PSDP—Resources and Tools:

The cultural web

Introduction

Much like the customs and traditions of a nation, the culture of a team or organisation is shaped over time.

People who work together tend to develop a shared culture, based on similarities in how they think and act. A range of factors then determine the effectiveness of that culture, which can be influenced by things like organisational structure and restructure (often pertinent issues for social work organisations).

These factors include:

a concrete mission recognisable to everyone, which arises from clear organisational objectives and strategy

a high level of employee engagement

a shared vision and common values

a high level of employee adaptability and competence.

What is the cultural web?

The 'cultural web' is a visual tool designed to help explore the range of factors that contribute to organisational or team culture (not all of which are easy to discern).

No organisational culture is perfect. However, a positive team can help social workers to create one, and be emotionally resilient and motivated in the face of adversity.

You can use this tool to both review your own team culture and plan how you might adapt it to create a more positive and supportive working environment. This is particularly important when considering issues of inclusion and exclusion, power, and difference and diversity, as these aspects of a team's culture can really impact on its resilience and the way it functions.

The cultural web model is explained overleaf, along with some self-audit questions. This tool then provides further exercises for considering cultural change.
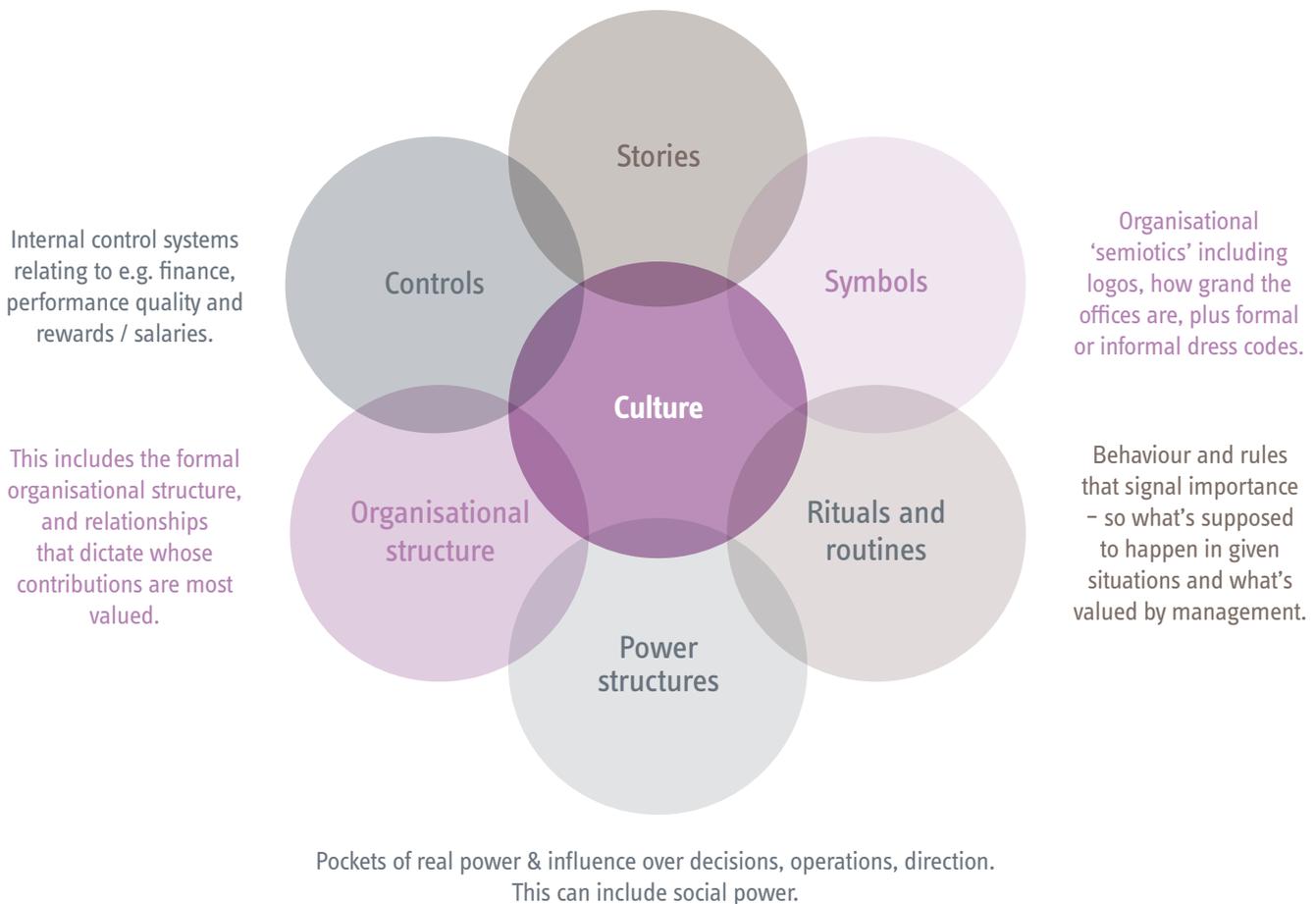
The cultural web model

The work of Gerry Johnson and Kevan Scholes (1999) sets out what they describe as the 'cultural web', pertaining to the different aspects that comprise the culture of a team and / or organisation.

Their model consists of six physical, observable elements of organisational culture, which form a coherent whole.

These are:

> stories

> symbols

> rituals and routines

> power structures

> organisational structure

> controls.

What past events do people talk about inside and outside the organisation – success or failures?
Who and what are the heroes / heroines?

Internal control systems relating to e.g. finance, performance quality and rewards / salaries.

Organisational 'semiotics' including logos, how grand the offices are, plus formal or informal dress codes.

Stories

Controls

Symbols

Culture

This includes the formal organisational structure, and relationships that dictate whose contributions are most valued.

Organisational structure

Rituals and routines

Behaviour and rules that signal importance – so what's supposed to happen in given situations and what's valued by management.

Power structures

Pockets of real power & influence over decisions, operations, direction.
This can include social power.

Culture audit: thinking about the six elements of the cultural web

This part of the tool provides more detail about the six elements of the cultural web. Within each one, there are questions that invite you to think about your own team and organisational culture, as it is now.

The following section then asks you to think about a vision for cultural change.

Stories

Stories are versions of past events that are continually re-lived within an organisation. Existing employees keep them alive and pass them on to new starters.

Stories are told in public spaces like corridors, canteens and smoking areas, are often about heroes, villains, successes and failures, and say a lot about an organisation's values.

Reflective questions		
What stories do people currently tell about your team or organisation?	What stories are communicated amongst children and families, and other agencies, teams and managers?	What stories are told about diversity, fairness, power and difference?
What do these stories say about what your team believes in?	What do social workers and other team members talk about when they think of the history of the team or organisation?	What stories do they share with new members of the team?
What heroes, villains and mavericks appear in these stories?		

Symbols

Symbols are about recognisable expressions of the organisation, such as its office building, corporate identity, logo, functions, dress code and use of language.

Reflective questions		
Is jargon or organisation-specific language used? If so, how accessible is it?	What, if any, status symbols are used?	What images are used to promote the organisation externally, e.g. in advertisements or annual reports? How reflective are these images of the diversity of the workforce?
Considering the viewpoints of children, families, other agencies, and your colleagues, what image is most associated with your organisation?		

Rituals and routines

Rituals and routines highlight what organisations value and how they handle things. Examples might include Friday lunchtime 'bring and shares', encouraging staff to go on training courses, saying hello and goodbye to each other each day, celebrating success through praise for jobs well done, making it OK to be vulnerable, recruitment and selection processes, and how social work practice is 'done'.

These factors reveal a lot about how people interact with each other both within and outside of the organisation. It's also important to consider how rituals and routines might include or exclude certain groups of people.

Reflective questions		
What rituals do children and families and other professionals / social workers expect when they are in contact with your team members?	What form does inequality and discrimination take in day-to-day interactions within the team or organisation?	In what ways do rituals promote social inequality?
Do social rituals in the team or organisation reflect diverse cultural practices and expectations?	What do team members expect?	What ritual or routine would be immediately obvious if it changed?
What behaviours do these routines encourage?	When a new problem is encountered, what rules do people apply when they solve it?	What core beliefs do these rituals reflect?

Power structures

Power structures are the most influential element of the cultural web because the most powerful people within an organisation tend to have the most direct influence on its core assumptions and ideas.

Reflective questions		
Who has the real power in your organisation? What do they believe and encourage?	How might you describe them in terms of the social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (aspects of personal and social identity relating to gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, ethnicity, education, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality – Burnham, 2013)?	Who makes or influences decisions?
How is this power used or abused?	Where in the organisation is the absence of fairness or equality most keenly felt?	

Organisational structure

Organisational structure refers to hierarchical composition, i.e. different levels of roles like social worker, team manager and head of service, and the relationships between people who occupy these, i.e. the lines of accountability and responsibility that define how a role is carried out.

Informal and unwritten power dynamics are also part of organisational structure, i.e. how some employees may be more experienced or feel part of a team but others may be marginalised by factors like race, disability or gender etc.

Reflective questions

Is the structure flat (organic, adaptable and flexible) or hierarchical (mechanistic, procedural and bureaucratic), formal or informal?	Where are the formal lines of authority, i.e. across roles or teams?	Do informal lines of authority exist, i.e. specialist roles or experience that give certain individuals an advantage over colleagues of the same pay grade or job role?
Do these informal lines of authority promote fairness and equality?	How are specialist roles chosen? Who has access to these?	How clear are individuals and teams about the structural boundaries of the organisation, i.e. are roles and responsibilities clear?
Where and how is this information recorded? How might people find out more about it?		

Controls

This relates to how an organisation is managed and controlled. It includes things like financial and quality assurance systems, and incentives (e.g. who is eligible for particular training, leave allowances, financial bonuses, and so on). How incentives are determined and distributed also falls under controls.

Reflective questions

What process or procedure exerts the strongest controls on resources or incentives? Which has the weakest controls?	Are some parts of the organisation more loosely or tightly controlled or are they equal? If they are different, why might this be?	Do employees get rewarded for good work, or penalised for poor work?
What reports are issued to keep control of operations, finance and resources?		

The cultural whole

As you answer these questions, you start to build a picture of what shapes your organisational structure. You might now wish to reflect on your responses, look at the web as a whole and make some general statements, which might include:

> a description of the overall culture

> identifying the most common themes and factors that appear again and again in your answers.

Your vision for cultural change

Now you've determined your current cultural web, it's a good idea to turn your attention to your vision for cultural change.

Having reflected on the questions, what would you like to see more of in your organisation? Perhaps think about the first step you could take to move towards this within your team.

Used in this way, the cultural web can help you to analyse your current culture, and identify what needs to stay, go or be added to if you're going to influence positive cultural change.

Reflective questions

Compare your two cultural web audits and identify the differences between them. Considering the six areas of the cultural web:

What strengths have been highlighted by your analysis of the current culture?	What factors are hindering the strategic aims or perhaps misaligned with each other?	What factors are detrimental to the wellbeing of staff and productivity in your workplace?
What factors can you encourage, reinforce or change?	What new beliefs and behaviours do you need to promote? And what support do you need to do this?	Is there anyone in the organisation you feel it would be important to share this feedback with, or who can help you to develop your actions and ideas?

Implementing cultural change is not easy. It involves re-moulding values, beliefs and behaviours and is a major change management challenge, which requires a great deal of time and hard work from all involved.

However, by providing a framework through which you can analyse the current culture and design changes, Johnson and Scholes' cultural web provides a good foundation to build on.

Using it, you can play a part in creating a cultural environment within your team that encourages success, supports organisational objectives, and makes for a better place to work.

Other ways you can use this tool

Bring it to supervision to discuss and complete the audit with your line manager.

Share these ideas with peers in a management meeting or action learning set, and invite them to work through the audit questions.

Present the ideas to your team in a meeting or away day, and invite them to work through the audit questions and contribute to a vision for cultural change.

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

Burnham J (2013) 'Developments in Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS: visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced' in Krause I (ed.) *Cultural Reflexivity*. London: Karnac.

Johnson G and Scholes K (1999) *Exploring Corporate Strategy* (5th ed). Essex: Prentice Hall.

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