting, 2009). Directors described the current agency culture as cohesive, "this culture is a pretty tightly knit culture...you either fit in the culture or you don't" (A2D1); and "socially it's a very strong culture and people are very tight" (A2D4). Supervisors emphasized the family nature, "there is a sense of family, we REALLY do care about each other" (A2FG1). This type of culture is noteworthy for leaders to consider as it promotes greater staff satisfaction and commitment (Schneider et al., 2013). In contrast, Agency 3 (children's mental health, 14–18 years) and Agency 1 (child welfare 0–16 years) both had a *hierarchy culture*, which has formal rules and procedures and is focused on internal control and stability (O'Connor & Netting, 2009). Although hierarchy cultures are the most common in traditional organizations (O'Connor & Netting, 2009), leaders may want to consider ways to shift this culture given the negative impacts presented below.

4.1. Mission vision values

In Agency 2, the mission, vision and values were well documented in this agency and considered central to daily practice by directors, "the mission and values, we live and breathe it every day, and it does shape me" (A2D3), and supervisors "we're driven by our mission, we have... solid values, and the leadership supports both of those in a very positive way" (A2FG2). They were also tied to client outcomes and staff wellness, "it's really about helping kids and families reach their best potential...[and] with your staff" (A2D1). The agency values were quite striking; they were meaningful and shared, having been developed with staff, and embedded into the agency culture. Directors and supervisors encouraged them in practice, "what are we doing to continue to live these values...or do it better?" (A2FG1); and "we expect you to act in this way, because that's what we expect of ourselves and each other here" (A2D2). This agency provides a positive example for leaders to ensure that their mission, vision and values are shared, meaningful, embedded into daily practice and culture, and tied to staff wellness and client outcomes. This congruency between individual and organizational values is essential and has multiple benefits, including greater worker satisfaction, motivation, commitment, and intention to remain with the organization (Zeitlen et al., 2014).

In Agency 3, the mission, vision and values were also well documented, embedded in some agency documents, and discussed during the observed management meetings. However, there were challenges living some values in practice and directors admitted that progress on the vision was stalled due to external pressures, "unless you have those champions and drivers...you never pull off that vision" (A3D1), and some thought they had limited meaning, "I don't think the vision and mission really drive the work" (A3D3). In Agency 1, the agency's mission, vision and values were also well documented. However, while some directors upheld them, "as an organization we're pretty good at understanding what our vision is, what our mission is, what our values are" (A1D2); supervisors saw them as not integrated, "the mission is really the touchstone...I don't know if it's embedded in the culture" (A1FG1). These agencies provide a caution to leaders, as there were challenges around meaning and living the mission vision and values in practice. This disparity is concerning, and others have found differences between espoused and enacted values with strong alignment at the board level but contradictions at the staff level (Fenton & Inglis, 2007).

4.2. Organizational structure

In agency 2, the organizational structure was significant, as the directors deliberately changed it to be flatter and less hierarchical, "I like a more flattened structure...there is functionality in this blended model" (A2D1). This flatter structure was described as a "matrix model" where directors and supervisors were "interchangeable" (A2D2). A matrix model was an appropriate choice for this purpose, as it is "the most complex and formal way to ensure high levels of integration"

(Lewis et al., 2012, p. 108). Supervisors highlighted the positives of this structure on their leadership practice, "there's a sense of permission to be a leader much less from the top down and more from beside people" (A2FG1); and "I'm pretty much free to make my own decisions and anytime I need to ask they're pretty open about answering it" (A2FG2). A matrix model fits with a flexible organizational structure, where the goal is connection and collaboration (O'Connor & Netting, 2009). However, the matrix model was acknowledged as challenging for some directors, "we could get things done a lot more efficiently if we weren't going through all these committees...but I realize the positive is communication, teamwork, sharing information" (A2D4). Supervisors expressed concerns about the management restructuring, as directors were preoccupied with external pressures, "there's been a change in our work pace...our executive team...had to take a step back" (A2FG1) resulting in supervisors being burdened with additional responsibilities, "(work) gets downloaded onto the middle management who then...step back from their teams" (A2FG1). These additional responsibilities negatively impacted supervisors' work completion and ability to support staff and were coupled with a lack of director support.

Agency 3 had a hierarchical structure, where the goal is control and leaders are in charge (O'Connor & Netting, 2009), although a new meeting format had been adopted. During observation, directors followed a traditional structure, setting the agenda and facilitating discussion with the supervisor group. Some directors commented on process issues in senior management meetings, "I don't know if it's always guided process as it could be" (A3D2); and lack of preparation, "we don't demonstrate our best leadership in terms of managing how prepared we are going in for meetings" (A3D4). These concerns were reinforced during the observed meeting, as some discussions appeared prolonged and could be condensed to allow more time for strategic discussion. There had also been some restructuring of supervisors' responsibilities, who were feeling burdened as a result, "with fiscal changes...we've had one position eliminated and the responsibilities from that job have been fanned out" (A3FG1). Supervisors appeared unhappy about these added responsibilities and it was affecting their work satisfaction.

Agency 1 also had a hierarchical structure, "there's hierarchy here... it's inherent in our structure...those people make decisions, and they can boss you around" (A1FG1). The senior management team had recently restructured with fewer positions and layers. Several directors reported positive outcomes with this, "it's really pushed us to develop those collaborative working relationships differently...There's a really good energy amongst us and I really VALUE that" (A1D4); and "we had some courageous conversations with each other and they've gone really well, there's an openness to doing that" (A1D3). However, supervisors voiced concerns with the management changes, as they were given new responsibilities without a feedback mechanism. They were feeling negative with the upheaval, as there was tension and instability, a 'deficit culture' and doing more with reduced management.

4.3. Trust and safety

In Agency 2, there were significant historical issues that negatively impacted organizational culture (details omitted by request) and the current executive director was required to re-establish trust with the Board and rebuild the agency's community reputation. The current executive director was pivotal to creating a welcoming culture and trust with staff, "we had to create a sense of SAFETY for everybody...the majority of staff would say they trust (ED) as executive director" (A2D2). Trust and safety are foundational components to effective organizational functioning and there are benefits from creating a friendly, caring and trusting culture (Zeitlen et al., 2014). Consistent with their clan culture, they had fostered a collaborative relationship with the union, and they strove for fair negotiations "we had tough negotiations, but they were fair, because the union knows that we want a win-win" (A2D2). Supervisors also supported a history of collaborative problem-

solving with the union, although they noted a recent change, “there has been a shift in their ability and willingness to have face-to-face conversations and deal with issues as they come up” (A2FG1). Supervisors also expressed concerns about the agency culture shifting in other ways, “we cannot continue with the culture we have...the risk management is going to become so much more significant” (A2FG1). External pressures, such as quality assurance and meeting data deadlines were emphasized on their questionnaires.

In Agency 3, there were some historical issues with the union that negatively impacted leaders’ trust and relationships with staff. One director stated, “I’ve struggled because the broad management team remembers the negative part of that (union dynamic) and wants to make decisions based on the worst of people” (A3D3). Directors detailed the impact on conflict resolution procedures, “it feels like you’re locked into a process. I’d like to work to resolve things... but I am bound by precedent, I am bound by the structures” (A3D2); and relationships with staff, “I’m having to be careful of my role...it puts my natural way of working with people aside sometimes and that’s been a challenge for me” (A3D3). Despite the negative influence of the union, the agency had experienced a decrease in union grievances, although they were anticipating another increase due to the upcoming renegotiation of the union contract.

In Agency 1, trust and safety issues were quite pronounced, “our supervisor group is concerned about safety in their group and with us” (A1D3); with a negative past legacy resulting in departmental divisions, “trust isn’t there...they’re not able to challenge each other” (A1D2). Some directors questioned supervisors feeling unsafe, “we struggle when people say they don’t feel safe...because we’re both really open to people coming in and speaking their mind to us and there are lots of people that do it” (A1D3). Others have also found that senior managers rated their organizational culture more positively than staff, recommending improved communication between these two groups (Silverwolf et al., 2014). Supervisors explained negative questioning by senior management affected their daily practice. They gave examples of not being able to talk freely and not feeling safe, trying to address this issue and experiencing negative consequences as a result (details omitted by request). They described directors as not available and not transparent with communication, leading to a negative culture shift and fear of raising issues. Several supervisors also stated having less influence on organizational culture, feeling less valued and trusted with project development, on their questionnaires.

The loss of a previous supportive director was a key issue for supervisors, “there was much less reactivity...she was very, very reflective” (A1FG2). They recalled her positive influence as a leader; she was described as responsive, supportive, collaborative, encouraging and calm. They contrasted her strengths-based approach with the current directors’ punitive style, “what are you guys not doing, maybe we need to fire some people!” (A1FG2). The current directors were experienced as more reactive and inconsistent. Themes of directors being stretched thin and supervisors feeling unsupported, were also noted on questionnaires. Supervisors also recounted tremendous agency change and staff losses during the past year and they were fearful about being held accountable for risk issues. Some supervisors attributed the changes to ongoing financial uncertainty and risk management, which are prominent in the child welfare field (McBeath et al., 2014), “there are lots of risks and consequences ...a certain urgency to everything” (A1FG2); while others upheld a negative shift in agency culture:

That has been child welfare FOREVER, the financial uncertainty, the risk that we take with clients, that doesn’t address the difference in culture, the difference in feeling that we have as supervisors about the consequences of taking initiative, speaking out...within this organization, the culture has shifted HERE, so that now people are feeling less supported, more vulnerable, less heard, more at risk. (A1FG2)

4.4. Communication and sharing information

In Agency 2, directors encouraged open communication and sharing of information, and both they and supervisors were trained in “Crucial Conversations,” which emerged as a foundational communication skill: “crucial conversations ...based on mutual respect and having a mutual goal...it’s about creating safety” (A2FG1). They made a concerted effort to encourage these conversations with staff, addressing issues openly with them, and this was observed during a supervisors’ meeting. Directors also shared information openly with staff and one supervisor confirmed this openness, “this place is PHENOMENAL for letting me know what’s going on...right down to even money” (A2FG2), and the executive director was observed sharing information during the all staff meeting regarding major agency changes. These efforts provide a positive model for leaders, as conditions for success include an organizational culture with communication, reflection, feedback, learning and support (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016).

In Agency 3, directors communicated with staff via email and staff meetings; however, issues arose around sending accurate information, which led to trust issues with staff. In one situation, directors exerted more control over what information was shared due to confidentiality issues, acknowledging this went against their usual practice of being inclusive. Supervisors confirmed the lack of information sharing, “we weren’t told about it until it was done, we had no details” (A3FG1). This closed process contrasted with a later observation, where the director openly shared details with supervisors. In contrast, some directors mentioned more open exchange of information with staff, “I’m pretty free with what I share with people, as long as there’s not a confidentiality issue or ethical or even a timing issue” (A3D3).

In Agency 1, there was a formal tone to sharing information and all staff meetings were used to update staff on agency business. For example, during budget cuts, directors discussed a detailed communication plan to announce staffing layoffs through an all staff meeting and a written memo. One director stated, “I try to deliver news in person...if I delivered bad news by email people would complain about that” (A1D1). This director brought in an external consultant to inform the senior management restructuring, “I could not have done that individually with people...they just couldn’t risk telling me what they really think directly” (A1D1). During the observation of the senior management meeting, this director was challenged about needing to share information more openly about a community agency initiative.

4.5. Staff recognition and wellness

Agency 2 developed meaningful staff recognition activities, which were observed during the all staff meeting, embedded into their culture, and reinforced in the agency’s values. Strong cultural consensus, i.e. congruency between organizational culture and values, is positively related to transformational leadership practices, such as recognizing contributions and celebrating accomplishments (Jaskyte, 2010). These activities included a “shooting stars” program, where staff nominated their colleagues for excellent work, and a wellness committee, with healthy activities and annual staff wellness surveys, “we share the feedback at all levels of the agency including the board” (A2D2). Supervisors agreed the agency appreciates and formally recognizes staff contributions, including “the employee recognition night” (A2FG2). Practicing this recognition daily was a key way of embedding it into the culture, “they have to be practiced 10,000 times before there’s a feeling in the culture” (A2FG1). Staff wellness was also a priority in this agency and acting on staff feedback was central to achieving success, “our wellness survey, it’ll be in the 98th percentile really, really, positive... but it’s still that two percent that we’re concerned about” (A2D2). Recent survey results indicated an improvement in staff wellness.

Agency 3 displayed limited staff recognition and wellness and the value of formal events, such as annual staff recognition and service awards, was questionable. One director acknowledged this problem,

“recognition is a bit of a challenge for us...culturally, our lack of doing that in a meaningful sustained way has hurt us” (A3D4). Some directors valued informal staff recognition, “supervisors will do little things for different staff for exceptional work” (A3D4); and “I’m very free with my praise for people...when there’s excellent work going on” (A3D3). Other directors admitted they struggled, “I’ve fallen down over again in accepting and recognizing that people are different from me and need external reinforcement” (A3D1). These results mirror others’ findings on variable levels of staff support and recognition (Zeitlen et al., 2014). Challenges included making recognition meaningful, “they want to know that you’re being authentic or legitimate when you’re giving the recognition” (A3FG1), and a unionized setting, “common or differential recognition and how you deal with that” (A3D2).

Similarly, in Agency 1, formal staff recognition was limited to the annual general meeting, such as staff years of service awards. Some directors and supervisors practiced recognition on an informal level, “I’ll send an email...It’s those moments of good work it’s important to notice” (A1D3). However, they emphasized, “we should embed that as part of being a leader...we don’t do it consistently or as an agency” (A1FG1). Several directors and supervisors recognized the value of staff recognition, “it helps to get staff buy-in, people feel more ownership for the process and the services that we provide” (A1FG2); and “showing that you value their contribution” (A1D5). This included staff well-being, “for well-being and worker satisfaction... if you don’t point out the positives, you could have high burnout rates” (A1FG2). Other directors admitted they struggled to provide this, “I don’t need recognition in order to feel good about my work ...but I do recognize it’s important for most people” (A1D2); and “I’m really bad at giving positive feedback and really good at giving constructive feedback” (A1D5). Some directors suggested the need for continuous improvement, “although it’s good to celebrate successes we should never rest on our laurels and always be examining what we’re doing and trying to improve upon it” (A1D3); and “we’re a community agency and we’re accountable to our clients and we can do better...I don’t want us to be patting ourselves on the back all the time” (A1D1).

4.6. Performance management and discipline

Agency 2 assumed a strength-based approach to performance management; their challenge was having an overly permissive culture for staff discipline. One director described how she empowered staff during performance appraisals, “they do their own, then we sit down and talk about it” (A2D2); and another described a strength-based approach, “I believe that people want to do a good job...so you can work through the other things” (A2D4). Supervisors also highlighted co-creation with staff and a strength-based approach, “discuss with them... where their growth areas are, what they’re doing well...their accomplishments” (A2FG1); and the ongoing nature of staff feedback, “I always try to be open and honest with them throughout the year and then reviews are an easy thing” (A2FG2). These practices were consistent with the agency’s supervision procedure and values. There were mixed responses about how to handle discipline. Some admitted, “I hate to discipline... work through it and get to an improvement” (A2D4). Others recognized discipline as necessary, “discipline comes out when there is a repeated behaviour or a SIGNIFICANT issue” (A2FG2). Although not widespread, some supervisors perceived an agency culture of permissiveness around discipline, “not saying no or setting firm boundaries, there are staff working in the agency...haven’t been held to account” (A2FG1); and lack of director support, “at the other end of the scale there is a job that needs to be done” (A2FG1). This agency culture of permissiveness created tension for supervisors who felt unsupported, and there was wide agreement on this.

Agency 3 had clear supervision and performance management guidelines and the process was linked to agency values, supervision and job descriptions; however, it was a challenge for supervisors to keep evaluations updated annually. There were also concerns about

inconsistent follow-through with staff performance concerns, “we’re not very good at pulling the plug when we need to...we just need to say ‘stop that’s enough’ and take the consequences for that” (A3D4); and discipline, “we’ve had conversations regarding disciplinary actions... but then when it gets to a certain level, the disciplinary action gets pulled back” (A3FG1). There was also a shift to becoming more directive with supervisors. One director explained that supervisors were not meeting service development requirements for increasing ministry accountability; this director became more authoritative with supervisors, requiring them to complete a monthly ‘report card’ with 25 accountability measures. Directors explained they were trying to shift the agency culture from blame to trust and accountability; however, supervisors presented a very different perspective of report cards, “its micromanaging and it’s an additional administrative task, it takes a lot of time” (A3FG1). This result is significant as effective workload management contributes to a positive culture (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016). Directors explained they used discipline infrequently, “I rarely go to discipline...it’s not the most effective way that people change their behavior” (A3D3); when required “it’s just a non-negotiable thing” (A3D4), and “there’s a line when a person’s behaviour is just not to be tolerated and in fact can poison the environment” (A3D3). At these times, directors followed a progressive discipline approach.

Agency 1 had an inconsistent approach to performance management. Directors admitted they lagged in completing formal staff evaluations, and there was room for improvement, “identifying performance issues early on, giving people really good feedback about their performance, about expectations” (A1D3). Supervisors confirmed this, “I haven’t had a performance review in many years” (A1FG1), noting an outdated performance appraisal tool, “It’s huge, it’s burdensome, it’s ridiculous” (A1FG2). There were also practice inconsistencies, as some directors and supervisors viewed the performance appraisal as a joint effort, “a PA is a mutual process” (A1D3); and “what’s working well, what work are you proud of, then the worker would set the goals” (A1FG1); while others had less input, “my goals are written for me” (A1FG1). This inconsistency is important as others have found that staff wanted consistent performance management (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016). Some directors exuded confidence with managing serious performance issues, “we’ve been very clear, written things down...this has to be changed by when” (A1D2); and “I’m talking to someone about whether they fit here, either directly or indirectly” (A1D1). However, supervisors painted a different picture, indicating a lack of director support to hold staff accountable for performance issues, “the support isn’t there...my leadership is potentially called into question over an ability to manage that person” (A1FG2).

5. Discussion and conclusion

There were significant variations between the three agencies’ organizational cultures. These variations will be compared and related to organizational effectiveness, using the Competing Values Framework (CVF, Schneider et al., 2013). Overall, the clan culture in Agency 2 was distinguished by several strengths. This included its shared mission vision and values, flatter matrix structure, trust and safety, open communication and sharing of information, meaningful staff recognition and wellness activities, and strength-based performance management. These results are consistent with clan cultures: values of affiliation, collaboration, trust and support; behaviours of teamwork, participation, employee involvement and open communication; and greater employee satisfaction and commitment as a measure of organizational effectiveness (Schneider et al., 2013). The directors also established a collaborative union relationship, and some authors suggest that leaders in human services should embrace a collaborative clan culture rather than for-profit business culture, as it increases staff commitment and reduces staff turnover (Toscano, 2015). There were challenges reported due to increased external pressures for risk management, quality assurance, and data management, which resulted in downloading of

directors' responsibilities to supervisors and negatively impacted supervisors' work performance. These external pressures may have been problematic for leaders in this agency as they align more with a market culture focused on achievement and competition to achieve productivity as success, which conflicts with a clan culture (Schneider et al., 2013). These pressures mirror the broader trend towards increasing government accountability and efficiency (Hasenfeld, 2010), which is highly relevant for leaders in children's services currently coping with such external pressures (McBeath et al., 2014).

The hierarchy culture in Agency 3 was marked by a mix of strengths and challenges. Strengths included well developed mission vision and values, a clear hierarchical structure with a new meeting format, and clear performance management guidelines. These results are consistent with hierarchy cultures: values of clear roles and formal procedures; conforming and predictable behaviours; and efficiency as a measure of organizational effectiveness (Schneider et al., 2013). However, this agency was coping with some internal challenges, including conflict due to formal union processes, threat of labour strike, and inconsistent follow-through of performance issues, which negatively affected staff relationships and smooth functioning as measures of organizational effectiveness (Schneider et al., 2013). There were also several challenges around living values, meeting process, variable sharing of information, lack of staff recognition, wellness and satisfaction. These areas relate more to a clan culture (Schneider et al., 2013), which may explain why they were challenging for leaders to achieve. This agency was also coping with significant external pressures due to fiscal constraints, which resulted in restructuring and additional responsibilities for supervisors; and increasing ministry accountability, which resulted in report cards for supervisors. These pressures may have reinforced their hierarchy culture, as the organizational value of security is positively related to a bureaucratic culture; and marked a shift towards a market culture, measured by being competitive and productive (Schneider et al., 2013). Leaders facing such external pressures might be tempted to adopt a market culture to improve operational and financial performance (Schneider et al., 2013). However, a central question is what is sacrificed in terms of staff satisfaction and commitment to meet such demands? The feasibility of making such changes is also an important consideration, as market cultures are more prevalent in larger human service organizations (Toscano, 2015).

The hierarchy culture in Agency 1 also had some strengths, including a well-documented mission vision and values, a clear hierarchical structure and formal communication, which are consistent with hierarchy cultures (Schneider et al., 2013). However, it experienced the most challenges with its culture, including significant trust and safety issues for supervisors that resulted in them feeling less supported, more vulnerable and at risk. A pertinent question is how can such agencies be effective when they are struggling with foundational issues regarding trust and safety? There were also varying perceptions of culture and leadership, which is linked to a more negative organizational culture (Aarons et al., 2017). This agency also had limited information sharing and staff recognition, which relate more to a clan culture (Schneider et al., 2013) and may have been challenging for leaders to achieve. This agency was also coping with significant internal pressures including union issues, budget cuts, staff layoffs, and inconsistent performance evaluation, which negatively affected its effectiveness in terms of staff satisfaction and smooth functioning (Schneider et al., 2013). As well, this agency was plagued with external pressures including increased risk management and significant fiscal constraints, which may have been challenging to address as they align more with a market culture (Schneider et al., 2013). These findings are relevant for leaders in child welfare, in terms of safeguarding their culture and effectively adapting to such external pressures (McBeath et al., 2014).

The various elements of organizational culture will also be discussed, along with practice implications for leaders in children's services. The mission, vision and values were clear and well articulated in all three agencies. This is an important result as a clear mission

consistent with workers' professional goals increases their commitment (Zeitlen et al., 2014), and the articulation and promotion of organizational vision and values is a core aspect of leadership and organizational success (Lewis et al., 2012; Stanley & Lincoln, 2016). However, there were variations in living the mission, vision and values in practice, and this result is an important reminder to leaders that their mission, vision and values need to be understood and the principles enacted daily at all levels of the organization to be effective (Lewis et al., 2012).

The organizational structures varied considerably, as agency 2 had shifted to a matrix model of leadership that centered on a network of relationships. This flexible structure may be an ideal model for leaders in children's services to emulate given the positive benefits of empowering supervisors as leaders. In contrast, the other agencies had hierarchical structures and issues regarding meeting process and supervisors' involvement. Supervisors in all three agencies also raised concerns about restructuring, which resulted in additional responsibilities, and negatively impacted their satisfaction and work performance. These results are an important reminder to leaders, as overburdening their middle management may be counterproductive to effective performance. Providing supervisory support and assistance with responsibilities instead may be beneficial, as it is linked to worker retention (Zeitlen et al., 2014). However, these added responsibilities were related to fiscal constraints, and in the current government context may signal the new reality that leaders are forced to contend with. This result provides a caution to leaders regarding the negative impact of external funding changes on fiscal and human resources and management practices in human services (McBeath et al., 2014).

Perhaps most striking were the varying levels of trust and safety in these agencies. In Agency 2, there was an intentional shift to develop trust and safety with staff. This is important for leaders to cultivate as organizational cultures based on mutual respect, trust, and recognition of members' contributions create a feeling of ownership, leading to more work dedication, better decision-making, and higher levels of effectiveness (Mahalinga et al., 2012). In contrast, trust and safety issues were significant in Agency 1, which highlights an essential lesson for leaders around the importance of creating trust and safety as a foundation. Leaders would do well to request and listen to supervisor and staff feedback regarding their experience of organizational culture, as a culture of respect, listening and supporting workers is linked to staff retention (Zeitlen et al., 2014).

There were varying levels of communication and information sharing between the three agencies. In Agency 2, leaders shared information and communicated openly with staff, while in Agency 3 this varied between open and closed processes, and in Agency 1 this was limited and formal. While it is important to use formal communication methods to keep people informed (Lewis et al., 2012), these results provide a caution to leaders around the importance of more open sharing of information and communication to foster trust and transparency with staff and strengthen their organizational culture, as clear lines of communication are linked to worker satisfaction and retention (Zeitlen et al., 2014).

Staff recognition was another element with varying results across the three agencies. While Agency 2 excelled by creating meaningful staff recognition and wellness initiatives that were embedded into their culture and consistent with their values, formal agency staff recognition was limited and not embedded into the culture in the other two agencies. These results are instructive for children's service leaders regarding the importance of purposefully cultivating staff recognition and wellness initiatives in their organizations, given the many staff benefits including staff retention, which is linked to feeling valued and appreciated for hard work by the organization (Zeitlen et al., 2014). Finally, performance management was also variable among these three agencies, in terms of being strength-based, having clear guidelines and consistency, and follow-through with discipline, resulting in supervisors feeling a lack of support during implementation. This finding is

instructive for leaders in terms of modelling and following through with performance management requirements.

Overall, this article presented qualitative research findings on various elements and types of organizational culture and leadership influence in three children's service agencies. There were significant differences among the three agencies, with one agency demonstrating more strengths than the others in several areas. These varying results contribute to the literature on qualitative comparative case studies highlighting organizational and management differences between child welfare and other human service agencies (McBeath et al., 2014). There were also multiple internal and external pressures that negatively impacted organizational culture and effectiveness. These pressures are relevant for leaders in children's services, as they may limit their influence on organizational culture and reduce staff satisfaction and performance, which is ultimately linked to improved organizational performance (Hardina et al., 2007). These results help to answer the call for qualitative research focused on complex behavioural processes and contextual influences (Schneider et al., 2013). They may be useful for leaders in children's services who are grappling with the government context of increasing accountability and efficiency (Hasenfeld, 2010) and striving to improve their organizational culture and effectiveness.

Declaration of Competing Interest

There was a potential conflict of interest with one agency, as one of the participants was known to the author in a personal capacity. This personal association did not interfere with the author's ability to carry out the research without bias. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB), contingent on full disclosure of this potential conflict of interest with participants.

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