Social Housing Competencies: Expertise for a New Era

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ASTRACT

This article outlines organizational-level competencies within the changing social housing context in Ontario. The changing context is occurring at the same time as key board members and staff are retiring. This prompts the question of how the sector can ensure excellent housing for low- and middle-income tenants into the future, while keeping in mind its social justice origins. Social constructionist, adult education, and critical theoretical traditions guided the research questions and methodology of this study, resulting in a working definition of organizational competencies. Organizational competencies have been identified through a sequential mixed methods approach. Four key competency clusters have been identified: capital asset, sectoral operational, people-oriented, and strategic. These clusters and the competencies they contain provide a model to assist organizations in meeting their social justice and business goals into the future.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit les compétences organisationnelles requises dans le domaine du logement social en Ontario dans un contexte changeant. Ce contexte change en même temps que des membres clés de conseils d'administration et des employés clés sont en train de prendre leur retraite. Ces circonstances font réfléchir sur comment le secteur pourra continuer à fournir des logements désirables aux locataires à faible ou moyen revenu tout en respectant les principes de justice sociale. Pour cette étude, les traditions de construction sociale, d'éducation pour adultes et de théorie critique ont guidé la formulation de questions de recherche et la méthodologie, avec comme résultat une définition pratique de ce que sont les compétences organisationnelles. Ces dernières ont été identifiées au moyen d'une recherche par méthodes mixtes séquentielles. Quatre regroupements de compétences clés ont été cernés : actif immobilisé, opération par secteurs, service au public, et stratégie. Ces regroupements et les compétences qu'ils privilégient peuvent servir de modèles pour aider les organisations à rencontrer leurs futurs objectifs en justice sociale et en affaires.

KEYWORDS / MOTS CLÉS Skill; Competency; Nonprofit; Social housing; Mixed methods / Habileté; Compétence; Sans but lucratif; Logement social; Méthodes mixtes

INTRODUCTION

Social housing[1] in Ontario is facing a multitude of challenges, including declining government funding, the end of operating agreements, increasing and ever-changing legislative requirements, and the subsequent modernization of the sector. This is happening at the same time that founding and long-term board and staff members are retiring. These changes lead to the overarching question of how to overcome gaps in knowledge and ensure that a new generation of board and staff members are equipped to ensure organizational success in the new environment. In turn, this leads to the definition of sector competencies, drawing from the National Learning Initiative (2003), as the knowledge, skills, abilities, and value orientation that ensure organizational success.

This article documents research into how competencies are understood in various jurisdictions and how they relate to the provision of social housing in current and future contexts. This is accomplished through a sequential mixed methods approach. This research draws on a structured literature review, surveys, a focus group, and qualitative interviews with social housing providers to address questions about social housing standards, competencies, the changing social housing context, knowledge and skill development, and organizational needs looking forward. In particular, this research pays attention to how the idea of competencies is used in response to the changing environment. Finally, it "clusters" these competencies as they are relevant in an Ontario social housing context. The goal is to develop further understanding of how competencies are understood and applied to best meet sector needs. While the research also examined sector standards, for the purposes of this article, the focus is specifically on findings about the competencies needed to ensure quality social housing in Ontario. This article begins by outlining the theoretical underpinnings used to frame this study and the way competencies are understood in the research. The social housing sector in Ontario is then contextualized. Finally, the methodology is outlined and then the findings in detail.

CONCEPTUALIZING COMPETENCIES IN THE SOCIAL HOUSING SECTOR: LEARNING AND SOCIAL CHANGE

As seen below, much academic focus on competencies is firmly situated in corporate or business environments. But no sector faces more complex challenges than the social housing sector. In addition to facing practical challenges, the sector is often seen as the solution to a broad range of social problems, such as homelessness and healthcare needs. This requires careful consideration of the theoretical and philosophical approaches to researching social housing, which, in turn, impacts research design and execution. Social constructionist, adult education, and critical theoretical traditions are drawn on in this study of competencies in the social housing sector. In addition, the idea of competency modelling is used to consider competencies within the context of nonprofit sector organizations.

Given the challenges of theorizing around workplaces that are situated in, arguably, a social justice space—the social housing sector (ONPHA & CHF, 2013)—these philosophical approaches fit for the following reasons. First, a social constructionist approach recognizes that prevalent notions of how we see the world and operate within it are not monolithic realities but are created through social interaction and discourse (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). This means context is critical to understanding concepts such as "competencies." Therefore, over time and place, our understanding of any given concept changes. K. Peter Kuchinke and Hee-Young Han (2005) have adopted Conger and Benjamin's three-part critique of competencies. This critique is as follows:

> first, the strong tendency to view defined competencies as universal and ideal-type criteria and ignore situational contingencies and personality-based differences; second, the fact that competencies might be mutually exclusive or even contradictory; and, third, that competency frameworks stabilize behaviors that might have proven effective in the past but may not anticipate future needs. (p. 387)

A social constructionist approach provides a frame of inference into the complexities of competency research within various sectors, subsectors, and organizations. In this research, these include the nonprofit sector, the social housing sector, and local contexts themselves (that is, regional, temporal, and organizational). Social constructionist underpinnings provide more thoughtful and thorough analysis, which, in turn, permits the examination of competencies in a way that allows them to be useful in practice.

Adult education and learning has typically been positioned as social in nature and social justice–oriented (Watkins & Marsick, 2014). It has also been positioned in opposition to workplace learning such as Human Resource Development (HRD). Ronald L. Jacobs (2014) defines HRD as "the process of improving organizational performance and individual learning through the human accomplishments that result from employee development, organization development, and career development programs" (p. 14). Human Resource Development is often seen to be embedded in, and subject to, organizational power dynamics and to be an approach that reinforces the status quo (Hatcher & Bowles, 2014). This means that HRD is seen as reinforcing existing power relationships and objectives at work as opposed to meeting employee learning needs and desires. However, adult education approaches attend to the power dynamics and societal influences that shape learning in any context with an awareness that these dynamics can either facilitate or constrain agency, identity, and ability (Watkins & Marsick, 2014). Taking an adult education perspective of learning at work assists in understanding some of the tensions inherent in the nonprofit sector as they relate to the idea of competencies. Karen E. Watkins and Victoria J. Marsick (2014) suggest that adult education is "focused on broad concerns of social justice and equity along with its long term focus on practical guidelines for teaching and learning" (p. 43), whereas workplace learning via Human Resource Development is focused more on productivity and performance (2014). An adult education perspective also sheds some light on the social justice values that various stakeholders bring to the nonprofit housing sector. It considers what this means for operating in an environment that is increasingly expected to be business-oriented and entrepreneurial (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016). Patricia A. Gouthro (2010), in her study of informal learning in community-based organizations in Canada, reported that adult education can provide a possible way to navigate the need to balance organizational survival with providing services. In the following pages, there is a review of the literature on competencies in the social housing sector. In conclusion, a definition of competencies to frame this study in the Ontario social housing context is presented.

Workplace competency, as a social phenomenon, is widely discussed in popular culture, business, and academia (Berdrow & Evers, 2014; Feser, Mayol, & Srinivasan, 2015; Kuchinke & Han, 2005; Stevens, 2012).[2] As noted, this article takes a critical approach to examining competencies in the nonprofit sector. While individual skills are often conflated with organizational competencies and, indeed, proved challenging to differentiate in interviews and focus group, they are distinguished in the following way: A skill is a singular ability that one employee may have and use in the execution of his or her job (Berdrow & Evers, 2014). Competencies, in contrast, are a cluster of knowledge, skills, and abilities that an organization requires in order to ensure a "transformative process combining resources and activity *inputs* into operational *processes* that result in specific competitive performance *outcomes*" (Lewis, 2003, p. 731). The strength of this definition and approach to competencies is that no one person brings a full spectrum of knowledge, skills, and abilities to the workplace. Instead, a successful workplace is the result of multiple contributors, both within and external to the organization. A critical examination of these definitions tells us that competencies are most often understood as bounded by the organizational context and are driven by the organizational business goals. In order for this form of competency framework to be transformative at a sectoral level, the development and use of competencies should come from an adult education perspective that is attentive to the power relations inherent in any organization.

To ensure that competencies are being defined in light of the Ontario social housing context and in keeping with social constructionist, adult educational, and critical theoretical perspectives, this article uses an adapted definition of compe-

tencies based on the National Learning Initiative's (2003) definition: "the knowledge, skills, abilities, intangible/tangible mindsets and behaviors … that lead to improving life in the community and the world through principled actions and professional behaviour in the voluntary sector" (p. 10). To more specifically represent the idea of competencies within the social housing sector, this definition is revised to "the knowledge, skills, abilities, and *value orientation* applied through principled actions and professional behaviour *to ensure housing excellence for low- and medium-income tenants.*" Sector competencies are made up of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and value orientation that are generally required for running social housing in the sector within the current context. Relying on the theoretical grounding outlined above, this article further suggests that competencies must be fluid enough to respond to local and subsectoral organizational needs, and the complex needs of adult learners, as well as be able to respond to temporal shifts as they occur.

Finally, the idea of competency modelling, which has been useful in the development of training and assessment centres, employee and career development initiatives, leadership development, and organizational change (Stevens, 2012), is used. Understanding competency modelling as a process that aligns a competency model with the context in question fits nicely within this research's theoretical framing as it centralizes sectoral, temporal, and organizational variables. In other words, it does not blindly promote the application of a monolithic model across settings (Stevens, 2012). Competency modelling suggests that competencies, as defined above, can be used within the social housing sector in a way that allows a comprehensive and responsive approach. The following section explores the nature of the social housing sector.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: SOCIAL HOUSING AND SOCIAL CHANGE

This section outlines a brief history of social housing in Canada and, more specifically, Ontario. It then summarizes how this history has informed some of the present challenges to the social housing sector. Finally, it concludes with why the exploration of organizational competencies, as previously defined, might be helpful in addressing the challenges that the social housing sector and those working in it face.

The first large-scale housing program in Canada emerged to house veterans returning from the Second World War (CMHC, 2011; ONPHA, 2015b). In the postwar period, social housing was expanded to include the working poor through the introduction of units meant to house low-income households (CMHC, 2011). Over the past several decades, the development of affordable housing in Ontario has taken three main forms that subsequently influenced funding and development within the social housing sector (ONPHA, 2015b). The first stage was significant provincial investment, which saw the creation of over 84,000 units between 1964 and 1975 (ONPHA, 2015b). The second stage was the increased presence of the Government of Canada in funding, which saw the creation of over 52,000 units between 1978 and 1985. The final stage began in the mid-1990s and saw the end of large-scale commitment to social housing with the subsequent devolution of social housing to municipalities in the early 2000s. The federal government halted new funding in 1993, except on reserves, and the provincial government ceased new funding in 1995 (CHRA, n.d.; Hulchanski, 2002). The federal and provincial governments reduced their large-scale investment in the construction of affordable housing, favouring the support of the private sector and the open housing market (ONPHA & CHF, 2013). Since 1993, different levels of government have offered smaller funding programs, including Investment in Affordable Housing, Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, and the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. Newer initiatives have supported smaller-scale developments through private nonprofits, municipal nonprofits, and cooperative housing providers. These small-scale investments since the mid-1990s have led to fewer units being created across Canada. Other initiatives, meant to address housing need and homelessness, have focused on rental supplements and private sector partnerships.
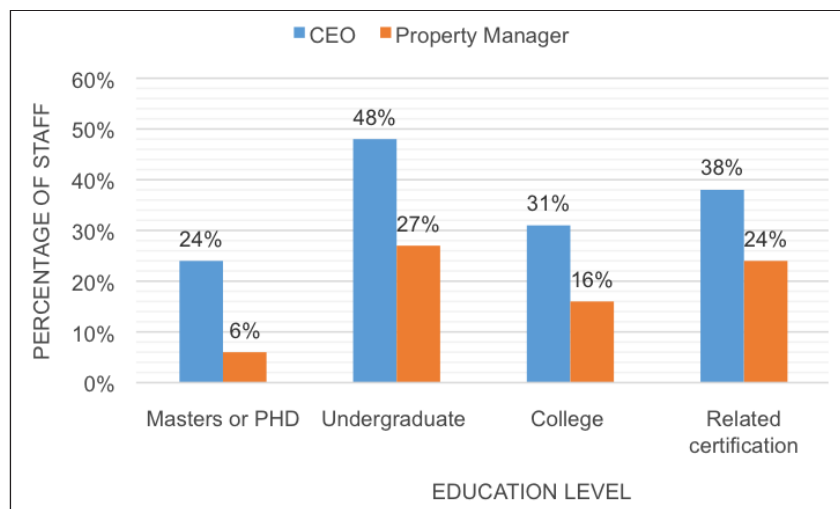
As a result of this history, funding for most of the existing affordable housing has been administered through federal or provincial operating agreements, which generally offered a combination of operating and capital funding to social housing

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31

providers for the term of mortgages, though longer for providers whose housing is administered under the Housing Services Act. The term for operating agreements generally ranges from 30 to 40 years, and one hundred percent of these agreements expire by 2040. Aside from funding constraints, housing providers in Ontario face a number of local contextual issues that influence their operations in ways unique to the social housing sector.

The policy environment stems partly from the administrative division of Ontario into 47 service manager and District Social Services Administration Board (DSSAB) areas that were developed to administer social housing programs across the province (Ontario, 2016). Service managers/DSSABs are responsible for, among other things, distributing resources to housing providers, reporting to provincial bodies, and creating local rules for designated areas under the *Housing Services Act*, 2011. Social housing providers must be compliant with all relevant legislation, regulatory measures, and zoning requirements from three levels of government. Social housing providers contend with a range of barriers that influence their ability to effectively run and manage housing. These challenges vary depending on the location and size of the housing portfolios and the demographics of the community in which they are situated. Challenges range from difficulty in accessing skilled trades and supplies in remote communities to developing effective systems to manage large-scale, multi-site operations in major urban centres. Some communities also face changing demographics, making it harder to recruit for board of director, volunteer, and staff roles (Suttor & Bettencourt-McCarthy, 2014).

In Ontario, there are currently more than 400,000 people who live in community-based affordable housing (ONPHA, 2015a). These social housing organizations now house a range of tenants, including "victims of violence and abuse; people living with developmental disabilities, mental illness, addictions, and HIV/Aids; and the formerly homeless and hard to house" (p. 2). As federal and provincial governments move toward reducing their role in the sector, housing providers face greater pressure to adopt more business-like or "entrepreneurial practices." The second, often conflicting, pressure has to do with the increasingly complex needs of tenants living in social housing (ONPHA, 2015d). These pressures have brought to the forefront conversations about the professionalization of the housing sector, as well as about the identification of the important knowledge, skills, abilities, and value orientation necessary to ensure good-quality, affordable housing. Long-term planning in the sector is even more important with the recognition that significant turnover has begun to occur due to retirement of senior staff. In particular, 74 percent of chief executive officers (CEOs) and property managers are between the ages of 46 and 65 (The Portage Group, 2015). This has obvious implications in the consideration of competencies and future leadership of the sector.

Figure 1: Survey respondents: Level of education of lead operational staff in the Ontario social housing sector, 2015

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32

Understanding competencies within the context of existing educational attainment and professional certification is helpful in understanding the opportunities for learning and growth of existing and new board and staff members. While a significant portion of the leaders in the sector have a postsecondary education, only 38 percent have a certification related to their role in social housing (see Figure 1). Given the unique context of the social housing sector in Ontario, this research seeks to comprehend how the concept of competencies is currently understood and how it can be used to address the challenges the sector is facing, while keeping in mind the social purpose inherent in the sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on a sequential mixed methods approach. A mixed methods approach can be defined as a research design that intentionally combines complementary approaches, including both quantitative and qualitative data collection in order to explore the research questions at hand (Brannen, 2005). A mixed methods approach is a good match for this theoretical approach and these research questions, as it allows the collection of data from a wider group from simple survey questions, which then frames the more in-depth data collection through interviews and the focus group. Data collection happened in three phases. First, international and Canadian publically available social housing sector reports pertaining to social housing standards and competencies were reviewed alongside academic literature. Competencies, as identified in this body of literature, were collected and grouped into themes. These themes formed the basis for the surveys. The second stage was the development of simple survey questions based on the identified themes. Finally, individual phone interviews were arranged with social housing staff and a focus group was set up via teleconference. These are discussed in turn below.

Social housing reports and frameworks

Canadian and U.K. social housing reports and competency frameworks publically available on the Web were reviewed against the literature to determine what standards had been identified within the sector and what competencies were identified as necessary for current and future success of social housing providers and the sector at large. Competencies identified in the reports were documented and initially clustered into five groups: strategy/strategic, people-oriented (internal and external relationships), capital asset-related, personal effectiveness, and impact-focused. These groups were used to populate the surveys and then the interview questions. Personal effectiveness competencies were identified as person level versus organizational level, which placed them outside of the definition used here and they were excluded from the research.

Surveys

Using sequential (survey) methodology, two surveys were done before entering into the interview phrase (Cresswell, 2007). This article refers only to the second survey on competencies. The data gathered from this method helped inform the interview and focus group questions (Cresswell, 2007). The surveys went out through a pre-existing e-alert tool. This method was chosen because it has an existing reach to Ontario social housing staff and board members, is economical, and has the ability to collect data easily. The e-alert's typical reach is just under 5,000 recipients. On average, 1,446 people open an e-alert when they receive it, and on average, 43 people open any given article (such as this survey).

The survey on competencies was sent out in a January 14, 2016, e-alert and was delivered to 4,897 subscribers. There were 39 unique clicks on the survey. It was sent again in a January 28, 2016, e-alert and was delivered to 4,926 subscribers. This time, it received 37 unique clicks. In total, 38 recipients completed the survey. Participants were asked two questions: "Please identify the 5 types of skills, knowledge, and values you think are most important, right now, for nonprofit housing organizations" and "Please identify the 5 types of skills, knowledge, and values you think are most important, in the future, for nonprofit housing organizations." The results are discussed below.

Individual interviews

Fifteen potential participants were chosen from the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association (ONPHA) membership at large using a purposeful sampling approach, with eight people responding. These participants were selected purposefully to yield cases that would be "information rich" (Patton, 2002). Interviews were held with seven women and one man who run social housing in Ontario. The respondents are all chief operational leads, and their organizations range in size from 40 units to 1,400 units. Their organizations represent seven private nonprofits and one municipal nonprofit, and are located in three small, two medium, and three large communities.[3] Interviews were conducted on the phone and were recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Focus group interview

The focus group was comprised of members of ONPHA's Local Advisory Member Committee. The committee is structured to represent a variety of communities throughout Ontario and a range of organizational focuses and tenant groups. While the group represents a "convenient sample," the committee is frequently brought complex challenges, and the focus group participants were selected based on their knowledge of the sector and connectedness with other community members. This focus group utilized a semi-structured interview format, or vertical process, via teleconference (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2010). In a vertical process approach, participants are encouraged to contribute ideas to each question and are able to listen to, or build onto, other participants' ideas. Interviewers rephrased questions as necessary to keep the conversation on topic (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2010).

Seven members were in attendance, representing five small and two large communities. The members ran organizations with between 50 and 560 units and represented five private nonprofit organizations and two municipal nonprofit providers. Five women and two men participated. The participants were senior staff in their organizations, with a range of titles that included executive director, CEO, general manager, administrator, manager, and property manager.

All focus group and interview participants were informed of the details of the research and signed an informed consent to participate. Interviewees were assigned pseudonyms and details have been changed slightly to protect participant anonymity.

The data from all sources was analyzed using inductive and deductive approaches. In other words, the data was first analyzed against existing categories and competencies as found in the literature and then against the two sequential surveys. At the same time, it was important to be aware of, and attentive to the possibility of other themes emerging from the data. Data analysis was iterative and occurred as follows. Each researcher reviewed the literature and identified "competencies." All of these competencies were then collected and reviewed, and similar concepts were grouped under one cluster. These competencies were used to populate the survey as detailed above. The interviews and focus group data was coded inductively and then the resulting competencies were reviewed against the survey results and the literature. The researchers met and recoded the competencies again, considering the data from all sources.

FINDINGS

The literature review resulted in 30 competencies being identified.[4] For the survey, the list was reduced to 18 (and excluded personal competencies), with the option for respondents to add other competencies. Each of the 38 respondents to the second survey typically chose four to five competencies. No new competency emerged from the survey. Participants were asked to respond to two questions: What competencies are required for today? What competencies are required for the future? Building maintenance, tenant-focused, and business competencies were the three most frequently chosen as needed for today. Building maintenance, tenant-focused, adaptability, and strategy competencies were the top four

chosen as needed for the future (see Figure 2). The interviews and focus group initially resulted in 40 competencies. Once recoded, they were further combined as reflected in Table 1.

Figure 2: Competencies required for current and future contexts in social housing as selected by 38 survey respondents
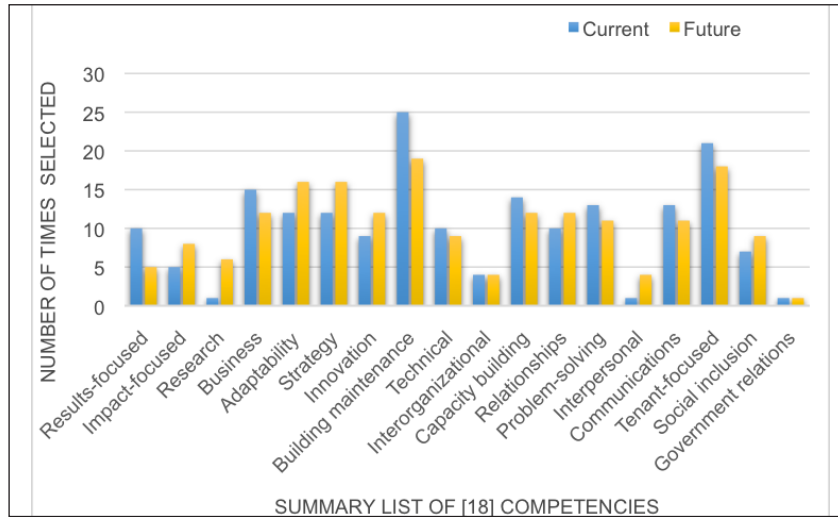

Table 1: Competency clusters

Cluster	Capital asset	Sectoral operational	People-oriented	strategic
Competencies	Building management Maintenance Safety Technical knowledge	Business Financial Legislative Rent-geared-to-income (RGI) Sectoral knowledge	Internal relationships: Tenant engagement Working together External relationships: Networking Collaboration Partnerships Service-relationships	Change management Governance: Self-governance Strategic planning Succession planning Innovation: Problem-solving Technology Values orientation: Social justice Anti-oppression

The focus group and interviews provided for a deeper exploration of competencies. They allowed competencies to be examined in the context of place and time, and permitted a more critical examination of the idea of competencies as it relates to the social justice origins of social housing (ONPHA, 2013). In particular, the interviews reinforced the study's sector-specific definition of competencies in two ways. First, the importance of "values" was manifest in the interviews and, therefore, suitable for inclusion in our definition. For instance, the focus group illustrated that values are an important part of social housing:

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35

> We are a faith-based organization, but not all of our staff are of the same faith. So, we see the values that we use as some of [the core pieces of our faith] … We use that as a way that we can implement service.

Second, the limits of organizational boundaries and the roles within them are not fixed. Social housing providers have been expected to address a larger scope of needs than their property management functions. The focus group identified that "you require a social worker, with legal and housing expertise. There's no way you can recruit for that level of skill in any individual. There's no university degree in the field we just talked about." While these contextual considerations were not the primary intent of this research, they pose some interesting considerations for future research and practice. They also reinforce the benefit of developing a definition of sector-specific competencies for research and practice purposes.

The literature did not always specify when a sectoral, organizational, or position/personal competency was being discussed. This lack of definitional clarity proved somewhat challenging when trying to build on identified competencies. An attempt was made to address this by summarizing the definition of competencies when speaking to interviewees. However, there are still instances where participants conflate personal competencies with organizational.

As noted above, the researchers coded the interviews and then met to review coding decisions. The interview data was then reviewed and recoded when compared to the literature and survey data. This resulted in four competency clusters: capital asset, sectoral operational, people-oriented, and strategic. These clusters are made up of related competencies that generally (via literature, surveys, and interviews) were identified as being necessary to "ensure housing excellence for low- and medium-income tenants."

The capital asset cluster included competencies that are required to manage the buildings, such as building management, maintenance, safety, and technical competencies. When talking about technical competencies, there is agreement that technical knowledge is necessary but not necessarily where this competency must reside. Mary says: "I need to know how the boiler and heating systems work. So, for me, training along those lines is very important." But regarding technical knowledge, Adrienne says: "You need to know where to go and get it when you do need it."

With respect to building management, Mary feels that this knowledge would be beneficial to all direct service housing workers: "My opinion is that if those frontline workers were trained better in all aspects of how to run a building, it would be better for the property." Maxine suggests that building management is static unless there are changes in building management systems—"in buildings … there is not much change. Unless you get a new building and new building automation systems and it's a greener building." This demonstrates the situational nature of such competencies. Mary illustrates the importance of health and safety but also that this is not universally agreed upon as a priority competency:

> Sometimes he will say, "I want to save money for the organization." The first thing I'll say is, "What is it about? You don't save money on safety. You don't save money on anything that is not a healthy thing. Anything that is health and safety, I don't care about spending on it." You do whatever it takes to fix it.

While related to building management, maintenance was identified by survey respondents as the most important competency both as a current and a future need. In contrast, this was not the case overall in the interviews; however, the number of times it was mentioned demonstrated its importance to the participants. Adrienne points out: "You really need a basic understanding of maintenance and of the buildings and how things work and what does what." This is supported by Mary, who says: "You have to know how the building runs." At the same time, there was the belief that these competencies could be learned in-house; as Finnian says: "We can teach someone how to fix something," and Mary says: "You

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have to also have someone who is committed to learning about how the building works." Again, though maintenance was identified as a competency, there was a range of perspectives regarding how it could be represented in the organization. The sectoral operational cluster included operational competencies that tied to the specificity of the sector, such as competency in business, financial, legislative, rent-geared-to-income, and sector knowledge. The specificity of the sector is a result of the values inherent in the work as well as processes that are a product of the historical development of the sector. Finnian says: "You can't teach someone how to look at the world in a way that is compatible with how we approach our work." These particular competencies only became apparent in the interviews and were not raised in the same way in the literature and surveys. Some of these competencies are more general operational competencies. They represent particular requirements that are specific to the sector. For instance, Adrienne talks about financial competencies in the context that "you're going to have to find ways of working with other providers, smaller providers … smaller ones because … funds are more limited and our options are a little more limited." Ruby talks about business and financial competencies:

> There are many nonprofits that are in the same position we're in. There was some information from [sector organization] on mortgage refinancing. We're going to look at it and see if there's something that's going to be valuable for us. We know there's going to be a shortfall, so we want to know whether there will be a benefit for us to refinance … There is a constant pressure to ensure best practices and business levels, which can be a moving target.

Adrienne talks about sector-knowledge competency being important. She says: "Who else has housing in your area that you can maybe call for help or work with on specific things." Finnian expands on how this can happen through knowledge transfer, "sitting down with me for an hour and we talk about the history of our organization, our values, our objectives, how our mission fits in with broader things like the big-picture orientation." Therefore, while knowledge of the sector was important, organizations can access and develop this knowledge in a range of ways.

Knowledge of legislation is mentioned as a sectoral operational competency. For instance, the focus group identified "knowledge of legislation, including *Housing Services Act*, *Residential Tenancies Act,*" as a competency, and Maxine says: "We have to be landlords, which means that they have to understand that we are the most heavily legislated business in Ontario, or so I've been told." Joanne expands on this:

> Whether or not you're in compliance with Ontario Regs—and that doesn't necessarily have to mean Housing Services Regs. It means all different Regs in the province related to housing, which—my gosh, anywhere from human rights all the way down to local standard bylaws. It's a changing game almost daily for any housing provider to figure those out and try their very best to ensure they're at least keeping up with changes.

Rent-geared-to-income (RGI) administration competency was mentioned, as it is a required process to administer rent subsidy in the province of Ontario. For instance, Maxine indicates that housing providers need to be "legislative experts. If you look at just the RGI legislation, what we have to do to calculate rents is quite detailed."

People-oriented competencies appear in the literature frequently as does tenant-focused competency in the survey. The interviews also touched on a people-oriented cluster that included relational engagement both inside and outside the organization. Competencies falling under this cluster are either outward facing and considered *external* or inward facing and considered *internal* to the organization. External people-oriented competencies include networking, collaboration, partnerships, and more formalized service relationships. Internal competencies include tenant engagement and working together. These relational competencies are much more fluid than distinct categorization allows. For instance, one focus group participant says of tenants: "We encourage people to help each other, because sometimes people lose their li-

censes, their cars. We have to show people that there are other ways of doing things." Also, Adrienne says about what is important: "Those people skills … making connections with various organizations and community (organizations) where you can go for help with issues that tenants are having." Here people-oriented competencies spanned internal and external organizational spaces. Externally, there is a spectrum of relational engagement such as networking, collaboration, partnerships, and service relationships. For instance, the focus group identified that:

> we're finding that it's a lot more important to network. We've been part of advisory groups, and hubs, and we've been finding it's more important now to understand what's out there. In small communities, it's important to put a face to the name that you may see.

In many cases, collaboration—loosely defined here as working together on a common project or goal—was identified as necessary. As Adrienne says: "We do have to try to work out some cooperation with some of the others to get some work done." Mary talks more enthusiastically about working together:

> You need to meet with your peers. You can't just sit in your own little desk by yourself when you can go out there. And you hear that other people are having the same issues and are dealing with the same things. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. Someone dealt with this, so they have great suggestions.

Tenant engagement was identified as a key competency with respect to both managing difficult situations and why social housing exists in the first place. In the focus group, some of the challenges related to the former were raised: "We were dealing with all of the problems that we all have in housing that were somewhat negative: drug and alcohol addictions, prostitution, violence in our communities. It was all on top of people that we have to manage." Joanne speaks to the latter and how relations with tenants is the key part of social housing:

> In respect to your residents … without them you're not in business, so you should—you want to be respectful to them and try to create policies and standards that are workable for them and that they can achieve. Because they need to as well. They need to feel like they're part of the whole process here. They are not just being told that this is how it runs. They are being asked for input. They are being asked for what could be happening, what standards could we change or improve to make your quality of life better.

The strategic cluster represents competencies that are evident in the literature and are reflected in the survey and in the interviews. The survey, in particular, identified that certain strategic competencies are going to be even more important into the future. These are adaptability, strategy, and innovation. After the interviews, these competencies were recoded as: change management, governance, innovation, and value orientation to more closely reflect how people spoke about these competencies with respect to the sector.

The majority of interviewees identified change management as a strategically important competency. Finnian suggests:

> We also look for people to have a certain amount of resiliency and be able to adapt to changing circumstances. Cause, certainly, in the almost seventeen years I've been involved in housing … you have to be able to adapt.

Change management represented not only responding to change but also preparing for change. One focus group participant identifies that "[I] think organizations need to become aware of the changes that we face. There has to be a culture of continuous learning that needs to take place rather than leaving the learning to the future." Maxine provides an example of how change can be managed:

> [I] think in that regard, really, to strengthen our sector—we're going to have a labor shortage in the future, and we need to set up those mentoring opportunities one-on-one so that new, engaged staff that are on-boarding in the organization are being mentored by more seasoned employees that have a lot of experience on the job and that can coach them in improving their skills, and being accepting of that.

At the same time, there are questions that still need answering. Such as this one posed by Ruby: "Within the next two years, we have to replace almost everything. I mean, a new roof, a new fire alarm system … What happens when we don't have any money?"

In general, interviewees focused on operational-level competencies and were not thinking about the board of directors. However, governance, which generally references board-level oversight, was raised frequently enough to be included in the list of competencies. More specifically, governance includes (board) self-governance, succession planning, and strategic planning. Maxine says: "I think as part of self-governance, you have to demonstrate initiative, organization citizenship, a positive attitude, and a sense of continued self-improvement in whatever area that might be." Joanne references the process the board goes through in managing itself with respect to membership and succession planning:

> We have competencies skills that we try [to] look for. So we'll look at the existing members, through the group themselves they will look at their own strengths, and then they'll look at the overall list of strengths for the organization and seek what they're missing when we have a vacancy … [the process] plays a huge role.

Participants in the focus group also raised succession planning: "We realized early on that we need to bring people in sooner, and when someone leaves, someone can step in right away and be comfortable. That way it's part of our succession planning." The need for succession planning as a key part of organizational governance was top of mind for interviewees.

Strategic planning is generally an expected role for the board of directors and was reflected in the literature and surveys as "strategy." In the context of the interviews and focus group, it was referenced more specifically as strategic planning or the actual planning action the board must take. For instance, Ruby says:

> Within the next five years, ninety percent of the nonprofit housing staff will be leaving and retiring. Lots will be leaving in the next couple of years, and this is happening already … We had a board meeting where we talked about planning for this.

Jackie says: "We selected priorities through strategic plans." Thus, in practice, knowledge of and skills in strategic planning represented a necessary organizational competency.

Innovation was identified in the literature and the survey as something that will become increasingly more important into the future. Innovation as a competency was likewise reflected in the interviews and focus group. For instance, one focus group participant suggests that moving forward, "innovation and some of the communication, collaboration, and mentorship are going to be more important." Finnian outlines the fact that competencies, while needed in the organization, might reside in certain positions. For one position, he says, "I would want someone who fits the profile more associated with risk, entrepreneurship, and innovation."

While not identified explicitly in the literature and surveys, the sub-competencies of technology and problem-solving were raised in the interviews and by focus group. The focus group indicated:

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39

> Technology is changing rapidly; the Internet of things is coming down the line and will likely shape the way buildings operate. There is a high expectation [on the part of] millennials and the younger generation: they don't want to work for organizations that don't have technology and don't utilize modern technology.

Adrienne talks about problem-solving in a couple of instances: "You have to be able to assess a situation and try to work out which direction you need to go [in dealing with people]" and "[considering past mistakes] is also an important part of the decision-making because if you don't revisit what you did … you are likely to repeat the mistakes you've made."

A final competency in the strategic cluster is social justice value orientation. While it was not raised explicitly in the literature or surveys, it did represent a critical and defining feature of how organizations and their leaders make decisions about their future. One focus group participant says: "We have values after our mission statement: love, integrity, excellence, quality, compassion, good stewardship, relationships, fun." Another says: "Values: respect, integrity, leadership, accountability, and teamwork." Finnian says: "One of the most important things is a commitment or understanding of social justice … in the work that we do." Maxine also says: "You have an understanding and commitment to the organization's mission, vision, and values and the organizational goals." For some respondents, their commitment to social justice values was inherent in their commitment to continuing to meet the needs of their community:

> I see that that will be a huge challenge for our organization in the future—the changing need of our clients, making sure their units are what they need, and how best to equip staff and our residents to keep moving in a positive direction.

Several respondents identified diversity as a critical component of their social justice value orientation. This included working with diverse communities with varying needs and also having a diverse staff with a diverse skill set. Jackie says: "I think anti-oppression is one of the largest values that should be taken into account, and understanding the needs of the communities that you're serving."

DISCUSSION

In keeping with the social constructionist, adult education, and critical theoretical traditions on which this study is based, it attempts to establish a definition of competency that considers the social justice origins and contextual nature in which social housing providers work. This study does not propose essential and static competencies, which would be more in keeping with a positivist approach. Instead, it aims to examine the idea of competencies in a way that is informed by sectoral data and that can act as a starting point to examine them in situ while mapping how concepts are evolving within the changing environment and competing perspectives.

Overall, the definition of competencies with respect to the regional, temporal, and organizational needs of the sector is supported as a working definition across data sources. As noted, this definition is not meant to be monolithic but to assist in framing the organizational competencies within a model that both respects the social justice origins of the sector and takes into account the capacity of the sector to deliver on certain goals. It does not present organization values *in opposition to* business requirements; rather, it presents them as working in tandem to ensure housing excellence for low- and medium-income tenants.

While there are some commonalities in competencies across data sources, there are also some discrepancies in how they are identified and understood. Overall, there was a fair degree of alignment on the competencies clusters, with the exception of the sectoral operational cluster, which was not present in the literature. This makes sense given that the lit-

erature was international and thus represented different jurisdictions with their own contextual considerations. In contrast, the interviews provided an opportunity for leaders to talk about competencies in relation to their own organizations and regions, and in relationship to the Ontario context.

CONCLUSION

Social housing in Ontario is in the midst of a fundamental change from the programs and norms that have shaped past operations. An organizational competency-based approach provides a potential way of thinking about adult education within the sector. It also can be helpful in planning for the recruitment of the next generation of staff and board members by keeping in mind organizational competency needs. This research has taken an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on social constructionist, adult education, and critical theoretical traditions to examine the idea of competencies in Ontario's social housing sector. It has analyzed competency literature, surveys, interviews, and focus group data in order to develop a model to consider competencies as they relate to the current and future needs of social housing providers as they strive to meet the needs of low- and medium-income Ontarians.

Ultimately this study used academic and sectoral literature to define competencies as "the knowledge, skills, abilities, and value orientation applied through principled actions and professional behaviour to ensure housing excellence for low- and medium-income tenants." Via the mixed methods approach, four competency clusters were delineated. These clusters are capital asset, sectoral operational, people-oriented, and strategic, which include specific competencies as outlined in Table 1.

Through developing a competency model, this research has helped clarify where there is alignment between the literature and the local context in defining competencies, identify what competencies are considered valuable, and also highlight where competencies might be best left identified within a specific milieu. This model can provide the basis for further research on competencies both in academia and within the social housing sector.

As mentioned above, this article also stresses the importance of articulating the coexisting business and values competencies and their interrelation and coadjuvancy in ensuring a robust social housing sector. Given the provincial focus on "innovation," "modernization," and "standards," this competency structure gives the housing sector a model to use in thinking about the competencies needed to respond to new requirements without losing sight of social justice origins. Further work can occur in exploring the applicability and value of this competency model within an Ontario social housing context and beyond. Future research can also look to clearly defining these clusters and the encapsulated competencies to facilitate operationalization, human resource development, operational processes, and related adult education in the Ontario nonprofit housing sector.

NOTES

1. Either nonprofit rental or cooperative housing funded by a legally prescribed government program (although some social housing providers are now building housing with no government funding). Social housing in Ontario includes Local Housing Corporations (formerly known as Public Housing), where nearly all tenants pay on a rent-geared-to-income scale, as well as community-sponsored nonprofit housing projects, which contain a mix of market and rent-geared-to-income units (ONPHA 2015c).
2. A Google search of "workplace competency" yielded 22,300,000 results on October 26, 2016.
3. For the purposes of this research, a large community contains one million or more residents, medium contains 300,000 to one million residents, and small contains fewer than 300,000 residents.

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41

4. There were initially many more competencies, but for the purposes of this research, where concepts were the same, these were grouped and retitled under one competency name.

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43