Research article

Toward a more comprehensive analysis of the role of organizational culture in child sexual abuse in institutional contexts

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article draws on a report prepared for the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Palmer et al., 2016) to develop a more comprehensive analysis of the role that organizational culture plays in child sexual abuse in institutional contexts, where institutional contexts are taken to be formal organizations that include children among their members (referred to here as "youth-serving organizations"). We begin by integrating five strains of theory and research on organizational culture from organizational sociology and management theory into a unified framework for analysis. We then elaborate the main paths through which organizational culture can influence child sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations. We then use our unified analytic framework and our understanding of the main paths through which organizational culture can influence child sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations to analyze the role that organizational culture plays in the perpetration, detection, and response to child sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations. We selectively illustrate our analysis with case materials compiled by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and reports of child sexual abuse published in a variety of other sources. We conclude with a brief discussion of the policy implications of our analysis.

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse is prevalent, injurious to its victims, and morally offensive to the general public in most contemporary societies. The majority of child sexual abuse occurs in the family or the surrounding community (Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011), but a significant minority occurs in institutional contexts; that is, formal organizations that incorporate children among their members (Euser, Alink, Tharner, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013; Shakeshaft, 2004). Formal organizations are collections of people engaged in sustained social interaction coordinated by at least a rudimentary horizontal and vertical division of labor in pursuit of one or more common objectives. Psychologists and sociologists understand formal organizations to be "strong situations," in that they consist of structures and processes that can override individual predispositions and shape member attitudes and behavior (Pfeffer & Davis-Blake, 1989). Formal organizations that incorporate children as members include organizations whose primary purpose is caring for children (e.g., schools, sports clubs, juvenile detention centers, and foster homes) and those for which caring for children is tangential to their primary purpose (e.g., religious organizations). We refer to both types of organizations here as "youth-serving organizations."

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This article draws on a report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to develop a more comprehensive analysis of the role that organizational culture plays in child sexual abuse in institutional contexts (Palmer, Feldman, & McKibbin, 2016). Prior theory and research on the role that organizational culture plays in child sexual abuse in these contexts does not benefit from recent scholarship on organizational culture in organizational sociology and management theory (hereafter, "organization theory"). Our analysis proceeds in four steps. First, we define child sexual abuse for the purpose of our inquiry. Second, we integrate divergent strains of theory and research on organizational culture from organizational theory to develop a unified framework for analysis. Third, we elaborate the main paths through which organizational culture can influence child sexual abuse in formal organizations. Fourth, we apply our integrated organizational culture framework and our understanding of the main paths through which organizational culture can influence child sexual abuse in formal organizations to analyze the role that organizational culture plays in the perpetration, detection, and response to abuse in youth-serving organizations. In addition, we selectively illustrate our analysis with case materials compiled by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Appendix A) and reports of child sexual abuse published in a variety of other sources. We conclude with a brief discussion of the policy implications of our analysis.

2. Defining child sexual abuse

Following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, we define child sexual abuse as:

… any act that exposes a child to, or involves a child in, sexual processes beyond his or her understanding or contrary to accepted standards. Sexually abusive behaviours can include the fondling of genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or any other object, fondling of breasts, voyeurism, exhibitionism and exposing the child to or involving the child in pornography (Bromfield, 2005). It includes child grooming which refers to actions deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and establishing an emotional connection with a child to lower the child's inhibitions in preparation for sexual activity with the child.

We understand this definition to include both the abuse of children by adults (referred to here as "adult-child" abuse) and the perpetration of sexually harmful behavior against children by other children (referred to here as "sexually harmful behavior by other children"), where the terms "adult," "child," and "children" are understood to be socially constructed (varying over historical time and across societies) and legally operationalized (varying from one jurisdiction to another). We explicitly acknowledge the existence of sexually harmful behavior by other children, because such behavior is prevalent in institutional contexts. In their international literature review of child sexual abuse in residential care facilities, Timmerman and Schreuder (2014) found that almost half of the instances of abuse involved perpetrators who were peers of their victims. Further, in their report on child sexual abuse in Australia between 2008 and 2013, Bromfield, Hirte, Octoman, and Katz (forthcoming) found that between 62% and 89% of allegations of abuse occurring in institutional contexts reported to the police in Tasmania, the Northern Territory and Western Australia involved a perpetrator who was under 18 years of age.

3. An integrated framework for the analysis of organizational culture

Giorgi, Lockwood, and Glynn (2015) present a comprehensive review of theories of culture found in organizational theory. Their review identifies five different conceptualizations of culture: values, stories, frames, toolkits and categories. Values are what people "prefer, hold dear, or desire." Stories are "verbal or written narratives with causally linked sequences of events" that convey meaning. Frames are "filters or brackets that delimit what we pay attention to." Toolkits are "sets of stories, frames, categories, rituals, and practices that actors draw upon to make meaning or take action." Categories are "social constructions or classifications that define and structure the conceptual distinctions between objects, people, and practices" (Giorgi et al., 2015: 5–7).

We think all five conceptualizations of culture identified by Giorgi et al. are useful in understanding the role that organizational culture can play in child sexual abuse in institutional contexts. Further, we think all five can be integrated into an overarching framework for analysis, in which organizational culture is understood to possess both content and form. Cultural content consists of assumptions, values and beliefs, and norms that distinguish appropriate from inappropriate attitudes and behaviors in an organization. Assumptions are shared understandings about the categories that objects, people, and practices in an organization occupy (e.g., in a boarding school, whether students are considered trustworthy) and the frame according to which action in an organization unfolds (e.g., whether a boarding school is considered first and foremost a place of learning or a business and thus whether teachers' relationship to students is that of mentor or service provider). Values and beliefs are shared understandings about what constitutes virtuous or unscrupulous attitudes or behaviors in an organization (e.g., whether or not it is good for boarding school teachers to monitor students' attitudes and behavior closely). Norms are shared understandings about what one should or should not think and do in an organization (e.g., whether or not boarding school teachers should socialize with students). While organizations' assumptions, values and beliefs, and norms often closely align with one another, they can diverge.

Cultural forms consist of artifacts and practices that convey cultural content in an organization. Artifacts are the identifiable units in which cultural content is conveyed. They can be material, such as the desks, chairs, and accessories in an organization's offices. For example, organizations that employ "open office" designs convey the assumption that social interaction in the organization is equalitarian. They also can be immaterial, such as the jargon, stories, and songs that an organization's members use and share. For example, organizations that employ jargon that refers to customers in a demeaning way may convey the assumption that they are appropriate targets of exploitation. Immaterial artifacts such as jargon may leave material traces, such as when jargon is used in email