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Organizational Culture of Social Support Institutions—Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

The value of support offered to individuals and families in a difficult situation, being a significant indicator of the quality of their lives, appears to harmonize inseparably with the moral aspect of the functioning of social support institutions. The support activity implemented by social services, as any other kind of professional activity, is subject not only to legal, but also to ethical responsibility which ought to be examined on both the individual and the macro levels.

The article presents results of the author's own study regarding organizational culture of social support institutions operating on the local level. The diagnosis has been made using the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) model where four main types of culture are listed, which enables the presentation of the predominant features of social institutions, i.e. adhocracy (creation), market (rivalry), clan (cooperation), and hierarchy (control) cultures.

As it is visible in the results of explorations undertaken, the predominant type of culture in the social support institutions examined is hierarchy culture (33.02%), whereas clan culture is the most desired one (38.13%). This means that the surveyed employees perceive their workplaces as highly formalized, oriented towards internal affairs and following the rules. According to them, the development of their institutions depends largely on the quality of interpersonal relations and professional development of skills.

KEYWORDS: institution, social support, organizational culture

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Introduction

Institutions serve multiple functions in social life, e.g. they grant the possibility of satisfying one's needs, facilitate pursuing social activity and lessening the effects of social changes, mainly through providing support and assistance to individuals and families (Sztompka, 2002; Łuczyńska, 1998). Following B. Malinowski, the basic distinction between intended and actual functions may be made. The former are connected directly with an institution's particular aims, whereas the latter are understood as an "overall result of organized activity, objective role that the institution plays in a cultural system. The role does not need to be compliant with the major principle of the institution." (Paluch, 1981, p. 71–72) Among the most important features distinguishing a social support institution from other entities operating within social life, the following may be mentioned: formal organization enabling the regularity of support; social sponsoring and monitoring; as well as the type of the institution's resources, including human resources, i.e. personnel; but also instruments, operational means, which may encompass social work, financial benefits and services (Łuczyńska, 1998). Supporting activities, as multiple others which constitute a part of the social activity field, are characterized by rationality, purposefulness, ethicality, transformativeness, and contextuality (Marynowicz-Hetka, 1998, p. 10). Preparation for effective action is an attribute of professional education of social services that, as part of their work, consciously and intentionally apply various models of methodological approach. Additionally, stressing the normative nature of social work and the necessity of following ethical principles in social work (Olech, 2006) makes social workers employed in social support institutions a professional group with a clearly outlined identity and specific cultural characteristics.

The matter of forming group identity of social workers has not been among the frequent subjects of studies hitherto conducted. They were mainly focused on the personal aspects of the sense of professional identity (Kurcz, 2002) and the occupational roles of social workers as well as the difficulties related to the performance of those roles (Żukiewicz, 2001). In the professional milieu of social workers, as Dobroniega Trawkowska has stressed (2006), discussions on the topic of professional autonomy, the significance of environmental control mechanisms, self-control or internal control of work quality are seldom initiated. The issue of collective identity is examined by the author from the perspective of the sense of community, but also the awareness of the distinction of functions served within society, the specificity of work ethics, as well as the field and impact measures based on a specialized range of skills and knowledge. The topic of culture within the area of support activities has also been touched upon by academics in a purely incidental manner (Kruk, 2010; Krzyszkowski, 2010). Hitherto conducted empirical studies were connected mainly to the life status of people

permanently marginalized and the culture of poverty. Thus it may be assumed that the category of the culture of support (activity) is present in the academic discourse, however, it is not discussed directly. It appears more frequently in the presentation of various solutions of practical nature (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2002). As it has been stressed by E. Marynowicz-Hetka (2014, p. 24), the creation of the culture of social work (“culture of practice”, “culture of activity”) is an extremely long-term process as a result of which “the given collective becomes a group, a community sharing the same or similar notions” (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2002, p. 144) which constitute the basis of the establishment of a symbolic institution (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2006). According to the author, it requires an atmosphere of cooperation, openness, trust and respect towards other people and their achievements. The attributes of what is referred to as culture of activity are convergent with the features determining the culture of practice of social services which include relationality, regularity of procedure or the creation of space for exchange (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2014).

The issue of organizational culture of social welfare institutions has been analyzed so far in the definitional and diagnostic area (Chmielewska-Muciek, 2013), as well as in the context of activities supporting families with children with disabilities (Szymanowska, 2019) and the management of social welfare centers and the creation of family policy (Wojtanowicz, 2024).

The aim of the article is to present the main characteristics of organizational culture and the results of original research on its diagnosis, conducted last year in social welfare institutions.

Organizational culture—explanation of the concept

There are numerous kinds of organizational culture which affect the behaviors of employees at work or the functioning of an institution as a whole in various ways. Their origins are sought in social studies (organizations *have* culture) and in the area of anthropology (organizations *are* culture). In the functional approach, predominant in the studies, based on a sociological concept, culture is an organization’s feature which serves the function of a social binder ensuring its sustainability. It is often understood as a collection of “taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, (...) it conveys a sense of identity to employees, provides unwritten and often unspoken guidelines for how to get along in the organization” (Cameron & Quinn, 2015, p. 28). It needs to be stressed, however, that identifying the culture of an organization with the atmosphere in it is unjustified. Culture is enduring, it encompasses fundamental values and states that are widely accepted within an organization. Atmosphere, on the other hand, stems from individual attitudes and personal perspectives, it is character-

ized by its variability over time and ease of observation. Culture represents that part of reality which has been created and exists as a result of human actions. According to Ł. Sułkowski (2002), organizational culture ought to be perceived, among other things, as one of the cultural areas, a set of rules and principles of social functioning of an institution, but also as examples and patterns of human behavior. In the case of social support institutions, significance is gained by those cultural features which characterize relationships of organizational authorities, the cooperation of people within the organization and their attitudes towards the outside world (Sikorski, 2006). The specific functioning of an institution is also influenced by the values, norms and attitudes of its employees (Mazur, 2014).

The components of organizational culture may be divided into three kinds which are as follows: a) patterns of thinking (i.e. cultural assumptions, values, norms) owing to which members of the group receive assessment criteria for various phenomena and situations; b) patterns of behavior which provide the proper forms of reactions to those phenomena and situations; c) symbols (physical, linguistic, behavioral, personal) owing to which the dissemination and consolidation of patterns of thinking and behavior take place among members of the group (Schein, 2004; Sikorski, 2006).

National culture of the individuals forming the organization undoubtedly plays a significant role in shaping organizational culture (Misiak, 2004; Silverthorne, 2005). This is observable in the case of international institutions, where employees build the organizational culture based on attitudes, norms, values, and beliefs characteristic of their countries of origin. Therefore, it might be assumed that its strength ought to be measured with the intensity of such features as: the clarity of cultural patterns, the level of their dissemination, acquisition, and internalization (Sathe, 1983). An organization's ethos is also strictly connected with its culture. As Czesław Sikorski has stressed, the system of values within a given social environment is shaped by culture, thus creating a system of collective preferences. Social values, on the other hand, determine the attitudes, norms, and values of a particular social institution which, at the same time, are the constituents of the institution's organizational culture (Sikorski, 1999, p. 239–240). The division of organizational culture, appropriate to its implementation within a social support institution, has been made by Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn (Cameron & Quinn, 2015, p. 45–53) who recognized its four main types, i.e.:

- a) adhocracy culture (orientation towards flexibility, entrepreneurship, innovativeness, acquisition of new resources and taking on challenges);
- b) market culture (orientation towards rivalry, perfectionism, achieving ambitious goals, orientation towards results);

- c) clan culture (sense of community, trust, commitment to cooperation, creating a family-like atmosphere at work, providing advice, help, pursuing concord and loyalty);
- d) hierarchy culture (bureaucratic style, strong formalization and orientation towards control).

The shape of organizational culture of a social support institution is affected by social, political, legal, demographic, educational, and broadly understood cultural factors, as well as individual experiences and traditions handed down in the fields of charity and philanthropy (Leś, 2001). Cultural dissonance, however, which is also the most frequent reason for cognitive dissonance, appears to be the source of destabilization in the management of organizational culture. The reasons for cultural differences, in this case, could be sought in groups of universal and organizational factors. According to Geert Hofstede, the former includes regional location, religion, sex, generation bonds, and social class membership. Among the latter, the following are listed: geographical factors, working conditions, division of labor, working methods, and professional differentiation of employees (Hofstede, 2000, p. 53–55). The positive results of cultural diversity are openness to new ideas, creative and flexible problem solving, expanding alternatives and meanings, whereas the negative ones include the increase in anxiety and difficulty in agreeing on meanings as a result of a lack of agreement, erroneous communication and the polysemy of social situations (Adler, 1986, p. 80). Another variable which is important in forming the organizational culture of social support institutions is their relationship with the environment (Dołhacz et al., 2009, p. 180) that includes various state, local authority, business and non-profit entities the organizations cooperate with.

Methodological assumptions and results of own study

To diagnose the organizational culture of social support institutions in the Białystok *powiat* [Polish unit of administration and local government] I used the model and questionnaire for assessing culture and its changes called Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (Cameron & Quinn, 2015; Cameron & Ettington, 1988; Cameron, et al., 2006). The aim of the study was to recognize the predominant profile of organizational culture (both current and desired), but also the factors which determine it. The assessment of organizational culture consisted in the determination of its six basic dimensions indicated in the questionnaire in the form of questions: What is the general characteristic of the institution? What is its leadership style? What is the

personnel management style? What ensures the coherence of the institution? What is emphasized the most? What are the success criteria in the institution?

From the 15 institutions invited to participate in the study, eight entities returned complete surveys (53.3%). The numerical data obtained was added up separately in A, B, C, and D answer groups and an arithmetic mean was calculated, which for the "current state" profile equaled A – 30.73%; B – 19.90%; C – 16.35%; D – 33.02% and for the "desired state"—A – 38,13%; B – 21,56%; C – 15,21%; D – 25,10% respectively.

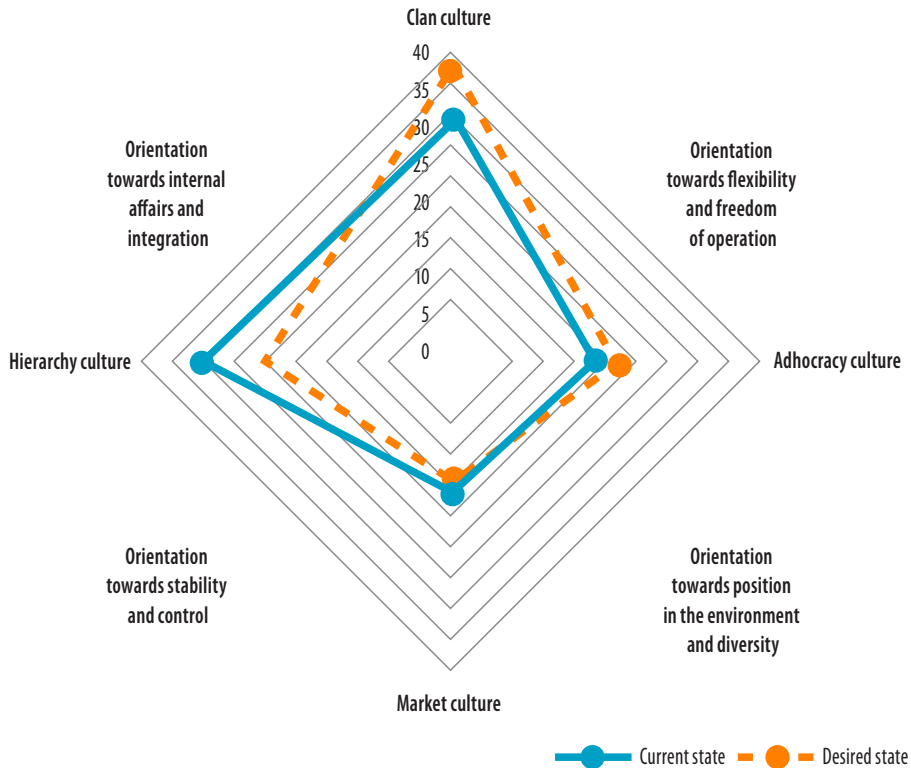


Diagram 1. The profile of organizational culture of social support institutions in the Białystok powiat (percentage data)

Source: own study

As the diagram above presents, the predominant culture type in the social support institutions examined is hierarchy culture (33.02%). This means that the employees surveyed perceive their workplaces as highly formalized, oriented towards internal affairs and following the rules, but also limiting freedom and creativity. The effectiveness of their activities results from meeting deadlines as well as from skillfulness and predictability. It is a culture type focused on tasks that need to be performed in a pro-

fessional manner, in accordance with one's qualifications, narrow specialization and roles of individual employees. In the institutions examined, a universal motivation system does not exist, whereas staff training is not obligatory and consists in supporting the development of selected employees. The clan culture type has taken the second position (30.73%). It is characterized by teamwork (e.g. independent work groups), the pursuit of creating a friendly work atmosphere and enhancing people's activity, care and responsibility of an institution for its employees, and treating the organization's clients as partners. An effective way of coordinating the activity of organizations having this type of organizational culture is by caring that all employees share the same values, beliefs, ideals, and common goals. It is also important to have strong bonds and morale of the team, as well as treating leaders as mentors, guardians, tutors, etc. The third model is adhocracy culture (19.9%), i.e. orientation towards innovativeness, swiftness of reaction to new opportunities that might arise, the lack of a centralized authority and professional relations, work performed in task groups, and stress laid on unorthodox and alternative solutions. The last culture type found was market culture which is characterized by focusing on conducting transactions (i.e. exchange, sale, contract, etc.) with other individuals or entities in order to gain an advantage. The basic values in this sort of organizations are efficiency and competitiveness, orientation towards results, achieving ambitious goals, the will to win and maintain the leading position.

As the analysis of the empirical material gathered shows, the profile of organizational culture that is desired the most by the examined social workers is the clan type (38.13%), whereas the market type is the least wanted one (15.21%). It seems quite thought-provoking that the hierarchy type has been rated so highly where a quarter of the respondents were for maintaining it (25.1%). Keeping the status quo, in spite of the requirement to submit and the excessive formalization, is probably connected with the sense of job security as well as the predictability and immutability of the hitherto existing relations within the institution.

Factors determining organizational culture

The OCAI tool used for examining organizational culture of social support institutions in the Białystok powiat enabled the diagnosis of partial features which constitute a reflection of present and desired cultures.

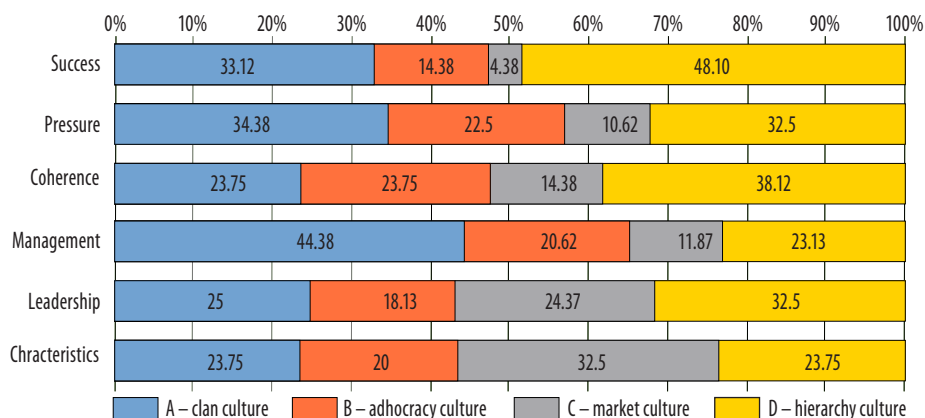


Diagram 2. Features of examined institutions and culture type present (percentage data)

Source: own study

From the contents of the diagram above it is visible that the examined institutions are characterized mostly by the care to perform their tasks as perfectly as possible (32.5%). Leadership is associated with coordination, skillful organization, creating harmonious conditions for achieving good results (32.5%), and with managing the team (44.38%). Coherence of the institutions examined is ensured by formal rules and regulations (38.12%). In spite of the fact that efficient operation is the most significant feature, attention is also paid to employees' personal development, mutual openness and co-participation (34.38%). Operational efficiency also constitutes a measurement of success for the institutions examined (48.12%) and its most important determiners are the certainty of providing assistance, keeping deadlines, and low operation costs.

The desired types of organizational culture in social support institutions operating in the Białystok *powiat* are, as I have indicated above, the clan and hierarchy cultures. The predominant preferences among the employees examined regarding the creation of clan culture prove their readiness to establish a family atmosphere and caring for others in the workplace (30.63%) as well as the pursuit of concord and loyalty in teamwork (47.5%). They also show the inevitability of building mutual trust and emotional commitment (34.38%) together with personal (43.12%) and professional development (41.25%). The highest numerical value in the latter culture type desired by the social workers surveyed, i.e. hierarchy culture, has been observed in the leadership dimension within a given organization (36.25%). The surveyed would like to perceive their superiors as people organizing and coordinating actions skillfully, assertive, persistent in achieving goals, but at the same time supportive and genuinely interested in the difficulties and dilemmas experienced by their subordinates.

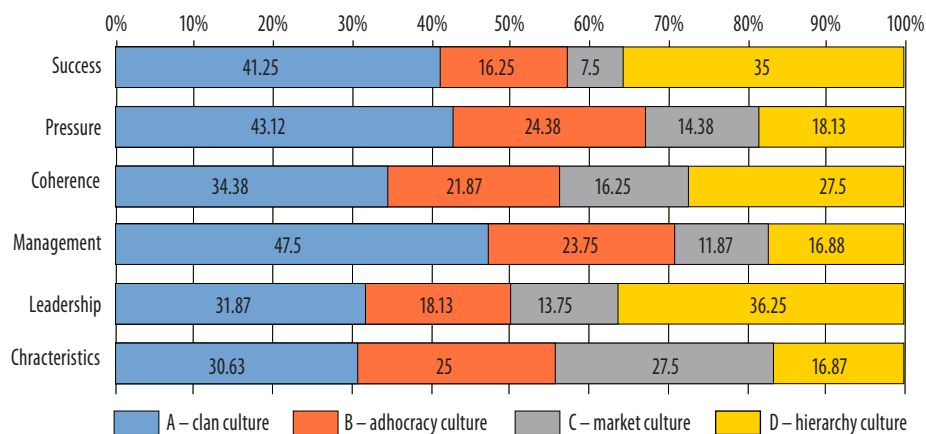


Diagram 3. Features of examined institutions and culture type desired (percentage data)

Source: own study

Although it is irrelevant as far as numerical analysis is concerned, the fact of an increase in indications for adhocracy culture, as compared to the initial state, seems worth stressing (Diagram 1). I have observed the increase in the general characteristics of institutions (orientation towards entrepreneurship and risk), management style (promoting innovativeness, freedom, originality), matters important to the given institution (stress on obtaining new resources and searching for innovative solutions), as well as success criteria (acquiring the leading position in alternative activities). The change happening in this sphere is, in my opinion, probably a consequence of the participation of the employees surveyed in social projects and proper implementation of social work based on the method of organizing the environment, which has been enjoying renaissance recently.

Final conclusions

The findings of the conducted research indicate that the dominant existing type of organizational culture in social welfare institutions is hierarchical culture, whereas the most desired type is clan culture.

Awareness of the existing and desired cultural values enables setting the direction of change in its functioning and, consequently, in how an institution's employees think and behave in pursuit of a shared goal. Such change, as indicated by the results of the study, ought to consist in the reduction of importance of hierarchy culture and strengthening those cultural patterns which reflect clan and adhocracy cultures. Increasing pressure on change oriented towards creating clan culture means assess-

ment of employees' needs and their fulfillment, support of team work and co-participation, raising morale by extending authorizations and rights, caring about the growth of mutual trust, open display of care for the employees, and creating conditions for independence. Creating adhocracy culture refers to making activity more dynamic, the encouragement to take risks, supporting creative solutions and innovativeness, thinking about the future and having a clear vision thereof. As it has been stressed by K. S. Cameron and R. E. Quinn (2015), such a direction of activities, obviously, does not mean tolerance of self-centered attitudes, self-creation and neglecting the pursuit of goals set, but it provides employees with the opportunity to recognize and display the strong and weak points of their institutions, and the stage of development of group identity.

It is beyond doubt that the concept of organizational culture, when interpreted correctly and applied in exploration, constitutes a suitable foundation for expanding research areas on the facet of activity culture in the field of social support. In organizational units of social support, actions resulting from formal principles of granting the support oriented towards achieving effectiveness and based on ethical premises, i.e. the idea of respect and dignity, expressing care and respect to other people (Hofstede, 1980), interpenetrate. The activity culture ought to be perfected constantly. It is a time-consuming and difficult process; nevertheless it serves the purposes of achieving the goals of social support and shaping the professional identity of social workers efficiently. Culture is created and managed by leaders, but it also evolves through group learning. It is an unwritten rule and a habitual mode of operation for employees (Schein, 2004). Examining the culture of social welfare institutions can provide insights into current needs and stressors in the work environment. Therefore, the results are crucial for the ongoing identification of employee challenges, their determinants, and possible solutions, as well as for long-term planning for staff's continued professional development of management practice (Wojtanowicz, 2024).

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