Building Public Sector Reputation:

An Examination of Child Welfare in Ontario

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Abstract

Building positive reputation in child welfare has been compared by professionals in the field to attempting to swim against the current. That the sector faces challenges in bolstering its public image is not surprising, as it is seen as a service of last resort for families experiencing significant challenges (Swift & Callahan, 2002). Existing research primarily examines how child welfare organizations attempt to manage reputation through media. With media being just one input that citizens consider when developing their perceptions of these highly complex agencies, there is a need for research that looks at reputation management holistically through models developed by scholars in the field (Fombrun & van Riel, 2007; Luoma-aho, 2008; Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015). This study sought to understand how and to what extent Children's Aid Societies (CAS) in Ontario manage their reputations by developing trust with citizens and ensuring positive outcomes for clients. The results demonstrate that, although the public supports the concept of child welfare, the work of these agencies remains mysterious to most. This presents an opportunity and need for CASs to take control of the narrative and tell their own stories to the community. Based on the findings of in-depth interviews with CAS professionals and a nonprobability survey of Ontario residents, this study proposes a Child Welfare Reputation Index. This tool can be used by CASs to assess their reputations and develop a roadmap to enhance standing within their communities.

Keywords: reputation, reputation management, relationship management, public sector, child welfare, children's aid

Background

There is an old saying that "your reputation precedes you" (Writing Explained, n.d.). This means that before people ever interact with an organization, they have already made judgements about the quality of the organization's people, products, or services based on what they've read, seen, or heard. This makes reputation a powerful thing, since these judgements affect the way people behave.

Reputation helps simplify decision-making by giving people an early indication whether they should trust an organization or not (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). This is particularly true when the organization they are evaluating is complex (Fombrun & van Riel, 2007). Like a magnet, a good reputation will attract support for an organization (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). However, poor reputations have the opposite effect and repel people from engaging or supporting an organization.

Reputation is a key factor in whether an organization will succeed or fail. For private sector organizations, it can affect market value and profitability (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Public sector organizations do not have the same considerations, since they receive public funding and are less subject to market conditions (Luoma-aho, 2008). This does not give them the luxury of ignoring reputation, since they still compete for qualified employees and have government mandates they must fulfill. In fact, having a positive reputation helps shield public organizations from political interference and helps them gain cooperation from the citizens they are expected to serve (Waerass & Byrkjeflot, 2012).

In Ontario, Children's Aid Societies (CAS) are public organizations entrusted with safeguarding the welfare of children and youth in the province. Their mandate includes investigating reports of children being abused or neglected and taking the necessary steps to

protect them (Ontario, n.d.). For children at-risk, CASs are empowered to employ a variety of interventions, up to and including removing them from the home and placing them into care with extended family or foster families (Ontario, n.d.). They also maintain a roster of foster homes and provide adoption services.

Somewhat similar to police, Children's Aid Societies wield a significant amount of authority. Like police, CASs have also faced criticism over their use of authority. One mother said of workers in children's aid, "I just have that fear of them… that they can come at any time, and they can do what they want to my family" (Buckley et al., 2011, p 104). Another felt that although she had involvement in the process, she had no control over the eventual outcome (Buckley et al., 2011). This can lead to a perception that the power held by Children's Aid Societies is, "absolute, tyrannical, and frightening" (Bekaert et al., 2021, p. 9). This stereotypical image of child welfare is largely based on individual experience, neighbourhood lore, and is often complicated by a misunderstanding of how CASs operate (Buckley et al., 2011). That child welfare has such long-standing difficulties in constructing a positive image is not surprising, seeing as it is a service of last resort when all other forms of the social safety net fail (Swift & Callahan, 2002).

Unsurprisingly, those working within child welfare hold a different view. They see child welfare as a noble calling that keeps children safe, reunites them with birth parents, or finds permanency in the form of loving adoptive or kinship families (Blake et al., 2013). In the words of one CEO working in child welfare,

> I do not want to spend my career warehousing kids, so therefore we have assembled a team of people that feel the same way I do. On this earth, we are here to make a difference, not to be part of the continued treadmill (Langer et al., 2006, p. 313).

Children's Aid Societies can be excused if they believe the proverbial deck is stacked against them when it comes to reputation. Both the issues and work of child welfare are unclear to most people. The public has neither the time nor the expertise to understand the complexities of child maltreatment (Blake et al., 2013). In the absence of that common understanding, they often listen to the loudest voices, which are often those offering critical views of the system, usually following a tragic event (Blake et al., 2013).

Additionally, the mandate of Children's Aid Societies can be problematic. Child welfare exists at the crossroads between "helping and punishing parents" (Swift & Callahan, 2002, p. 18). There are some who believe the child welfare system is designed to be fixated on problems, rather than seeking to understand the family situation (Bekaert, 2021). This can lead to "constantly changing thresholds of intervention, guided at least as much by ideological and political interests as by any evidence of what works" (Swift & Callahan, 2002, p. 18).

Given the critical importance of positive reputation, it is incumbent for Children's Aid Societies to find a way to bridge the gap between the externally held perception that these agencies are to be feared and avoided, and the internal perception that child welfare is an honourable profession focused on helping people. Based on brain research, if people's perceptions do not fit the facts when they process information, they will generally reject the facts (Strategic Frame Analysis, 2012, as cited in Blake et al., 2013). In a world where facts alone are not enough, Children's Aid Societies must be responsible for their own narratives. The key to success in this regard is for Children's Aid Societies to tell their stories simply and consistently (Blake et al., 2013). Ongoing messages are key.

Further complicating this pursuit of improved reputation is that Children's Aid Societies exist to prevent neglect or abuse. In other words, it is difficult to demonstrate success when the

goal of child welfare is to produce the absence of negative outcomes (Chenot, 2011). Highlighting nothing is never as interesting nor as sensational as demonstrating that something has happened (Chenot, 2011). Whereas police may point to high profile investigations or arrests, Children's Aid Societies must avoid stigmatizing the vulnerable populations they work with, and also respect their right to privacy.

This study will examine the key drivers of reputation in child welfare and where CASs can best focus their efforts to build a positive reputation amongst citizens. There exists a great deal of literature on the social work practices of the child welfare sector. There is far less research on public relations practices within the sector and how reputation in this highly specialized field can be managed and improved. Existing research focuses primarily on how child welfare relates to the media and how risk can be mitigated in times of crisis. However, scholars (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Cravens et al., 2003; Grunig & Hung Baesecke, 2015; Luoma-aho, 2007) have established that reputation is the product of much more than media coverage. Stakeholders' perceptions of an organization are developed through a variety of inputs, including their personal experience with the organization, the quality of its products and services, how well the organization lives up to the commitments it makes, as well as secondary sources such as media coverage, word of mouth, and others (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015).

This study looks exclusively at Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. The province also includes a number of Child Wellbeing Agencies that provide child welfare services to Indigenous communities. Indigenous peoples have a complex and traumatic history with child welfare, requiring specific research to understand these unique perspectives (Haight et al., 2018). As such, Indigenous agencies are not included in this study.

Literature Review

Corporate reputation

As something intangible, scholars have conceptualized reputation in a number of different ways. Davies and Miles (1998) believe reputation has three components: personality, what the organization really is; identity, how the organization describes itself; and image, how people perceive it. Gotsi and Wilson (2001) offered a simple definition of corporate reputation, saying it involves stakeholders' overall assessment of an organization over a period of time. Barnett et al. (2006) defined corporate reputation as, "Observers' collective judgments of a corporation based on assessments of the financial, social, and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time" (p. 32). The common thread through the majority of definitions is that reputation involves stakeholders' perceptions of an organization.

Each definition shares common elements with Fombrun's (1996) earlier work. Fombrun (1996) believes that these assessments are comprised of the "firm's past actions and future prospects" (p.72) which contributes to the organization's overall appeal. Later, van Riel and Fombrun (2007) further elaborated on the notion of assessments, saying they are made based on the organization's performance relative to expectations and norms. As these assessments accumulate over time, reputation capital will ebb and flow for each organization (Barnett et al., 2006).

Doorley and Garcia (2015) are among the few scholars whose definition does not account for the role of stakeholders' assessments in reputation. They suggest that reputation is a product of the organization's performance, combined with its behaviours and communications (Doorley and Garcia, 2015). However, there are organizations that suffer from poor reputation despite high levels of service and expertise, which points to the need to incorporate stakeholders' perceptions

in any definition of reputation (Luoma-aho, 2008; Luoma-aho & Canel, 2016; Waerass & Byrkjeflot, 2012).

Fombrun's (1996) definition of reputation has been one of the most widely cited and enduring. According to him, reputation is the aggregate of all stakeholders' perceptions about an organization's past performance and future prospects, which can be compared to others (Walker, 2010). However, Walker (2010) cautions against viewing reputation as the aggregate of stakeholders' perceptions, arguing that reputation is issue specific. For example, Walmart has an excellent reputation for profitability, but a poor reputation for how it treats its employees. Walker (2010) also notes that reputation can vary based on the stakeholder group. Using the Walmart example, the company has a tough reputation with suppliers, but a positive reputation with its investors (Walker, 2010). Therefore, Walker (2010) proposes that organizations have multiple reputations depending on the issue and the stakeholder group involved, but that each reputation represents the aggregate perception for that specific issue.

Amending Fombrun's (1996) definition, Walker (2010) defined reputation as a "relatively stable, issue specific aggregate perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects compared against some standard" (p. 370). For the purposes of this capstone, the researcher accepts this definition of reputation.

Public Sector Reputation

Scholars who have studied the public sector argue that the definition of reputation must be augmented for public organizations since they lack the profit motive and exist regardless of consumer demand. Waeraas and Maor (2018) say that a single definition of public sector reputation is difficult to establish, as it is often confused with similarly related concepts such as image, prestige, legitimacy, and status. Luoma-aho (2008) says reputation is "a sum of

assessments, experiences, expectations, all of which can be understood to form a unity, a reputation" (p. 449). Carpenter (2010, as cited in Lee & Van Ryzin, 2020) largely aligns with this definition, saying that it is a set of beliefs about the organization's capacities, role, and obligations, and adds that these beliefs are "embedded in a network of multiple audiences" (p. 183). Similar to corporate reputation, public sector reputation is comprised of stakeholders' assessments of the organization's credibility, reliability, responsibility, and trustworthiness (Fombrun, 1996).

Waerass and Byrkjeflot (2012) found that Fombrun's (1996) assertion that reputation can be compared to competitors is problematic for public sector organizations. They argue that the public has an expectation of similarity in public services. In other words, people should be able to access the same services, with comparable levels of consistency and quality at any child welfare agency in Ontario. Waerass and Byrkjeflot (2012) say that "there are winners and losers in the quest for an excellent reputation, thereby limiting the number of organizations that potentially can have it" (p. 199). They prefer the term legitimacy to assess reputation in the public sector, since every organization can possess legitimacy, thereby resolving the problem of competition (Waerass & Byrkjeflot, 2012). Legitimacy is the "generalized perception that the organization is acting in accordance with a set of norms" (Deephouse & Carter, 2005, as cited in Waerass & Byrkjeflot, 2012, p. 202).

Unlike the private sector, the public sector cannot pick and choose who it serves. Therefore, Luoma-aho et al. (2020) expand the notion of stakeholders to include all citizens. They argue that stakeholders' assessments express their level of satisfaction with public services (Luoma-aho et al., 2020). They define citizen satisfaction as an "intangible, multidimensional construct that includes citizen approval of public sector actions and the public sector's

fulfillment of citizens' needs and its meeting of citizens' expectations" (Luoma-aho et al., 2020, p. 6). Citizen satisfaction determines whether they remain loyal, stop engaging with the service, or publicly complain about the service and seek remedy (Luoma-aho et al., 2020).

Citizens develop their assessments based on "their own experiences with an organisation, its advertisement and other paid communication, and unpaid media time" (Kuoppakangas et al., 2019, p. 150). What people hear from others also plays an important role in the development of their assessments of an organization. Of particular interest for public sector organizations, word of mouth is more influential in a service context, because services are intangible (Sweeney et al., 2014). While positive word of mouth is highly effective, "negative messages tend to be more personal and to contain richer, more affective content and to be more powerfully conveyed" (Sweeney et al., 2014, p. 341).

Relationship Management

Given that citizens' experiences with an organization inform their perceptions, organizations must take great care to manage these relationships appropriately. Relationships form when parties have mutual interests and their actions affect one another (Hung, 2005; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Interests may include moral, economic, emotional, social, cultural, and/or geographic considerations (Hung, 2005). Relationships also involve expectations of behaviour, and either the transfer or exchange of information, energy, or resources (Broom et al., 1997).

Of particular relevance to this study, relationships also form when there is a legal necessity to associate (Broom et al., 1997). In Ontario, Children's Aid Societies have the exclusive legal responsibility to provide child protection services year-round (OACAS, n.d.). Further, the Child, Youth, and Family Services Act (CYFSA) stipulates that everyone in Ontario

has a duty to report reasonable suspicions that a child may be in need of protection (OACAS, n.d.).

Looking specifically at the relationships between organizations and their publics, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined them as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (p. 62). Emphasizing the importance of the interdependent nature of organization-public relationships (OPR), Hung (2005) says that organizations must decide whether to compete or collaborate with their publics to achieve their ends. Grunig (2006) argues that mutual benefit should be the goal, saying that organizations must "behave in ways that solves the problems and satisfies the goals of stakeholders as well as management" (p. 9). Effective two-way communications are key, as both parties are less likely to act in ways that negatively affect the other when their needs and expectations are understood (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Results of mutually beneficial relationships include enhanced perceptions, attitudes, evaluations, and intended behaviours of each party (Bruning & Ledingham, 2002).

Hon and Grunig (1999) believe there are four factors that determine whether an OPR is successful or not: trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, and commitment. Trust is the degree to which each party is willing to open themselves to the other. Factors underlying trust include integrity, dependability, and competence. Control mutuality is the ability each party has to influence the other. Although power in the relationship may not be equal, both organizations and publics must be able to exercise some degree of control over the other. A satisfying relationship is where "the benefits outweigh the costs" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 20). Commitment is the willingness of each party to spend energy to promote and maintain the relationship.

Bruning et al. (2004) similarly believe that OPRs involve commitment and satisfaction, and add that anthropomorphism and the comparison of available alternatives play a role in whether an OPR continues. They argue that organizations should develop strategies to personalize themselves to their publics (Bruning et al., 2004). In other words, organizations should be seen as relatable, rather than nameless, faceless entities.

In the private sector, consumers often have multiple alternatives to a particular product or service. For example, there are many grocers and consumers can choose which one(s) have earned their business. However, the evaluation of alternatives (Bruning et al., 2004) holds less relevance for this study. CASs are responsible for providing child protection services for a geographical area and clients referred to the agency generally do not have choice of societies from which they can access services.

Initially, OPRs were thought to fall into two different categories, exchange or communal relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). In an exchange relationship, both parties engage only to the extent that they receive or expect to receive benefits from the other. In communal relationships, both parties provide benefits because they are genuinely concerned for the well-being of the other. Hung (2005) believes there is a larger continuum of relationships, ranging from completely altruistic to exploitative, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Hung's (2005) Relationship Types

Relationship Type	Defining Features
One-sided communal	One side gives to the other to the detriment of its own well being or success
Communal	One side works for the good of the other even if it receives nothing in return
Covenantal	Both sides work towards a common good
Exchange	Each side expects future benefits based on past behaviour
Contractual	Agreements may not be balanced, yet both sides receive something in return
Manipulative	Asymmetrical communication is used to achieve goals

Exploitative	One party takes advantage of the other

Bruning and Ledingham (2002) identified five stages in the development of relationships: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. As parties move along the continuum, their behaviours move from friendly, uncritical dialogue, to the identification of shared values, greater self disclosure and, ultimately, the institutionalization of the relationship in some type of public or private ceremony (Bruning & Ledingham, 2002). Conversely, relationships in decline begin with increased recognition of the differences between themselves and the other party, followed by a decrease in the amount of communication shared and a recognition that the relationship has become stagnant, eventually ending at the termination of the relationship (Bruning & Ledingham, 2002).

The Role of Public Relations in Relationship Management

Some of the main challenges organizations grapple with are identifying and meeting their publics' need and wants, treating them as partners rather than targets, and to continuously review the state of those relationships (Swart, 2012). As intangible assets of the organization, relationships are considered major drivers in promoting organizational survival and success (Swart, 2012).

The public relations function has a significant role to play in the creation and stewardship of relationships. The function acts as corporate experts in relationship management by identifying key publics and then building and maintaining long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with them (Grunig, 2006; Swart, 2012). The public relations function is ideally situated to monitor the state of OPRs and to take action to address areas of need (Bruning et al., 2004). This requires a dialogic approach to "actively solicit information from key public members and listen to, process, and respond to those messages" (Bruning et al., 2004). This

dialogic, or symmetrical, approach requires organizations and publics to use communication to adjust their ideas and behaviours to one another, rather than trying to exert control over the other party (Grunig, 2006). In this sense, public relations is a bridging activity that leverages connections with stakeholders to refresh and bolster the organization (Swart, 2012).

There are key differences between practicing public relations in the public versus private sector. Public sector practitioners operate in more complicated, unstable environments as governments and public sentiment change (Gelders et al., 2007). They must also adhere to additional legal and formal constraints, and more rigid procedures as defined by government legislation. Another important distinction is that the quality of communications activities in the public sector are not only measured by effectiveness and efficiency, but also by the tenets of democracy and lawfulness (Gelders et al., 2007).

The Intersection between Relationships and Reputation

Reputation is largely the result of organizational behaviour and the quality of its relationships with stakeholders (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015). Like reputation, relationships are intangible assets that can be leveraged to build understanding, trust, and create mutual benefit (Swart, 2012). Intangible assets are increasingly seen as critical to ensuring an organization's success in the global economy, making managing relationships a key priority (Swart, 2012).

Relationships differ from reputation, as they involve give and take from each party. However, both reputations and relationships rest on the bedrock of the assessments, or expectations, of each party. Littlejohn (1995, as cited in Ledingham, 2003) wrote that relationships are defined not so much by what is said as by the partner's expectations for behavior" (p. 186). The failure to meet or exceed those expectations can determine whether the relationship continues (Thomlinson, 2000, as cited in Ledingham, 2003).

Just as consumers develop expectations of the organization's image, products, and services, they also develop expectations for how the organization engages with them to build and maintain the relationship (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998). Stakeholders will then assess whether the organization is falling short, meeting, or exceeding their expectations (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998). As noted, these assessments are critical in the formation of an organization's reputation (Fombrun, 1996; Walker, 2010).

Some believe the importance of reputation and relationships fluctuates depending on the public's proximity to the organization. Hutton et al. (2001) say reputation is more relevant to people who have no direct ties to an organization, while direct stakeholders prefer to evaluate an organization based on the strength of the relationship. In other words, reputation matters to strangers, while relationships matter to friends and associates.

The Role of Public Relations in Reputation Management

Hutton et al. (2001) believe it is difficult for public relations practitioners to claim ownership of reputation management in an organization. They argue that organizational reputation is not something that can be managed directly, as it is the global result of the organization's behaviour. Public relations may not be best positioned to manage reputation, given that it has "little or no authority over most of those dimensions—financial performance, quality of employees, organizational ethics, quality of products, and so forth" (Hutton et al., 2001, p. 256) that contribute to an organization's reputation.

To manage reputation, the public relations function must have a voice in organizational decision-making. Too often, the administrators in child welfare organizations "hide behind confidentiality laws" (Thomlinson & Whiting Blome, 2012, p. 249) rather than reaching out to the public. Ayre (2001) wrote that child welfare organizations must "be more effective in the

creation and promotion of our own preferred discourses" (p. 899). Grunig and Hung-Baesecke (2015) would agree, saying the traditional role of putting out strategic messaging after decisions have been made has little to no impact on reputation or relationships. Given that reputation is largely a product of organizational behaviour, public relations "must play a role in managing the behaviour of an organization, through the strategic management process" (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015, p. 13). Having an influence in organizational decisions would allow public relations practitioners to "to explain, teach, and provide context about the work of child welfare" (Thomlinson & Whiting Blome, 2012, p. 249) to proactively grow reputation.

Since reputation is developed by consistently delivering on promises, it is unrealistic to expect public relations to be solely responsible for managing reputation (Murray & White, 2005). However, public relations can play a central role in supporting a strong reputation. By engaging internal and external stakeholders in two-way symmetrical communications, public relations can act as the conscience of the organization and influence decision-making (Grunig, 2006; Murray & White, 2005). Public relations should provide advice on reputation management and oversee the communications function to ensure the organization gets credit for the good work it does (Murray & White, 2005). This work is both proactive and reactive, and involves "anticipating and heading-off potential nasty surprises, acting to put companies in the best position with consumers against competitors, creating a favourable environment with other stakeholders and responding to crises and bad news" (Murray & White, 2005, p. 353). For these reasons, Grunig and Hung-Baesecke (2015) say that rather than focusing on reputation, public relations "should focus on relationships as an indicator of both the value and the success of their work" (p. 43). In particular, keeping existing stakeholders satisfied is more important than

acquiring new ones, as the satisfied stakeholders will attract new stakeholders by themselves (Parasuraman et al., 1985, as cited in Luoma-aho, 2015).

Reputation Management

Can reputation truly be managed? It is the subject of considerable debate. Hutton et al. (2001) say that trying to manage reputation is analogous to trying to manage one's own popularity, which they call "a rather awkward, superficial and potentially self-defeating endeavor" (p. 249). While reputation may not be something that organizations can completely control, Doorley and Garcia (2015) contend that there are few organizational assets that can be fully managed. This can be even more challenging for Children's Aid Societies, given that the public knows very little about them, which "seems to foster public distrust in the ability of a government agency to carry out the function of child protection" (Cooper, 2005, par. 1).

Regardless of whether corporate reputation is completely within the company's control, there is consensus that it should not be left to chance. Rather, reputation is the "result of many factors, such as organisational processes, managerial decisions, attitudes and behaviours of managers, quality of the products and services offered, stakeholder relations and communication processes" (Sezgin, 2017, as cited in Deniz, 2020, p. 105). A good reputation creates a favourable operating environment, but requires constant maintenance (Luoma-aho, 2008). Even if reputation is not entirely within the organization's control, there are many examples of it being mismanaged through scandal, error, and inaction (Doorley & Garcia, 2015). In particular, child welfare does itself no favours, with bureaucratic responses to most situations, rather than creative problem solving that addresses the issues of workers and clients (Cooper, 2005).

There are three levels of processing that impact people's perceptions of an organization: at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Fombrun & van Riel, 2007). The largest influence

takes place at the primary level, which is from direct personal experience (Fombrun & van Riel, 2007). Organizations can directly impact personal experience through its behaviours and how it treats stakeholders. Because people only take in a limited amount of direct information, the majority of information comes from secondary sources, which include word of mouth and through what they hear in the media (Fombrun & van Riel, 2007). People who have had good experiences with an organization are more likely to share them with others, giving the company some degree of control over the secondary level of processing (Fombrun & van Riel, 2007). The organization influences tertiary experiences through the mass media messages it puts out (Fombrun & van Riel, 2007).

Fombrun and van Riel (2004) developed a model to guide reputation management. They say reputation is tied to the familiar indicators that an organization is being well managed. Organizations with positive reputations differ from others in five key areas, which are the drivers of reputation. These factors include an organization's visibility, authenticity, transparency, consistency, and distinctiveness (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004).

No matter how good the organization is, it must be known if it is to have reputation. Normally, the more well-known an organization is, the more favourably the public will rate it (Fombrun & van Riel, 2007). Exceptions include certain public sector organizations (Luoma-aho, 2008) and tobacco companies (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004), indicating there is such a thing as bad publicity. Top-rated companies that communicate effectively and engage with stakeholders are seen as genuine and credible, which attracts stakeholders' support and advocacy (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004).

Organizations can build reputation by occupying a distinctive place in the market (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). Intel was able to create a unique value proposition in the minds of

customers by engaging in ingredient marketing (Keller & Kotler, 2020). Intel gave their processors a new name, Pentium, and the company launched the “Intel Inside” campaign to position it as the only provider of quality parts for personal computers (Keller & Kotler, 2020). Having the reputation of being the only company to offer personal computers with Pentium processors fueled a 12-fold increase in the company’s net income (George, n.d.). A reputation platform that is more successful at conveying strategic alignment and emotional appeal can produce a “tipping point, a bandwagon process through which those who are perceived as more distinctive win a disproportionate share of visibility and reputation” (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004, p. 157).

The public appreciates authenticity and “you can’t fake it for long – you’ve got to be real” (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004, p. 91). Fombrun and van Riel (2004) say that efforts to manipulate the organization’s image through public relations and advertising will fail if there is a disconnect with the company’s identity. To be authentic, an organization’s behaviours must be “rooted in core values that are articulated, believed, and lived by employees” (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004, p. 93) each and every day.

Transparency requires that organizations share information freely. They make available all the information stakeholders need to develop their opinions about the organization’s current operations and future prospects (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Transparency demands that organizations provide comprehensive, relevant, and timely information that is reliable and can be compared to other organizations in similar sectors (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004).

Stakeholders are inundated with messages from a variety of organizations and sources. People must pick and choose the messages they will internalize and those they will ignore. Research shows that people are more likely to notice messages that confirm their pre-existing

beliefs about an organization (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). This requires an organization to communicate a consistent message across all its platforms (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Some of the methods to promote consistency include "strict guidelines, use of a common logo, adopting logical brand architecture, building a communications plan, creating intranets and extranets, and adopting standardized measurement and tracking" (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004, p. 240).

Reputation Management in the Public Sector

For many years, the thinking in public sector organizations was that "good deeds should speak for themselves" (Luoma-aho, 2007, p. 124) and that the pursuit of a positive reputation was unnecessary. However, that thinking has evolved, as more public sector organizations are beginning to understand that reputation confers legitimacy, resulting in numerous benefits to the organization (Luoma-aho, 2007). Luoma-aho et al. (2021) posit that a positive view of the public sector is healthy for democracy because engaged citizens help improve the overall quality of public services.

Reputations are valuable assets for public organizations, as they offer stakeholders clarity about the agency and its mission, and they are "often relied upon more heavily when the agency itself is more complicated" (Carpenter & Krause, 2011, p. 27). Positive reputations generate public support, which gives public sector organizations more autonomy from their political masters (Carpenter, 2002, as cited in Waeraas & Maor, 2018). A well-regarded organization is buffered against political attack, more resilient in a crisis, and better positioned to recruit and retain qualified employees (Kuoppakangas et al., 2019).

Citizens' perceptions influence the way they interact with the public sector, for better or for worse (Luoma-aho, 2008). Unfortunately, this presents a significant challenge, as public sector organizations "have been associated with negatively charged words such as inefficiency,

bureaucracy, waste, incompetence, and rigidity for so long" (Waeraas & Maor, 2008, p. 1). Waeraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) note that, "Bureaucracy, by which all public organizations are characterized, is used so often as a derogatory term that it is easy to forget the values it was originally supposed to embody, such as progress, rationality and efficiency" (p. 186). Public sector organizations have the force of law behind them and may impose themselves upon citizens (Luoma-aho, 2008). This includes citizens who must pay taxes, the police who arrest law-breakers, and child welfare agencies called upon to intervene when children are at risk. Therefore, Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003) raise an important question to consider when examining public sector reputation, "Is it realistic to expect a forced user to be satisfied?" (p. 12). This means an organization's reputation is linked to its mission, since "paying a tax or receiving a subsidy produce two entirely different levels of satisfaction and either level may have nothing to do with the quality of the service" (Kampen et al., 2006, p. 391). There is a silver lining, however. Although the public tends to be critical of the public sector as a whole, they often rate the services they receive from individual organizations much more favourably (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2016).

Politics also influence peoples' perceptions of public sector organizations. People with a more liberal ideology tend to have more favourable opinions of public sector organizations focused on the environment, education, or health and human services (Lee & Van Ryzin, 2020). Conservatives tend to favour law enforcement and the military (Lee & Van Ryzin, 2020). In general, people who trust the government tend to have higher opinions of public sector organizations than those who are distrustful of government (Lee & Van Ryzin, 2020). This points to trouble for public sector organizations, as trust in the government has eroded

significantly over the years, with nearly 50 percent of people saying they view government as a divisive force in society (Edelman, 2022).

Public organizations have fundamental differences from their private sector counterparts, which requires a tailored approach to managing reputation. Public sector organizations follow political leadership, which can be susceptible to the whims of the electorate at any given time (Christensen et al., 2020) as the public expects to have a say in determining the priorities and directions of public organizations (Gelders et al., 2007). Public organizations are also subject to freedom of information laws and have a higher level of accountability compared to the private sector (Gelders et al., 2007; Luoma-Aho & Canel, 2016). Unlike private organizations, which may choose their target markets, public organizations must serve a much wider range of stakeholders (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2016). As a result, Gelders et al. (2007) note that public sector organizations deal with a "complicated, more unstable environment; additional legal and formal constraints; more rigid procedures; and more diverse products and objectives" (p. 329). Although reputation is primarily built on what an organization does rather than it says (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015) this does not always hold true for the public sector, whose reputations may suffer despite the quality of their service (Kampen et al., 2006). A poor reputation is unlikely to cause the demise of a public sector organization, as they are created by government, receive public funding, and are therefore less subject to market conditions and customer preferences (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2016).

Waeraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) identified five specific problems unique to managing reputation in the public sector. They are politics, consistency, charisma, uniqueness, and excellence (Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). Public sector organizations must not stray from their political mandate, making their identities largely predetermined. Public sector organizations are

responsible for addressing serious social problems that are unlikely to be resolved, such as unemployment, crime, and poverty. The association with these issues prevents public sector organizations from being seen as charismatic (Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). Managing reputation requires organizations to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Kuoppakangas et al., 2019). However, the public has an expectation that public sector organizations share similar values and service quality (Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). If a public organization attempts to carve out an image of excellence and uniqueness, it may encounter solidarity problems with other similar public agencies (Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). Given the issues associated with managing reputation, Luoma-aho (2008) suggests public sector focus on improving the daily practices that eventually shape reputation. In fact, a neutral reputation may be preferable for public sector organizations since it requires less maintenance (Luoma-aho, 2007).

Reputation Management in Child Welfare

Child abuse is a serious public health matter, which takes a heavy toll on victims, their families, and communities (Thomlinson & Whiting Blome, 2012). However, unlike other public health issues, such as COVID, smoking, and impaired driving, child welfare is often left searching for a public voice to heighten awareness and garner support (Blake et al., 2013). The general public tends to know little about the agencies responsible for protecting children, how they work, make decisions, or cope with their responsibilities (Cooper, 2005). Very few realize that child welfare professionals regularly make life-altering decisions, including whether to remove children from their birth parents or leave them with their families and possibly in harm's way (Regehr et al., 2002, as cited in Thomlinson & Whiting Blome, 2012). Research has shown there is a significant gap between public perception and the realities of the child welfare system

(Blake et al., 2013). As a result, the system needs allies, but rarely finds them and must face the media, policymakers, and the public on its own (Blake et al., 2013).

Child welfare work is perhaps the most complex in social work, as employees are required to protect children whose families may suffer from mental illness, substance abuse, violence, poverty and a raft of other serious issues (Ellett et al., 2007). These problems are complex and are not easily resolved. While Ontario legislation recognizes the family unit as the preferred environment for the care and upbringing of children, the safety of children remains the number one priority (Swift & Parada, 2004). Increasing the complexity of the work, unlike nearly every other public and private services industry, "child welfare agencies serve involuntary clients" (Ellett et al., 2007, p. 265). Additionally, child welfare agencies are perhaps the only service that works with clients in their own homes, which can raise concerns about employee safety and wellbeing (Ellett et al., 2007).

The news media is a significant source of the public's knowledge about the child welfare sector. By informing and influencing the mood of public opinion, media coverage impacts social policy, social workers and their clients (Zugazaga et al., 2006). In child welfare agencies, media coverage has been shown to have a direct impact on staff recruitment, retention, and funding (Zugazaga et al., 2006). Negative media coverage may make it more difficult for employees to engage with families and assess the risks children face (Thomlinson & Whiting Blome, 2012). Child welfare workers have a tendency to personalize the problems of their agencies. When media portray the agency negatively, it tends to lead to "a shared sense of low morale, diminished job satisfaction, low commitment to the organization" (Chenot, 2011, p. 175).

Only a small percentage of the population is ever involved with child welfare, so the majority of citizens rely on what they read in newspapers and online, see on television, or hear

by word of mouth for information about social services (Zugazaga et al., 2012). Over the years, the social work profession has had serious concerns about its portrayal in the media (Zugazaga, 2006). These concerns appear to be well founded. Franklin (1998, as cited in Zugazaga et al., 2012) concluded that "newspaper reporting of social work and social services is overwhelmingly negative and critical" (p. 624). Many professionals in the field feel they are “typically featured in unflattering, negative terms such as child snatchers, ineffective do-gooders” (Zugazaga et al, 2012, p. 623). Media coverage about child welfare is normally in connection with a child fatality and the central theme is how the system failed (Ellett et al., 2007). Typically, the focus is on mistakes, misjudgments, oversights, uninformed practices by social workers, and communications problems within organizations as contributing factors leading to tragic outcomes (Swift & Parada, 2004). Whether these characterizations are valid and deserved, is immaterial. Their impact creates an image that “the child welfare agency offers poor service, is a terrible place to work, is mismanaged, and harms children by commission or omission” (Thomlinson & Whiting Blome, 2012, p. 244). Chenot (2011) describes this as the vicious cycle, where a tragic event occurs, media attention inflames public outrage, causing politicians to call for reform, resulting in the child welfare agency adding new accountability measures to a profession already drowning in paperwork.

The news media inhabits the divide between the public's shock and over a child's death and the child welfare system (Blake et al., 2013). Too often, both child welfare agency and the media develop an adversarial relationship where one seeks information while the other must maintain confidentiality (Blake et al., 2013). Child welfare has not done itself any favours, as “poor relationships with the press and the general public are often self-inflicted due to ineffective or nonexistent ongoing PR efforts and the adoption of a consistently defensive posture with the

media" (Chenot, 2011, p. 172). To help break this cycle, there is a need for increased communication between agencies, the public they serve, and the media (Cooper, 2005).

Improved relationships are necessary to tell a different story about the work being done in child welfare. Positive work in child welfare helps protect children, secure safe refuge, reunite them with family, or identify safe, loving homes through adoption or kinship placements (Blake et al., 2013). Langer et al. (2006) argue that the image, or reputation, of child welfare is built through projection and introjection. Projection takes place through agency communication, including marketing, and the promotion of the agency's mission, vision, and values (Langer et al., 2006). An introjection occurs when receivers construct images from their own experience or viewpoints conveyed to them (Langer et al., 2006). Like reputation, it is unlikely an organization will be able to maintain a single image, as each stakeholder will make their own assessment about the organization (Langer et al., 2006).

To address the gap between child welfare's image, or reputation, and identity, Gioia et al. (2000) suggests two tactics. First, the agency may more forcefully project an image to stakeholders that more clearly conveys their conception of the organization's identity (Gioia et al., 2000). For example, the agency may position foster care as a noble calling as to develop positive support (Langer et al., 2006). Secondly, agencies can highlight the socially desirable aspects of their work to manage stakeholder perceptions (Giola et al., 2000). An agency can highlight its work to strengthen families through proactive supports that keep kids safe and in their own homes. To tell their stories more effectively, it is recommended that child welfare agencies meet with reporters, share information about the agency's programs and services, discuss problems, and identify which stories they are interested in pursuing (DeSantis, 2006, as cited in Chenot, 2011).

To ensure the agency authentically represents itself in its communications, Langer et al. (2006) say that hiring caring staff committed to the agency and children is essential.

Measuring Corporate Reputation

Reputation has been described as an intangible asset (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004) that has very real impacts on an organization. A considerable amount of time and effort have been devoted to developing tools to effectively measure reputation. Corporate scandals have highlighted the need to be able to quantify reputation. American Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan said "a firm is inherently fragile if its value emanates more from conceptual than from physical assets" (Cravens et al., 2003, p. 201). In other words, investing in a company whose value is largely a product of its reputation is a risky proposition since reputation can be wiped out overnight.

There is some general agreement on the drivers of reputation that should be measured. The Reputation Quotient developed by Fombrun and van Riel (2004) considers an organization's emotional appeal, products and services, financial performance, vision and leadership, workplace environment, and social responsibility. This work was further refined into the RepTrak System to provide executives with a tool to track stakeholder perceptions and "enable a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying informational drivers of reputation that elicit emotional attachment" (Fombrun et al., 2015, p. 4). RepTrak evaluates stakeholder assessments of an organization's products and services, innovation, workplace, governance, citizenship, leadership, and performance. Leger (n.d.), a Canadian owned market research and analytics firm, measures reputation using six core pillars, including financial strength, social responsibility, honesty and transparency, quality, attachment, and innovation. The Reputation Index, developed by Cravens et al. (2003) rates organizations according to a weighted scale of factors, including

products/services, employees, external relationships, innovation, value creation, financial strength, strategy, culture, and intangible liabilities. Weighting is distributed based on the company being measured, and Cravens et al. (2003) suggest the company's products/services should account for anywhere between 30 to 60 percent of the scale's total value. The Index is the only tool that does not explicitly evaluate stakeholders' emotional attachment to the company. However, some of this is captured in the external relationships factor, which considers how the company interacts with society and the environment. An overview of tools to measure reputation is presented in Table 2.

Research suggests that stakeholders' emotional attachment to an organization is the key factor in determining reputation. Fombrun & van Riel (2004) found that differences in perceived financial performance and leadership had little impact on reputation. Humans are not purely rational beings. People base decisions on hearsay, emotions, incomplete information, and unconscious processes, causing them to rely on reputation to help them decide how they feel about an organization (Polesz, 1988, as cited in Fombrun & van Riel, 2007). To achieve a five percent improvement in reputation, an organization would need to increase its emotional appeal to stakeholders by seven percent (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Conversely, the organization would need to boost stakeholder assessments of its financial performance by 55 percent to achieve that same five percent improvement in overall reputation. Public relations practitioners seeking to improve their organization's reputation must "start to acknowledge the heightened importance of emotions in society today" (Luoma-aho, 2015, p. 18).

Despite the advancement in efforts to effectively measure reputation, it is important to be mindful of some of the limitations of the tools. Bromley (2002) has concerns with most attempts. He argues that the subjective assessments underpinning most measurement scales make them

inherently unreliable. Although, he concedes that a carefully constructed quantitative assessment can produce scientifically reliable data (MacMillan et al., 2005).

Bromley (2002) goes on to say researchers should be circumspect about creating a single score to represent an organization's reputation. It is problematic because different stakeholder groups "are likely to differ in their values and beliefs and are therefore likely to judge a company's reputation in terms of different issues that are important to them" (MacMillan et al., 2005, p. 216). In his view, combining the views of all stakeholders sacrifices the complexity of reputation for the sake of simplicity. In other words, we can measure the average body temperature of someone whose hair is on fire but standing barefoot on ice; however, that does not give us a sense of the danger the person is facing. One way to alleviate Bromley's concerns is to accept Walker's (2010) assertion that reputation is an "issue specific aggregate perceptual representation" (p. 370) of an organization that can be compared against a standard.

Measuring Public Sector Reputation

Although there are well-developed reputation measurements for the private sector, they are not always appropriate for the public sector, which requires a tailored approach (Overman et al., 2019). Public sector organizations differ from their private sector counterparts in their philosophy, core values, goals, leadership, outcomes, and reform (Christensen et al., 2020). The public sector is multi-functional and more susceptible to influence from internal and external stakeholders, legislation, and government regulations (Christensen et al., 2020). Public sector organizations must serve all citizens and, in some instances, must impose their services on uncooperative members of the public (Luoma-aho et al., 2021).

Table 2
Reputation Measurement Tools

Tool	Reputation Quotient	RepTrak	Leger	Reputation Index	Bureaucratic Reputation Scale	Public Sector Net Promoter Score	Luoma-aho Scale
Categories Measured	Emotional appeal Products and services Financial performance Vision and leadership Workplace environment Social responsibility	Innovation Products and Services Workplace Governance Citizenship Leadership Performance	Financial Strength Social Responsibility Honesty and transparency Quality Attachment Innovation	Products and services Employees External relationships Innovation Value creation Financial strength Strategy Culture Intangible liabilities	Overall reputation Performance Morality Procedures Technical	How likely are you to recommend an organization or service to others?	Authority Esteem Trust Service Efficiency
Unit of measure	Seven point scale	Seven point scale	11 point scale	Nine point scale	Five point scale	Ten point scale	Five point scale
Number of Questions	20 questions testing the attributes of the above categories	23 questions testing the attributes of the above categories.	26 questions testing the attributes of the above categories.	55 questions	Five to ten total questions.	One question.	45 questions testing dimensions of reputation. 10 questions to obtain background information.

One measure to evaluate reputation in the public sector adapts the net promoter score (NPS). Using a ten-point scale, the NPS asks stakeholders to indicate how likely they are to recommend an organization or service to others (Luoma-aho et al., 2021). Based on their responses, respondents are classified as promoters, passives, or detractors (Luoma-aho et al., 2021). This measure is relevant, given the power of word-of-mouth to influence stakeholders' assessments of organizations (Sweeney et al., 2014).

However, there are challenges to simply importing the NPS into a public sector context. Most public sector services are not freely chosen and some services, such as child welfare, taxation, and law enforcement, may go against the citizen's personal wishes (Luoma-aho et al., 2021).

To address this issue, Luoma-aho et al. (2021) propose a public sector net promoter score (PSNPS). In this measurement, they suggest taking those who would normally fall into the neutral camp and include them with the promoters. Their data suggests that there are very few truly passive citizens and that the passives are more likely to be promoters rather than detractors (Luoma-aho et al., 2021). Detractors are an important group, as many are willing to offer ideas about how the organization should change for the better (Luoma-aho et al., 2021). They say further research is required to see how the PSNPS can be used to help identify the needs of both promoters and detractors.

The Bureaucratic Reputation Scale (BRS) is another tool that can be used to understand citizens' perceptions of the public sector. Bureaucratic reputation does not focus on performance, "but also other dimensions that are especially important in a democratic society" (Lee & Van Ryzin, 2019, p. 180) such as morality and fairness. The BRS combines five to ten questions about an organization according to five different reputational dimensions measured on a five-

point scale (Lee & Van Ryzin, 2019). The dimensions include general, testing whether the organization has a good reputation overall; performance, whether the organization is well run; morality, the degree to which the organization maintains high ethical standards; procedures, whether the organization treats people fairly; technical, testing whether organization bases its decisions on solid evidence (Lee & Van Ryzin, 2019). Maor (2016) feels that bureaucratic reputational measurements should also consider the impact of the reputation of the individual CEO on the overall reputation of the organization.

The Luoma-aho (2007) scale also measures public sector reputation according to five factors, which differ somewhat from the BRS. This tool looks at the organization's authority and whether it is flexible or bureaucratic; esteem and whether the organization is appreciated or not; trust and whether the organization is fair or not; service and whether their offering is useful or useless; and efficiency, whether the organization is effective or not (Luoma-aho, 2007). These measures suggest that public sector organizations can manage their reputations by concentrating on maintaining the trust of citizens and ensure their everyday experiences with the organization are positive (Luoma-aho, 2007).

Regardless of how it is measured, Luoma-aho (2007) argues that public sector organizations would be best served by striving for a neutral reputation. Good reputations create favourable operating conditions for public sector organizations, but they require continuous cultivation and maintenance (Luoma-aho, 2007). As reputation increases, so do the expectations of the organization. Luoma-aho (2007) believes this is problematic as "managing reputation is not easy in public sector organizations, as the public managers have less room for maneuver" (p. 136). This point is echoed by Waerass and Byrkjeflot (2012) who argue that public sector organizations are "chronically depressive because they deal with insoluble problems" (p. 196).

Public sector organizations should strive for a reputation that is high enough for the organization to be trusted, yet low enough to manage expectations should their funding, and the laws and regulations governing them change (Luoma-aho, 2007).

Research Problem

This study seeks to better understand the key factors to building positive reputation in child welfare agencies in Ontario and how and to what extent strategic communications should contribute these efforts. This is a valid area for study as many of the existing models for reputation management "emphasize and measure factors that are not evident or central for public sector organizations, such as financial performance or competition" (Luoma-aho, 2007, p. 125).

While a great deal of literature exists on the social work practices of child welfare, little research is available on how Children's Aid Societies can improve stakeholders' assessments of their organizations. Where such literature exists, it is mainly focused on CASs' interactions with media, often in crisis situations. Existing research in public sector reputation management emphasizes that reputation flows from actions and that agencies "should concentrate on maintaining stakeholder trust and making sure that stakeholder experiences of the everyday practices of the organization are positive" (Luoma-aho, 2007. P. 136). This capstone explores whether this axiom holds true for Children's Aid Societies and whether there are other important considerations to address when building reputation.

Research Questions

RQ1: How and to what extent do Children's Aid Societies in Ontario manage reputation?

The purpose of this question is to gain an understanding of the activities Children's Aid Societies engage in to build reputation and which area(s) of the organization assumes primary responsibility for those activities. This question will examine the extent to which Children's Aid

Societies work to manage the image of the agency versus their focus on the "grass-root level daily practices that eventually shape reputation" (Luoma-aho, 2008, p. 458). From an experiential standpoint, this question will uncover the practices CASs find most impactful and why. It will also illuminate gaps that exist between what the organization does and how it is perceived.

RQ 2: How and to what extent do citizens assess Children's Aid Societies in Ontario?

For public relations practitioners to effectively engage with citizens, they must understand what is important to them and how they make judgements about Children's Aid Societies. Research has already been established to measure reputation, including Fombrun's reputation quotient (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004) and Luoma-aho's (2008) public sector reputation factors. This question will establish what factors are foremost in citizens' minds when evaluating their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with children's aid societies. The question will also examine whether citizens rely on primary or secondary experiences when assessing Children's Aid Societies (Bromley, 1993, as cited in Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015).

RQ3: How and to what extent should public relations be involved in managing reputation at Children's Aid Societies in Ontario?

This research question will elaborate on the activities public relations practitioners engage in to support positive reputation. It will also outline the expectations of the CEO and frontline service workers for public relations support.

This question will further assess public relations' position within the CAS. Since reputation is based primarily on what an organization does, Grunig and Hung-Baesecke (2015) argue that public relations must be part of the management function to influence organizational behaviours.

Research Methodology

This exploratory, single-case study meets Yin's (2014) definition of a common case, which seeks to understand the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation. In this instance, the everyday situation being examined is the reputation management practices of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. A single case study can be limited as it places "all your eggs in one basket" (Yin, 2014, p. 64). However, a single case is warranted, as child welfare is a unique and highly complex field incorporating as many as 19 different professions in a single agency (Waerass & Byrkjeflot, 2012). Further, the issues and work of Children's Aid Societies are unclear to most people (Ellet et al., 2007) and this study will add to the limited body of public relations research in this area.

The study uses multiple sources of evidence to draw conclusions about how Children's Aid Societies in Ontario can effectively manage reputation. Stacks (2011) notes that the best approach to any problem is to triangulate data from both qualitative and quantitative methods. This study employs in-depth interviews with various individuals working in Ontario CASs and a nonprobability sampling survey of Ontario residents. Evidence is then tested against the theoretical propositions on both public and private sector reputation management to "determine whether the propositions are correct or whether some alternative set of explanations might be more relevant" (Yin, 2014, p. 51).

Stacks (2011) believes in-depth interviews are ideal for answering questions of definition, value, and policy. In this case, the researcher is examining the value of reputation to Children's Aid Societies and the practices that lead to improved reputation amongst citizens in the communities they serve. The in-depth interview "provides rich detail and the ability to understand what the individual being interviewed really thinks" (Stacks, 2011, p. 174).

A survey is a carefully constructed measurement tool that gauges "how the public perceives an issue" (Stacks, 2011, 224). The survey in this study seeks to understand the public's perceptions about Children's Aid Societies in Ontario and the key factors they consider when making their assessments of these agencies. As a nonprobability sample, the results will not be generalizable to the general population in Ontario and will be restricted to descriptions based on the messages studied (Stacks, 2011).

Data Collection Procedures

In-depth interviews (Appendix A) were conducted with nine individuals working in child welfare representing three distinct roles within their agencies. Interviews included three Executive Directors (equivalent to CEO), three communications directors, and three frontline service workers. Subjects were recruited through the researcher's personal network and through the networks of colleagues working in child welfare who agreed to share the researcher's name and study information to others. All potential interview subjects were provided with the researcher's Letter of Information and Informed Consent. Respecting COVID-19 safety protocols, interviews took place using the Microsoft Teams platform. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Rev.com, an online automated transcription service. Following the production of reliable transcripts, audio files were destroyed to respect confidentiality. To protect individuals from harm, all interview subjects provided their informed consent, which they could have revoked at any time (Yin, 2014).

The survey seeking citizens' opinions on Children's Aid Societies (Appendix B) was released on McMaster University's Limesurvey platform. The sole eligibility requirement was that participants reside in Ontario. The survey obtained a nonprobability sampling of respondents in the province. Nonprobability sampling occurs when "when you do not have access to every

unit in a population of people" (Stacks, 2011, p. 201). Participants were mainly recruited through snowballing, which happens when existing participants help recruit others. The researcher placed posts with links to the survey on his Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn accounts. In the posts, shares and retweets were encouraged. Recruitment emails were also sent to the researcher's personal and professional list of contacts. The survey received a total of 553 responses, of which, 125 were complete, with the remaining 408 responses incomplete. With the recruitment method, it is not possible to generalize the results to the larger population in the province. However, as Stacks (2011) notes, "It's not that nonprobability samples are unrepresentative of the population—they may be—but the problem is that we will never know just how representative they are" (p. 201).

Results

Survey Respondents

The survey included one filtering question to confirm that respondents resided in Ontario. In total, 125 fully complete responses were received from individuals living in the province. Of these respondents, a small percentage (6%, n=7) indicated that they belonged to a visible minority group, based on their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, sexual orientation, or disability. The majority of survey respondents (89%, n=111) did not identify as having traits that would place them in a visible minority group and 6% (n=7) declined to provide a response to the question.

The survey asked respondents whether they had ever had involvement with a Children's Aid Society. Involvement was defined as a respondent's current or previous employment or volunteer experience with a society, whether they had donated to a CAS or had ever received services from a CAS. Services included whether the respondent had adopted or fostered through

a CAS, or received child protection services. One third of respondents (34%, n=42) indicated some level of involvement with a CAS, while 65% (n=81) said they had never been involved with a CAS. Two respondents (2%) declined to answer the question. When asked to evaluate their level of knowledge about Children's Aid Societies, the majority (67%, n=84) said they were somewhat knowledgeable, 21% (n=26) said they had no substantive knowledge of CASs, and 12% (n=15) indicated that they were highly knowledgeable.

Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with a number of statements on a five-point scale, where one indicated strong disagreement and five indicated strong agreement. Generally, they indicated support for the existence of Children's Aid Societies. On the first statement, "Children's Aid Societies perform an important function in society," more than 87% (n=109) either agreed or strongly agreed (Table 3). Five respondents (4%) disagreed and no respondents (0%, n=0) said they strongly disagreed with the statement. The mean response was 4.41 on the five-point scale. When asked to rate the statement that supporting CASs "is a good use of taxpayer dollars, 82% (n=103) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Six respondents (5%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean response was 4.22 on the five-point scale. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (65%, n=82) either agreed or strongly agreed that, "Sometimes it is in the best interest of the child to be removed from the home if they are experiencing abuse and/or neglect." Four respondents (3%) were neutral and two respondents (2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean response was 4.58.

Respondents' noted that societies "help children when they need it the most when it comes to dysfunction and abuse in their homes." They felt that, "Children need advocates for their well-being when their parents/guardians are not looking out for their best interests." Other comments focused on the outcomes of CAS intervention, "I don't really know a lot about their

process, although I do know they placed a little girl in the foster care of a wonderful home and they were able to adopt her later on." Several positive comments also recognized the commitment and dedication of workers, and praised their efforts to keep children safe despite the complexity and volatility of many of the family situations they encounter. One wrote, "Workers I am familiar with are kind, generous people who create positive relationships with families and children."

A number of respondents confessed to having little knowledge of CASs, but expressed approval of what they believed their overall mandate to be, "I believe it's a support for families that may require assistance." However, those respondents did not feel they had the knowledge to evaluate whether CASs were effective at protecting children,

> I don't know much about Children's Aid, but I know there are a lot of children in unsafe homes so it's good that there is an agency that exists to protect them. I don't know in actuality how well they perform this role as family situations can be very complicated.

When asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement that, "In general, I have a positive opinion of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario," 51% (n=64) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed (Table 4). One-third of respondents (31%, n=39) expressed a neutral opinion, and 16% (n=20) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean response was 3.44 on a five-point scale. When asked if they believe their local CAS has a positive reputation, 33% (n=41) either agreed or strong agreed, resulting in a mean response of 3.12 on a five-point scale.

Respondents indicated that reputation would be a deciding factor in whether they decided to engage with the organization. In total, 64% (n=80) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the society's reputation would determine whether they would donate, volunteer, or

seek employment with their local Children's Aid Society. The mean response was 3.77 on a five-point scale.

Respondents expressing a negative view of CASs generally felt that societies were ineffective due to their own errors or because they are overburdened and under-resourced by government. One respondent felt that, "Children fall through the cracks on a regular basis. These kids need a voice and often they aren't getting it." Personal experience informed a number of comments, with several commenters expressing displeasure that the CAS had left children in potentially dangerous situations with their biological families. One wrote, "Keeping families together is not always the best answer. As somebody who has been in this program and has a lot of experience, I did not want my family to be 'kept together' and nobody listened." One felt that CASs' focus on reducing the number of children in foster care meant that societies "let kids die because they are no longer focused on risk." Another noted,

> My friend has a neighbour who has five or six children who are clearly neglected, don't attend school and are unsupervised. She called CAS who did nothing. We will read about those poor kids one day.

A number of respondents wrote that CASs were in a difficult position due to underfunding or government rules and regulations. One wrote that Children's Aid Societies were well intentioned but, "restricted by burdensome process and bureaucracy." Another agreed that workers were well meaning, but working "within a system that relies more on checks and balances than ethics and best practice." A third respondent noted that CASs were "misunderstood, handcuffed, and underfunded." Another respondent agreed that CASs were "underfunded, understaffed, and overworked" leading to "caseloads being too high to provide adequate standards of care and connection to meaningful resources and supports."

Respondents were asked to share their perspectives on the effectiveness of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. When presented with the statement that CASs in Ontario "do a good job of protecting children from abuse and/or neglect," just over one-third of respondents (38%, n=47) agreed or strongly agreed. More than 40% (n=51) took a neutral position and 20% (n=25) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. The mean response was 3.1 on a five-point scale. When asked to evaluate whether Ontario CASs used their authority appropriately, 40.8% of respondents (n=51) agreed or strongly agreed that they did, while 31% (n=39) took a neutral position, and 16.6% (n=22) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean response was 3.28 on a five-point scale. When asked for their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement that Ontario CASs "treat people fairly," 38% of respondents (n=49) agreed or strongly agreed. More than two-thirds (37%, n=46) took a neutral position, and 16% (n=20) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean response was 3.29 on a five-point scale.

Despite how they may feel about child welfare's effectiveness, a majority of respondents said they would feel comfortable making a report to their local CAS. In total, 74% (n=82) either agreed or strongly agreed that they would call their local CAS if they suspected a child was being abused or neglected. The mean response was 4.1 on a five-point scale.

Table 3
Children's Aid Societies perform an important function in society.

Level of Agreement	Response percent	Response count (N=125)
Strongly agree	58%	73
Agree	29%	36
Neither agree nor disagree	9%	11
Disagree	4%	5
Strongly disagree	0%	0
Did not answer	0%	0

Table 4

Children's Aid Societies in Ontario do a good job of protecting children from abuse and/or neglect.

Level of Agreement	Response percent	Response count (N=125)
Strongly agree	8%	10
Agree	30%	36
Neither agree nor disagree	41%	51
Disagree	15%	19
Strongly disagree	5%	6
Did not answer	2%	2

Table 5

Arithmetic mean of responses

Statement	Mean response on a five-point scale where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 5 indicates strong agreement (N=125)
Sometimes, it is in the best interest of the child to be removed from the home if they are experiencing abuse and/or neglect	4.58
Children's Aid Societies perform an important function in society	4.41
Supporting the work of Children's Aid Societies is a good use of taxpayer dollars	4.22
I would feel comfortable making a report to my local Children's Aid Society if I suspected a child needed protection from abuse or neglect	4.10
The society's reputation determines whether I would consider donating, becoming a volunteer or seeking employment with the organization.	3.77
Children's Aid Societies do their best to provide support and keep families together	3.64
In general, I have a positive opinion of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario	3.44
I would recommend the services of my local Children's Aid Society to a family that may need support for issues impacting their children (e.g. - poverty, mental health, parenting skills etc.)	3.43
Children's Aid Societies in Ontario treat people fairly	3.29
Children's Aid Societies in Ontario use their authority appropriately	3.28
Children's Aid Societies in Ontario do a good job of protecting children from abuse and/or neglect	3.10

RQ1: How and to what extent do Children's Aid Societies in Ontario manage reputation?

Communications Professionals

In-depth interviews with three communications directors in the sector were conducted for this capstone research to better understand their perspectives of managing reputation in child welfare.

Generally, the three directors believe that managing reputation in this sector is more complex because of the authority that CASs hold. One said, "The fact that workers could walk into your home and take your children is so profoundly powerful on an emotional level for parents and families." Another director agreed, saying that no matter whether the CAS removes a children from the home or not, they are likely to be criticized publicly for being either punitive or not doing enough to protect children. They also noted that CASs are not funded to do advocacy work and that countering narratives in the community is difficult without the proper resources. One compared their situation to being like a salmon swimming upstream, "You're always coming up against a little bit of a barrier or starting at a little bit of a disadvantage because of the power imbalance between us and the people we serve."

Despite the challenges of working in the sector, all three directors believe that an agency's reputation is critically important. One director felt that how the public views the CAS "can quite literally decide whether or not a child lives or dies." They went on to explain that people with suspicions, or evidence, that a child is being abused should be calling a CAS to investigate. However,

> If I read in the paper about how my local Children's Aid Society is letting families down or is racist or screwing up, I might think twice before I make that call to a Children's Aid Society. And that kid is going to suffer as a result.

Given the critical importance of the public's perception of CASs, what should be the normative practices for managing reputation? The three directors interviewed all agreed that managing reputation begins with the service the agency provides the public. One noted that how the public experiences the CAS will trump anything that can be said or done by communicators. They went on to say,

> If we can impact how people are experiencing us, then that will be the driver that determines what people will say about us. Word of mouth is so strong and when it's good, it can spread far and wide because it's from the grassroots.

The factors that director believes leads to a positive experience includes whether the CAS treats people fairly and with compassion. They also noted that people are more likely to feel positive about their experience if the agency has been transparent by explaining their reasons for involvement, what the process looks like, and disclosing rationale for decisions. They explained that understanding has changed how they approach their work, "this has driven my shift over time with communications to it being much more based on relationships and experience versus a more fulsome push on doing social media, for example."

Providing compassionate service includes remaining cognizant of the power imbalance between the CAS and the citizens it interacts with. One director notes that, "if we don't recognize the power, the influence and authority that we have, when a service recipient makes the decision to open the door, that is going to impact our reputation in a massive way." This means treating citizens as partners and attempting to work collaboratively towards mutually beneficial solutions.

Despite the power imbalance, the communications directors interviewed believe that partnership is possible. It requires the CAS to be very intentional about providing families with a voice. One director felt this learning was crystallized during an inquest that took place involving their CAS following the death of a young person receiving services. The inquest reinforced that outcomes could have been improved with greater family involvement. They noted that, “you don't make decisions for people without them there. Period. I don't care how much experience or expertise we have, it doesn't matter. They're there. They’re family.” Family involvement will not prevent disagreement, they said, but the CAS can help family members understand why a decision was made and the principles that supported it.

The communications directors also acknowledged that their agency’s reputation may be different depending on the group being asked for their feedback. For example, one director noted that families receiving child protection services may feel less positively because having an investigation done on their family is by nature a “traumatic experience.” However, a family that has been brought together by the CAS through adoption is much more likely to rate their experience as positive. Then, there is the perspective of the general public who does not have much interaction with child welfare, but bases their opinions based on media coverage and word of mouth. In those instances, “The question for people is, is the Children's Aid Society a force for good?” Unfortunately, the directors all agree that positive media coverage is difficult for child welfare agencies to obtain because of the strict privacy laws in place preventing the CAS from providing substantive comment on articles.

For many years now, there has been a provincial overrepresentation of black and Indigenous children in care. One director noted that an important focus at their agency is “to ensure that our work is not only responsive to racialized and equity deserving communities but

also our staff as well, because they are the ones who do the role." The director went on to say there is a great need to do more to address racism, oppression, and discrimination to ensure that citizens and staff receive "culturally appropriate services."

The communications directors interviewed expressed a prevailing view that the reputation of their individual agencies is inextricably tied to the public's view of child welfare as a whole. They all noted the importance of having greater collaboration to impact the public's view of child welfare. One director noted,

> We have 50 different children's aid societies saying 50 different things, doing 50 different things, and there's no cohesion there. There's no brand management there, there's no opportunity to really leverage each other's resources to do wonderful and amazing things.

Another director echoed the point, saying that, "nothing we do is in isolation" and that there needs to be coordinated responses to issues facing the sector. In particular, they noted that when an issue hits a large metropolitan area, like Toronto, then the impact is felt across the province. However, like the other director, they felt that not enough is being done to work together and pool resources, "In all of my career in child welfare, I would say there was only one given time that provincially that we had a really strong shared message." Further discussion of the coordinated public relations campaign will appear in response to RQ3, which explores in-depth the role of public relations in managing reputation in child welfare.

Executive Directors (ED)

Three executive directors at Ontario Children's Aid Societies were interviewed to gather their perspectives on managing reputation.

There was general agreement that reputation is a meaningful asset that supports organizational effectiveness. However, one ED clarified that having good reputation should not

be conflated with being liked or admired. The ED said the goal of having a positive reputation should be that the public understands the purpose of the agency, “are they clear on what our authority is, particularly if we've not been invited into their lives? And do they know their rights? Are we communicating that clearly and upfront?”

Echoing the point, another ED said it’s critical for people to understand that families sometimes struggle and could benefit from the intervention and support provided by a CAS. Therefore, Children’s Aid Societies should strive for a reputation that conveys legitimacy. If CASs are seen as legitimate, people will be more willing to accept their intervention, even if they did not initially wish to access their services. The ED compared the situation to someone experiencing a health crisis,

> Somebody who unfortunately gets ill is not necessarily really wanting to use the services of the hospital. Particularly, I think they would prefer to not have to use the services, but they also have a recognition that they need that at a certain point in time.

There is more work to be done to achieve greater awareness of child welfare and how CASs operate. One ED said, “It’s mysterious to people. I think if they have an impression, it's whatever they've read in the media and whatever's in the media is an extreme of really horrific cases.” Another ED mentioned the role of media in shaping people’s impressions of CASs, “they tend to remember things they've read in the press or heard about children’s aid that are kind of upsetting or salacious.” CASs have been around for more than a century, but another ED lamented that people have a rudimentary understanding of child welfare. They said the public generally knows “simple things. They protect kids, they donate to families at Christmas time, some of those usual high level, not too deep understanding of the work.”

The EDs interviewed all believe that ultimate responsibility for the agency's reputation rests with them. One said that if reputation "isn't important in the C-suite, it's not important anywhere in the organization. So I always take the opportunity to talk about the importance of those things." Another ED said that everything the organization does contributes to reputation, whether good or bad, but it was their job to manage reputation at the macro level. They explained that, "I have to look after how it looks through the Board of Directors, through the Ministry, through the community, through my staff."

Reputation can be viewed as a type of social bank which can be drawn upon to support the organization through difficult times. One ED said that sharing good news and having a presence in the community builds up equity in the organization's relationship with the public. When something negative happens, the public "might be a little more kind to say that event doesn't necessarily characterize that whole organization. And so I think it is important to be proactive, to be out there."

Reputation is also a barometer of whether the public has confidence in the agency to do a good job. Building greater public understanding will help people understand what is meant by "doing a good job." One ED clarified the problem by asking, "What is it though, that the public trusts us to do?" Meaning, does the public believe that the CAS will do a good job in removing children, or do they believe the CAS will support the family so they have the best chance of keeping their children at home and being successful. The ED noted that reputation has to be a reflection of the service provided,

> So it comes back to, what is our philosophy as an organization? It's a different kind of trust building. If people called because previously because they were worried about a

> serious risk to a child, do they now trust to call earlier to help and support a family? That's part of our journey.

Ultimately, the reputation of Children's Aid Societies will be determined by the quality of the relationships it builds and maintains with the public. Relationships require continuous investment, and one ED noted that, "to me, a relationship doesn't stay stagnant. It gets worse or better depending on the time and attention you pay to it." For another ED, the most effective investments are made in the form of the little things, "Are we polite? Do we return phone calls? Are we gracious about receiving someone's complaint and handling it with respect? All of that is terribly important in terms of how you are perceived."

For a CAS to do the little things well, it needs staff that believe in the mission, believe in treating people well, and have the skills and training to do the work properly. For one ED, that means that all organizational communications and directives "bring it back to service, why you're serving families and why you're serving kids." To ensure they have the right people interacting in the community, one ED makes a point of meeting every new frontline service staff member after they have completed the authorization process,

> I'm looking to answer two questions. And one is, if I was a mom opening that door and you are standing there, I would ask myself, can this person help me? And the second question would be, will I let them?

One way for the organization to develop reputation is by maintaining a positive community presence. This can be through events and partnerships, or through direct service. One ED said they were intentional about ensuring frontline service staff are deployed within the community. They said, "my staff are 97% community based. They are based in schools and at the hospital and women's shelters and with the police. They're out in neighboring agencies or

community partner locations. They don't sit in the office." These decisions are the direct responsibility of the ED through the organization's budgeting process.

Another ED noted that having a presence in the community contributes to the organization being seen as a "neighbour and as a citizen in the community." This helps personalize the organization and alleviate anxiety that the organization does not have people's best interests at heart. The ED recounted a story about staff who wanted the organization to fund their participation in a dragon boat race to raise money for charity. There was initially some anxiety about putting their workplace on their shirts for fear of the stigma associated with CASs, but the ED said the community welcomed them with open arms. They said, "I remember folks walking up to me from the local hospital, from different organizations. It felt great to have you guys here."

Frontline Service Workers

Three frontline service workers at Ontario Children's Aid Societies were interviewed to gather their perspective on reputation and how it affects their roles.

The frontline service workers interviewed all believe that the practice of child welfare is not well understood by the broader public. One frontline worker said,

> I think the general public just thinks we just swoop in right away and take kids out of homes. They don't understand that there's a significant process behind those decisions. And there's typically a ton of time that has passed before we're doing that.

Conversely, the worker felt people with higher levels of education or work in more senior white collar roles have the perception that CAS' wait too long to intervene. These individuals tend to make the same assumption that there is not a significant process behind decisions and "they think we give families far too many chances to continue to parent versus when we know

we can give the kid a better life." Workers said there is a pendulum in child welfare. In the late nineties, child welfare had a much lower tolerance for risk and children were removed from the home more quickly. However, the pendulum has shifted towards supporting families so they are able to parent successfully and keep their children safely.

Misperceptions of the role of Children's Aid Societies complicate workers' experience at the door when they are called out to investigate a report of potential neglect or abuse. If people do not understand the purpose of child welfare and the process workers are required to follow, "Are they going to work with you? It's going to take so much more time to really get them to trust that you're not going do the worst thing, that you're not going break up their family."

The goal of greater awareness should not be to convince people to like Children's Aid, since workers generally agree that reputation is largely influenced by people's experience with staff and how they treat clients. Rather, the goal of outreach should be to increase transparency, "If we pulled back that curtain and say this is the process, this is what we try and do and this is why we do it. This is how we do it. I think it would benefit everyone." One worker said greater transparency would make people's experience with a CAS "less scary" by explaining how child welfare has modernized itself. Another noted that more outreach into the community would help counteract negative "word of mouth amongst people who don't understand the system."

Workers agreed that there is a stigma associated with being involved with Children's Aid that complicates efforts to develop positive reputation. One worker compared it to pest control, "all of a sudden, there's a pest control truck outside of that home, one of our neighbors, and now you know they've got bugs or rodents or something." Similarly, people will judge their neighbours receiving service from a CAS. Neighbours may assume the family abuses their children, has poor parenting skills, or are unable to provide basic necessities.

Combatting stigma requires a greater focus on the help that Children's Aid Societies provide families. One worker pointed to a similar agency that provides support for homeless teenagers. Although they still do their core work of providing emergency housing, "they've branched out beyond that in a community role where they're trying to do some very early interventions." The worker noted that the agency had instituted afterschool programming, "and things like that where they're changing the perception and the stigma of being homeless." They believe that by maintaining a presence in the community and highlighting early intervention and support that CAS' provide families, it may lessen the fear people have of their authority.

The reputation of the CAS is also dependant on the services provided. For example, child protection services are oftentimes poorly regarded, while adoption services are looked upon more favourably. One worker who has spent more than 30 years in the profession said when they were working in child protection, they would tell people they "drove trucks" for a living. In their current placement in the adoption department, they noted that they regularly receive "wine and chocolates" from families who have adopted.

Children's Aid Societies have a great deal of authority, which people sometimes resent. People who are the subject of an allegation must work with the CAS whether they wish to or not. Despite their authority, workers believe that compelling cooperation creates more conflict and should only be relied upon as a last resort. If a worker is too authoritative, then "how do they ever reach that person that they're trying to help? How do they ever understand their pain?"

Again, workers pointed to transparency as being the determining factor in whether the relationship with a client moves forward amicably or whether the CAS needs to assert its authority. One worker said, "I'm very honest with my clients that this is the reason I'm here. This is what we need to do to get rid of me." Another worker noted that transparency and outlining

the process is important because, “people don’t like surprises.” When the relationship is more cooperative, solutions are identified quicker and the intervention of the CAS is less intrusive. Because clients don’t have a general understanding of child welfare, it is up to workers to explain the process and their options. However, the workers interviewed did not believe there was enough consistency in how the process is explained to clients, which often leads to conflict in the relationship.

For the workers interviewed, transparency goes hand in hand with respect. Parents who are the subject of a CAS investigation already feel defensive because they want to avoid the worst possible outcome, which is the removal of their children. The reaction is immediate, “You can tell just with their body language. As soon as you identify yourself, they're trying to close the door. They say, you're not coming in their home.”

To have the best chance at securing their voluntary cooperation, it is imperative that workers show respect and not pre-judge the families they work with. Workers believe it is important to go into every situation with an open mind. They receive information from the screening staff who received the allegations and they must investigate. They note that in the past, people working with a CAS may have perceived the experience to be very one-sided, but “we want to hear your voice. We want to hear your side of it. We’re not going to steamroll you.”

RQ2: How and to what extent do citizens assess Children’s Aid Societies in Ontario?

Survey respondents residing in Ontario were asked to rate the factors most likely to influence their opinions of their local Children’s Aid Society. Respondents were asked to evaluate 12 factors on a five-point scale ranging from least important to most important in influencing their perceptions.

Word of mouth from current or former clients was rated as the key factor in forming people's perceptions of CAS'. This factor was rated as either important or most important in influencing their opinions by 78% (n=97). Five percent (n=6) said hearing from clients of a CAS was unimportant. The mean response was 4.19 on a five-point scale. Their own personal experience with a CAS was the second most influential factor, with 70% (n=87) of respondents rating it as either important or most important. Seven percent (n=9) said their own personal experience was unimportant. The mean response was 4.17 on a five-point scale. Hearing from current or former employees of a CAS was the third highest rated factor in influencing opinion. Just over 73% (n=92) rated this as either important or most important. Seven percent (n=9) said this factor was unimportant. The mean response was 3.92 on a five-point scale.

Media coverage was rated as either important or most important by 52% (n=65) respondents, while 12% (n=15) said media coverage was unimportant. Thirty-two percent (n=40) expressed a neutral position. The mean response was 3.47 on a five-point scale.

Social media, online reviews, and information from the Ontario Government were rated as the least influential factors in forming opinions about Children's Aid Societies in the province.

Statements from the Ontario Government were rated as either unimportant or least important by 32% (n=40) of respondents, while 30% (n=37) felt communication from the government was either important or the most important factor. The mean response was 2.91 on a five-point scale.

Online reviews were rated as either unimportant or least important in influencing people's opinions by 36% (n=45) of respondents, while 32% (n=40) felt online reviews were either important or most important. The mean response was 2.93 on a five-point scale.

Social media was also considered generally unimportant, with 30% (n=37) saying this factor was either unimportant or least important in helping them to form impressions of CAS', while 29% (n=36) felt it was important or most important. The mean response was 2.97 on a five-point scale.

Table 6
Influential factors affecting citizens' perceptions

Factor influencing perception	Mean response on a five-point scale where 1 means least important and 5 means most important (N=125)
What current or former clients of the Children's Aid Society say	4.19
My own personal experience with Children's Aid	4.17
What current or past employees say about the Children's Aid Society	3.92
What my friends and acquaintances say about my local Children's Aid Society	3.80
My personal feelings about the mission and purpose of the Children's Aid Society	3.68
Media coverage of my local Children's Aid Society	3.47
Media coverage of other Children's Aid Societies or child welfare in general	3.45
Information from my local Children's Aid Society	3.12
What I see about the Children's Aid Society on social media	2.97
Online reviews about the Children's Aid Society	2.93
Statements from the Ontario Government about the Children's Aid Society or child welfare in Ontario	2.91

Respondents were offered the opportunity to indicate how they learn about their local Children's Aid Society. Respondents were provided a list of opportunities and were permitted to pick multiple methods. The largest portion of responses came from respondents indicating they rarely hear anything about their local CAS (55%, n=69). Of those who do learn about their local

CAS, 50% (n=63) said they do so by speaking with friends. Just over one-third of responses (33%, n=42) were for traditional media (newspapers, television, and radio) and speaking with current or former clients. CAS newsletters were the lowest scoring response, with 2% (n=3) respondents selecting this option. Table 7 provides a full list of responses.

Table 7
How do you learn about your local Children's Aid Society? Please click all that apply.

Method	Percentage Response	Number of respondents selecting each variable (N=125)
I rarely hear anything about my local Children's Aid Society	55%	69
Information shared by my friends/colleagues	50%	63
Speaking with current or former clients	33%	42
Traditional media (television, newspaper, radio)	33%	42
Speaking with those who have adopted through a CAS	30%	37
Speaking with CAS employees	25%	31
Social media posts from others about my local CAS	18%	22
Information from the Ontario Government	15%	19
The Children's Aid Society webpage	14%	18
The Children's Aid Society's social media channels	14%	17
I am employed or involved in some way with my local CAS	14%	17
Online news websites	13%	16
Speaking with CAS volunteers	9%	11
Children's Aid Society newsletter	2%	3

Table 8
Respondents' perceptions of their local Children's Aid Society

Perception	Mean response on a five-point scale where 1 means least important and 5 means most important (N=125)
My local CAS should seek a higher profile in the community.	3.91
I would recommend the services of my local CAS to anyone interested in fostering or adoption.	3.81
I believe my local CAS treats people like me fairly.	3.63
I would recommend the services of my local CAS to a family that may need support for issues impacting their children (e.g. poverty, food insecurity, parenting support).	3.43
I trust my local CAS.	3.36
I have heard negative things about my local CAS.	3.19
I believe my local CAS has a positive reputation.	3.12
I have heard good things about my local CAS.	2.99

Respondents were then asked to identify their preferred method for learning about their local CAS. Respondents were provided with a range of responses and asked to select one as their most preferred method. Speaking with current or former clients of the CAS was the highest rated response, with 14% (n=17) choosing this option. Traditional media was also rated highly, with 12% (n=15) of respondents, followed by the CAS website with 11% (n=11). Five percent (n=6) of respondents said they did not wish to know anything about their local Children's Aid Society. The least favoured method to learn about the local CAS was through conversations with agency volunteers (2%, n=3).

Respondents expressed an interest in learning more about their local CAS. When asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement, "My local Children's Aid Society should seek a higher profile in my community," 63% (n=79) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. This resulted in a mean response of 3.91 on a five-point scale.

Respondents were offered the opportunity to share commentary about the survey and child welfare in Ontario in general. Thirty respondents (24%) left comments, while 95 respondents (76%) declined to comment further.

A number of comments related to people's lack of knowledge about Children's Aid in Ontario. One said the survey made them want to learn more, "I've never had any involvement personally but I'm sure they play an important role in the community." Another said they rarely see positive stories of child welfare in the media, but the survey made them think there is more to child welfare than they previously believed. One mentioned that child welfare rarely gets attention unless there is an inquest into the death of a child. Another said that information "in Ontario is not shared as often as in other places. At bare minimum, a number to call for the society should be common knowledge." While one wondered whether "Children's Aid is something that people think of as an entity across Canada as a whole, rather than as a local service."

RQ3: How and to what extent should public relations be involved in managing reputation at Children's Aid Societies in Ontario?

Those professionals in child welfare who agreed to be interviewed for this study placed a strong focus on the need for public relations professionals to be on the forefront of working with the community to build relationships and raise the profile of the CAS. One communications director said that with the Ontario Government's child welfare redesign, they hope there will be a recognition that along with the focus on preventing children from coming into care "you need to do meaningful community engagement and community education as well so the public is aware of the new direction of child welfare."

Making the Children's Aid Society a more known commodity would help "ease some of the concerns or fears people might have if they need to reach out and get some help from us" according to one executive director. This point was echoed by a communications director who noted that child welfare work will always be associated with a stigma, which requires more in-depth work with people in the community because "you don't have an Amazon sized budget to try and counter some narratives."

One of the most significant narratives that needs to be countered is the impression that CAS rely too heavily on their authority and that people always need to be on guard against losing their children. With a complicated history that involves the "Sixties Scoop" of Indigenous children, those interviewed understand how these long-standing reputational issues developed. However, CAS' are now placing an increasing focus on early intervention support to keep families together. There needs to be increased communication effort to have this message penetrate into communities. Communications directors pointed to the need for coordinated efforts to develop "messaging that's going to resonate and begin to improve our reputation and re-educate the community that we are Child Wellbeing 2.0. We are not the Children's Aid Societies over the past."

Frontline service workers believe greater awareness in the community would assist them in developing trust with clients. Building relationships with clients and working cooperatively to complete investigations and ensure the safety of children is far preferable than having to rely on the agency's authority. Support from the public relations function would assist in "letting the community know how child welfare has modernized itself." One frontline service worker said it would be beneficial if public relations helped "pull back the curtain and say this is who we are, this is the process, and this is why we do it." Another worker said that if the community had

more knowledge about how CASs work, it would help counter “word of mouth amongst people who don't understand the system and people that we have interacted with that haven't had a good experience.”

Communications directors agree that news media is an important avenue to get information into the community. However, they all point to challenges in working with reporters to earn positive news coverage. One director said, “We respond to negative stories for the most part” and that their work with media focuses on “mitigating risk.” Another director said that CASs have to be realistic in what can be achieved through media. In their view, “you can have a hundred positive stories in the paper. All it takes is that one negative story that’s immediately going to nose-dive your reputation.”

Privacy requirements of the CYFSA prevent CASs from providing any information about children receiving service from the agency. When a tragic event happens, or a family speaks out against the CAS in media, the agency cannot provide any substantive comment about the situation. One communications director said this makes child welfare an “easy target.” They went on to explain, “they write a salacious story about child welfare and how it's failing our families and whatnot. Sometimes they're right. Often they're not. And for me, that is remarkably irresponsible.” Another director said that makes it very difficult to introduce “the good work that Children’s Aid Societies do and the change we are seeing in the sector.”

Negative stories in the media damage the reputation of the CAS both externally and internally. They diminish the public’s perception of the CAS externally and contribute to a decrease in staff morale internally. One communications director said this is a major concern because “it affects us in terms of how they’re advocating for us out in the community. People are less likely to say ‘I work at a Children’s Aid Society and we do fantastic work.’”

Despite the challenges, both executive directors and communications directors believe it is important to be "available and responsive" to media. One executive director highlighted the importance of the public relations function in "providing media training to senior staff" to ensure appropriate messaging is delivered effectively. They also noted that, to the best of their ability, it is important to "share the good work of the organization," which takes "persistent effort and energy." The need to work with media was echoed by another executive director who said CASs need to "be in the game and engaged as part of that public relations strategy, whether it's good, bad, or ugly."

In addition to earned media coverage, CASs can also engage in paid advertising campaigns to support increased reputation. The three communications directors interviewed stressed the need for CASs to work together to increase reputation of child welfare across the province, "I don't think that the strategy on how you can address that is an individual one. It has to be a coordinated response." That each agency has limited financial flexibility for public relations campaigns heightens the need for pooling resources with other CASs. The Ministry expects financial resources directed towards doing "what's right for kids and to invest that money into frontline work"

Communications directors pointed to the "I am your children's aid" campaign as an example of what can be accomplished by working together. One said that in their career, that campaign was "the one time we had a really strong shared message." As a collective, CASs engaged with a marketing firm to develop the campaign. The firm's research indicated that

> What we had to do is bring the Children's Aid Society out from the marginalized into the mainstream. When people think of child welfare, they think, well, it's not me. I don't care.

I don't, I don't abuse my kids. My next neighbor doesn't abuse their kids. Or, I hear it happens, but I don't want to know about it.

The premise behind the campaign was that children who have experienced abuse or have been in care are no different from anyone else. “They're your doctors, they're your lawyers, they're your air cadets. They're regular people. They just had to overcome potentially a lot more than you.” Messaging was shared on billboards, movie theatre ads, radio ads and various other tactics. With required financial contributions from each CAS in Ontario, the campaign “was beginning to shift the needle. Unfortunately, the money eventually runs out.”

Developing partnerships with community partners is an effective, lower cost way of improving service and dispelling myths about child welfare. One communications director provided the example of developing a partnership with a group that supports newcomer families. They noted that newcomers have a significant fear of child welfare agencies taking their children and were advised by others to avoid the CAS at all costs. The CAS provided the community group with space within its offices so newcomers could have positive experiences within the context of a CAS and for them to become more familiar with the supports offered to help families. This has helped reduce fear and “because of that, they’re our champions now because they understand what we do and that we can help.”

From the perspective of one executive director, public relations is “the enabler” that creates alignment in an organization. They noted that when the organization understands and is aligned with its mission, vision, and values, frontline service is able to do the on-the-ground relationship building with the public that supports positive reputation. However, it has to be an integrated approach,

> How is your communications person involved in decision-making in the organization? Are they in the places they need to be to support the service work? If they're just writing and never at a senior team meeting to understand the challenges, can they be prepared in the way they need to be prepared? And can you be prepared as a senior leader as well? I would say, in my experience, no.

Another executive director concurred, saying it's a question of where the public relations function is situated within the organization. They stressed the importance of public relations being involved in everything the organization does. "You can't wait to engage communications after decisions are made. And when it does happen after, things haven't gone well."

When they are involved early on in organizational processes, communications directors can ensure the CAS's "philosophy and principles" are baked into each initiative. One director said they act as a "disruptor" within the organization. "When something comes, I ask 'why' all the time. It does not make me popular at all." The director feels that the public relations function "sees things from a different perspective." This perspective enables the director to ask probing questions to identify core issues such as what strategic goals the project satisfies, who needs to be engaged, who needs to be informed, and in which way? By ensuring the work is aligned with organizational goals, the public relations function adds value by helping "reputation continue to get better because you stick to your word."

Discussion

Survey responses confirm the contention of Zugazaga et al. (2012) that the majority of the public does not intersect directly with child welfare. Sixty-five percent of respondents (n=81) have not been involved with a society in any way (either as a client, donor, or employee). That 34% (n=42) have had some interaction with a CAS may be high considering the researcher's

employment in child welfare and social network that includes employees and volunteers with CASs.

Despite Blake et al.'s (2013) view that child welfare is often an island unto itself with few allies, survey results suggest there is strong support amongst the citizens in Ontario for the work of Children's Aid Societies. With a mean response of 4.41 on a five-point scale, survey respondents strongly believe that CASs perform an important function in society. Similarly, respondents felt that supporting the work of CASs was a good use of taxpayer dollars (mean response of 4.22 on a five-point scale). This runs counter to one interview subject who said, "we're just convinced that everyone outside our walls hates the Children's Aid Society."

Although agencies often "serve involuntary clients" (Ellett et al., 2007, p. 265) and have been branded with derogatory monikers such as "baby snatchers" (Zugazaga et al., 2012, p. 623), survey results do not find that the authority these agencies wield to be problematic. In fact, survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that it can be in the best interests of the child to be removed from the home if they are experiencing abuse or neglect (Mean response of 4.58 on a five-point scale). If anything, survey respondents felt there was "too much emphasis on keeping families together and not on the best interests of the child." However, further research is needed to confirm these findings amongst the populations most likely to receive chid protection services from a CAS. Specifically, the in-depth interviews conducted with professionals suggest that immigrants and new Canadians are very fearful of Children's Aid Societies. As noted earlier, the perspectives of Indigenous peoples require separate research to understand their perspectives of these agencies given the trauma associated with their interactions with child welfare in Canada.

While the public is generally supportive of the work of Children's Aid Societies in concept, they have a decidedly less favourable opinion of how well these agencies perform in

reality. When asked whether they believed societies do a good job of protecting children from harm, the mean response fell to 3.1 on a five-point scale. Mean responses for questions of fairness and whether agencies use their authority appropriately were 3.29 and 3.28 respectively. These decidedly less positive perceptions of performance explain respondents middling evaluation of CASs versus their supportive view of the concept of child welfare work. One respondent summed up their feelings by saying CASs are "an amazing use of tax dollars." However, they tempered their support by adding, "unfortunately, it's really all about the workers" who are often overworked and unable to provide adequate standards of care.

Luoma-aho and Canel (2016) concluded that, while people tend to be critical of the public sector as a whole, they generally rate individual organizations more favourably. The survey tested this assertion by asking questions about respondents' overall perceptions of child welfare as well as their perceptions of their local Children's Aid Society. Generally, local societies enjoy a strong level of legitimacy. When asked if they would feel comfortable making a report to their local society if they felt a child needed help, 74% of respondents (n=92) either agreed or strongly agreed that they would. This resulted in a mean response of 4.1 on a five-point scale. Similarly, 53% of respondents (n=66) said they would recommend the services of their local society to anyone interested in fostering or adoption. This resulted in a mean response of 3.81 on a five-point scale.

Despite these results, the survey confirms that local CASs struggle with achieving a positive reputation in the community. This is consistent with Kampen et al. (2006) who said that public sector reputations may suffer despite the quality of their service. When asked whether they had heard good things about their local CAS, 28% (n=35) of respondents disagreed, resulting in a mean score of 2.99 on a five-point scale. When presented with the statement, "I

believe my local Children's Aid Society has a positive reputation in the community," 33% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, resulting in a mean score of 3.12 on a five-point scale. This disconnect between reputation and respondents' approval of their work may be attributed to the nature of their work. This aligns with Waerass and Bykjeflot, (2012) who said public sector organizations are "chronically depressive" (p. 196) because they deal with serious social issues unlikely to be resolved.

CASs cannot afford to ignore reputation, as survey respondents confirm that their local society's reputation will determine whether they support the agency. Sixty-four percent of respondents (n=80, mean response of 3.77 on a five-point scale) said the decision whether to donate, volunteer, or seek employment with the agency would be dependent on the reputation of the CAS. This confirms Fombrun and van Riel's (2004) belief that reputation has a direct impact on behaviour. However, more research is needed to identify how strong their reputation needs to be to encourage people to engage. Luoma-aho (2007) suggests that a neutral reputation may be preferable for public sector organizations since it requires less maintenance. While a neutral reputation may be easier to maintain, it is unclear whether it is sufficient to attract donors and top employees.

When examining the drivers of reputation in child welfare, it is clear that people's direct interactions with the CAS are paramount in forming their perceptions. Survey respondents were asked to evaluate a number of statements that influence their opinions of Children's Aid Societies. When presented with the statement, "My own personal experience with Children's Aid," 70% of respondents (n=77) agreed or strongly agreed that would be a key factor in influencing their opinion. This represents a mean score of 4.17 on a five-point scale.

That personal experience is rated so highly is unsurprising. Luoma-aho (2008) suggests public sector organizations not focus on reputation directly, but on the daily practices that eventually shape reputation. This aligns with the views of communications directors interviewed. One noted that there "is more value and truth" in focusing on service rather than enhanced communications. Another said that people's experience with the services offered will trump any marketing messages they receive. One executive director summed it up by stating, "How the public feels about us equates to their confidence that we will do a good job."

Next to service is word of mouth. Given that few members of the public actually interact with a CAS, what they hear from people they trust is highly important in forming perceptions. Of all the groups they listen to, survey respondents said that what current or former clients had to say was the most influential in forming their opinions. Seventy-eight percent (n=97) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, resulting in a mean score of 4.19 on a five-point scale. Following clients, people are influenced by what current or former employees have to say (mean response of 3.92 on a five-point scale) and what their friends say (mean response of 3.8 on a five-point scale). Sweeney et al. (2014) notes that word of mouth is especially important in a service context, such as child welfare, because services are intangible.

Unfortunately, for Children's Aid Societies, negative word of mouth tends to be more prevalent. One executive director said that people tend to recall things they've "heard about that are kind of upsetting or salacious." This aligns with Sweeney et al. (2014) who wrote that negative messages tend to contain richer contents and are often "powerfully conveyed" (p. 341). One frontline service worker noted that negative word of mouth also tends to compound, "you have somebody with a bad experience that throws it out there and then people are like, 'oh yeah, they did this to me too' or that we were mean, or overreacted in some way." As noted earlier, the

best defence against negative word of mouth is to ensure to the best of your ability that people have a good experience when they interact with the CAS.

Ensuring a good experience for clients depends on the orientation of the relationship. The ideal state would see both parties working together to keep children safe and create the conditions for them to thrive. Hung (2005) would refer to this as a covenantal relationship, characterized by both sides working collaboratively towards a common goal. This is the direction child welfare is moving towards, with less focus on traditional investigative work and more emphasis on "family centered child protection work" (Buckley et al., 2011, p. 101). Further evidence of this shift is found in the Ontario Government's (n.d.) Child Welfare Redesign strategy, which focuses on services to enhance family wellbeing.

Survey respondents identified four key factors that would determine their satisfaction with their relationship with the CAS. The four factors are the ability to provide input in the process, whether the agency keeps its promises, whether the organization makes decisions based on evidence, and how the worker treats them. Respondents identified the use of evidence in the decision-making process and their personal interactions with the worker at the two most important factors determining their satisfaction with the relationship.

Frontline service workers believe that relationships need to be respectful. Showing respect means being transparent about why they were called to someone's home. One worker said, "I'm very honest with my clients that this is the reason I'm here. This is what we need to do to get rid of me." Another worker explained that transparency means being able to "pull back the curtain" and tell clients why they were called to the home and thoroughly detailing the process they need to follow. The worker went on to say it is important to approach the situation with a mindset of "figuring it out together."

It is important for clients to feel like decisions are not made arbitrarily. The use of evidence in decision-making is so critical that Lee and Van Ryzin (2019) included it as one of their cornerstone measurements in their Bureaucratic Reputation Scale to evaluate public sector organizations. While some may believe that the CAS just takes children quickly, one worker noted that those people "don't understand there is a significant process behind those decisions" and that they may spend months gathering the appropriate evidence to make a decision. Workers said they make a point of sharing the evidence they have with the client so there is no mystery behind their decisions.

Reputation and relationships are built by consistently delivering on promises (Murray & White, 2005). One worker said delivering on promises includes those big and small, "I think it's communication. It's getting back to them. When they phone us, phone back." One executive director said it's ensuring that people know their rights when they're involved in a CAS investigation and ensuring those rights are respected throughout the process.

Clients involved with a CAS want to feel like they have a say in the process, which could ultimately determine whether their children continue to reside with them or not. Hon and Grunig (1999) refer to this as control mutuality, which is the ability each party has to influence the other. They note that when each party's needs and expectations are understood, the two sides "are less likely to behave in ways that have negative consequences on the interests of the other (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 10). Supporting the notion of mutuality, one frontline service worker acknowledged they have "the responsibility to protect, but we have to also respect that the client has some power over their own lives." Another worker said it is important to assure clients that, "We want to hear your side of it. We're not going to steamroll you."

Generally, Fombrun and van Riel (2007) found that the public is more likely to have a positive opinion of well-known organizations. However, Luoma-aho (2008) argues that this does not hold true for certain public sector organizations. The mission of those public sector organizations can be problematic, and Kampen et al. (2006) used tax agencies as an example. They said the public is unlikely to hold tax agencies in high regard because they do not enjoy paying taxes (Kampen et al., 2006).

Although those interviewed believe that the authority the CAS wields can complicate how the public perceives them, survey respondents indicated a desire to learn more about child welfare. When asked how they learn about their local CAS, 55% (n=69) of respondents said they rarely heard anything about their local agency. Indicating a desire to learn more, 63% (n=79) of respondents said the CAS should seek a higher profile in the community. Conversely, only 5% (n=6) of respondents said they had no desire to know anything about their local CAS.

There was 100% agreement amongst the executive directors, communications directors, and frontline service workers interviewed that the public does not have in-depth knowledge about the work of Children's Aid Societies. One executive director said people mainly have a "high level, not too deep understanding of the work." Another executive director said child welfare is "mysterious" to people.

Not having a higher visibility is problematic as it allows others to shape the narrative and ultimately, the CAS' reputation. One executive director said people's impressions of child welfare are likely from what they've seen in the media, "and whatever's in the media is an extreme of really horrific cases." Sustained negative media coverage contributes to "a shared sense of low morale, diminished job satisfaction, low commitment to the organization" (Chenot, 2011, p. 175). One communications director noted that demoralized staff are less likely to

advocate for the CAS when in the community. This is particularly problematic since 74% (n=92) of survey respondents said that what employees have to say about the agency has a significant impact on their perception of the CAS.

Strategies to enhance community awareness include coordinated campaigns, proactive media relations, and community engagement. Communications directors pointed to the previous "I am Your Children's Aid" campaign as highly effective in improving reputation. The campaign aimed to demonstrate to the community that children in care are no different than anyone else. One communications director explained it featured former kids in care "saying, hi, I'm Nick. I am an electrician and oh, by the way, I'm also a former youth in care. It was like putting a face to a Children's Aid Society." This aligns with Brunning et al.'s (2004) view that organizations should find ways to personalize themselves to their publics.

Although communications directors see their organizations as "easy targets" for media, there is a recognition that media does play an important role in shaping public opinion and, ultimately, the reputation of the CAS. While some of the work involves "mitigating risk" and trying to introduce positive messaging, there is room for more proactive efforts to see that the organization gets credit for the good work it does. One executive director said it was in their best interest to "to publish stories, to write op-eds, to write letters to the editor. I think that would be good because it might help with the misunderstanding of our work and it might give us a more friendly public." Gioia et al. (2000) would agree with this approach, noting that increased communication with media is necessary to highlight the socially desirable aspects of the CAS' work.

Community engagement is an excellent way to position the agency as a good corporate citizen. Engagement can include agency representatives sitting on boards or committees, or by

sponsoring or partnering with other local community service providers. Engagement also means more visible things like toy drives for children, participating in events and local celebrations. One frontline service worker said the agency was well received when it participated in the area's Santa Claus parade, "the toy mobile would be there, our logo was there and we would be handing out packages trying to recruit foster parents." Being involved with the community is an important avenue to develop relationships and Grunig and Hung-Baesecke (2015) contend that reputation follows relationships.

The Child Welfare Reputation Index

This study documented various methods developed by scholars to measure and evaluate reputation. While several of these methods were designed to test the reputation of public sector organizations, child welfare is uniquely complex (Ellett et al., 2007). To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to specifically examine reputation in this sector of the public service.

This index was developed based on the convergence of the evidence found in existing literature, interviews conducted with professionals in the field, and the expectations of the public expressed in a survey. The index measures reputation according to five key factors including

- Awareness
- Transparency
- Trust
- Service
- Compassion

While Fombrun and van Riel (2004) identified emotional attachment as the primary determinant in the development of an organization's reputation, the Index does not specifically

measure this factor. Literature and in-depth interviews with professionals working in child welfare revealed that the authority these agencies hold is a barrier to likeability. One ED interviewed also said that likeability wasn't as important as understanding. Rather, people determine the extent to which they appreciate these agencies based on how they are treated. This study suggests that citizens expect to have their unique situations understood, to have a voice in processes involving their families, and because of the stigma of being involved with child welfare, people expect to be treated with dignity and respect. For these reasons, the researcher believes it is most appropriate to measure the organization's compassion rather than the degree to which people form emotional bonds with the agency. Compassion connotes an understanding of people's feelings and a desire to alleviate their stresses and/or pain (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

The index includes three questions designed to test public perceptions of each category. Each question is evaluated on a five-point scale where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree. With 15 total questions, there is a maximum of 75 points. The total score should be divided by the maximum amount of points to determine a percentage representing the organization's reputation.

Aligning with Walker's (2010) definition that reputation is "issue specific" (p. 370) the index should be used to evaluate specific areas of the organization and not the organization's reputation as a whole. For example, the index could be used to evaluate the organization's reputation for child protection services. Adoption services would need to be evaluated separately.

Table 9
Child Welfare Reputation Index

Factor	Statements to be evaluated on a five-point scale where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree
Awareness	I understand the organization's goals and objectives.
	I hear positive things about the organization's service.
	I would recommend the services of this organization to others.
Transparency	The organization shares information freely.

	I understand the process the organization follows and my rights.
	Communication with staff is regular and ongoing.
Trust	The organization adheres to high ethical standards.
	I believe what the organization says.
	I am willing to work collaboratively with the organization.
Service	The organization makes decisions based on evidence.
	The organization keeps its promises.
	I believe the organization has the ability and desire help people like me.
Compassion	The organization treats me with dignity and respect.
	I have a voice in the organization's process and am able to influence decisions.
	The organization takes time to research and fully understand my needs.

Recommendations for Public Relations Professionals

By documenting that child welfare is relatively unknown to the general public, this study validates the need for public relations professionals to demystify the sector and dispel myths. By making the goals and processes of child welfare more known, public relations professionals can assist frontline service workers by alleviating people's fear of Children's Aid Societies. By reducing the public's fear over the potential loss of their children, frontline service workers may be able to work with families at earlier junctions to secure the safety of children and ensure that family units are strong and successful.

With the Ontario Government's Child Welfare Redesign strategy, it is necessary for Children's Aid Societies to place increased emphasis on communicating their service philosophy. With a mean response of 4.1 on a five-point scale, it is clear that survey respondents feel comfortable contacting a CAS for child protection concerns. However, respondents felt less confident about recommending the services of a CAS to provide proactive support to a family. Fifty-one percent (n=64) of respondents said they would recommend the services of a CAS to families needing assistance for issues that may impact their children, such as poverty, mental

health, or parenting skills. The mean response was 3.43 on a five-point scale. The disparity in results points to the need for additional communication to raise community awareness of the proactive support services provided.

This represents a significant opportunity and requires a dedicated focus from public relations professionals. Tactics outlined in this study include proactive media outreach, community engagement, and targeted campaigns to promote the services of the CAS. Based on the recommendations of communications directors in the sector, professionals should look for opportunities to collaborate with other CAS' to pool resources and present unified messaging to engage the public. Proper research is key to understanding the perspectives of the public and to develop appropriate messaging.

Further Research

Further research is needed to validate the Child Welfare Reputation Index proposed in this study. Understanding that reputation is issue specific, it will be beneficial to test the reliability of the index against the perceptions of various citizens, including clients, donors, politicians, and the general public. Testing content validity will confirm whether the index measures the most relevant aspects of reputation in child welfare or whether adjustments are required. In particular, further research is needed with members of diverse communities.

Additional research would also be helpful to determine whether the index is an appropriate measurement tool for use by Indigenous Child Wellbeing Agencies. Given traumatic interactions with the child welfare system, such as the Sixties Scoop, Indigenous peoples have a unique perspective on child welfare. Additional research would confirm if the index is sufficient to adequately understand the perspectives of the Indigenous community.

Limitations

The researcher is employed within the child welfare sector at a CAS. While efforts were made to effort was made to avoid bias, the researcher's employment with the organization has the potential to affect the researcher's perspective and interpretation of data. The researcher worked with his Capstone Advisor to review the interview and survey questions to ensure that data collection procedures were appropriate. The study also received clearance from McMaster University's Research Ethics Board.

The survey was conducted with a nonprobability sample (Stacks, 2011). This means results are not generalizable to the overall population in Ontario. Participants were recruited through various methods, including the researcher's personal contacts, social media, and snowballing, whereby the researcher's personal contacts shared the survey with their networks. It is not possible to discern the geographic location of participants or their socioeconomic status. For the study to be truly representative, data would need to be collected from all areas of Ontario and from families of all different backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses.

Only 6% of responses came from members of visible minority communities. Given the rich diversity of people with different abilities, orientations, ethnic backgrounds, and faiths in Ontario, further research is required to understand the degree to which these communities view child welfare differently than the dominant hegemony.

Despite the limitations, results of this study provide important insight into how citizens view and make judgements about Children's Aid Societies within the province of Ontario. Results provide a preliminary window into how CAS' can focus their efforts to cultivate improved reputation amongst clients and citizens. Further research can refine these efforts and result in a fully reliable roadmap for CAS' to gain and hold the support of their communities.

Conclusion

Children's Aid Societies in Ontario have a complicated relationship with citizens. On one hand, the public is supportive of the concept of these agencies. People believe that children need to be kept safe and their wellbeing protected. On the other hand, people who have direct contact with these agencies may fear their authority and resent that they have the ability to remove their children. This range of perceptions creates an unstable environment for CASs to establish positive reputation.

Although they have the force of law behind them and are less subject to market conditions, public sector agencies cannot afford to ignore the benefits associated with positive reputation. Highly regarded organizations are better protected from interference from politicians, are more resilient in crisis situations, and are better positioned to compete for top talent (Kuoppakangas et al., 2019).

While there is a great deal of academic literature concerned with the social work practices of child welfare, research on reputation management in this highly specialized sector is limited. Research, where it exists, is mainly focused on managing reputation relative to media coverage and how to minimize the negative impact of unfavourable news coverage. However, media coverage is but one input that citizens consider when assessing these organizations.

One executive director compares the work of Children's Aid Societies to healthcare. By the time a patient needs treatment in the emergency room, the situation has deteriorated significantly, whereas earlier intervention may have prevented the crisis. For families involved with a CAS, early intervention can act as preventative medicine to keep families strong and prevent situations that result in children being removed from their home.

As illustrated in the analogy above, there are proactive measures that CAS' can take to cultivate positive reputation and enjoy the benefits that come along with it. Conversely, ignoring reputation creates vulnerability and lessens the ability of the organization to weather a crisis. By implementing the Child Welfare Reputation Index proposed in this study, agencies can identify areas of strength and areas of improvement relative to their reputation and enact strategies to better relate to citizens. By actively seeking to manage reputation, CASs can increase organizational effectiveness and deliver societal benefits by helping children grow up in healthy environments with every opportunity to reach their full potential.

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Appendix A

In-depth Interview Questions

1. Generally, what do you think people would say about your organization if it came up in conversation?

2. Do you think the majority of people in your community hold these opinions about your organization? How can you tell?

3. Your organization provides a mandated service and clients may not have a choice but to cooperate with your organization. How do you think that affects your agency's reputation?

4. How does the public's opinion about your organization (or child welfare in general) impact your work as a CEO/Communications professional/Frontline Service Worker? Does it make your work easier or more difficult? In what ways?

5. What do you believe is the number one thing that influences the way the public feels about your organization? What is the number one thing that influences the way your clients feel about your organization?

6. *If the answers are different:* Why do you believe there is a difference between your two answers?

7. What is the most impactful thing you can do as CEO/Communications professional/Frontline Service Worker to influence the way clients/the public feel about your organization?

8. What are some of the other things you can do in your role to influence public opinion of your organization?

9. Do you believe your organization should seek a higher profile within the community? Why or why not?

10. Is there something important that I did not ask you about? Is there anything else you think I need to know about your Children's Aid Society?

Appendix B

Online Survey Questions

Are you a member of a visible minority group?

- Yes
- No

Children's Aid Societies provide child protection services and are governed by the Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017.

In Ontario Children's Aid Societies are responsible for:

- ✓ investigating reports of abuse or neglect of children under 18 and where necessary, taking steps to protect them
- ✓ looking after children under their care or supervision
- ✓ counselling and supporting families
- ✓ Adoption, kinship, and fostering services

The following set of questions seek to understand your overall perceptions of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. Please note, some Children's Aid Societies may be known as Family and Children's Services.

Have you ever been involved with a Children's Aid Society in Ontario?

Please note that involvement may include:

- ✓ your current or previous employment with a society
- ✓ your current or previous volunteer experience with a society
- ✓ If you have ever donated to a Children's Aid Society.

- ✓ If you (or a close family member) have ever been a client of a Children's Aid Society in Ontario (e.g. – you have adopted or fostered through a CAS, or received child protection services)
- Yes, I have had some involvement with a Children's Aid Society.
- No, I have never been involved.

On a scale of 1 to 3, where 1 means not knowledgeable at all and 3 means highly knowledgeable, please indicate your level of knowledge about with Children's Aid Societies in Ontario.

1 – Not knowledgeable at all

2 - Somewhat knowledgeable

3 – Very knowledgeable

Don't know/Prefer not to answer

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree, please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

In general, I have a positive opinion of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

Children's Aid Societies perform an important function in society.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

Supporting the work of Children's Aid Societies is a good use of taxpayer dollars.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

Children's Aid Societies in Ontario do a good job of protecting children from abuse and/or neglect

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don’t know/prefer not to answer

Children’s Aid Societies in Ontario use their authority appropriately.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don’t know/prefer not to answer

Children’s Aid Societies in Ontario treat people fairly.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don’t know/prefer not to answer

I believe Children’s Aid Societies do their best to provide support and keep families together.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don’t know/prefer not to answer

Sometimes, it is in the best interest of the child to be removed from the home if they are experiencing abuse and/or neglect.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don’t know/prefer not to answer

The following set of questions seek to understand your perceptions of your local Children’s Aid Society in your community. Please note, some Children’s Aid Societies may also be known as Family and Children’s Services.

Please tell us a few words that come to mind when you think of your local Children’s Aid Society.

Open text answer

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree, please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements

I trust my local Children’s Aid Society

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

I believe my local Children's Aid Society treats people like me fairly.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

I have heard good things about my local Children's Aid Society.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

I have heard negative things about my local Children's Aid Society.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

I would recommend the services of my local Children's Aid Society to anyone interested in fostering or adoption.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

I would recommend the services of my local Children's Aid Society to a family that may need assistance with parenting, poverty, mental health, or homelessness.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don’t know/prefer not to answer

My local Children’s Aid Society should seek a higher profile in my community.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don’t know/prefer not to answer

I believe my local Children’s Aid Society has a positive reputation in the community.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don’t know/prefer not to answer

The society’s reputation determines whether I would consider donating, becoming a volunteer, or seeking employment with the organization.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neither Agree or Disagree

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Don't know/prefer not to answer

Please rank each of the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5, where one means most important and 5 means least important.

What are the factors most likely to influence your opinion of your local Children's Aid Society?

- Media coverage about my local Children's Aid Society
- My own personal experience with Children's Aid
- My personal feelings about the mission and purpose of the Children's Aid Society
- What my friends and acquaintances say about my local Children's Aid Society
- What I see about the Children's Aid Society on social media
- Online reviews
- What current or past employees say about the Children's Aid Society
- What the union representing workers says about the Children's Aid Society
- What current or former clients of the Children's Aid Society say
- Media coverage about other Children's Aid Societies or child welfare in general
- Information from the local Children's Aid Society (website, brochure, newsletter etc.)
- Statements from the Ontario Government about the Children's Aid Society or child welfare in general
- Other: _____
- Don't know/Prefer not to answer

How do you learn about your local Children's Aid Society?

Please click all that apply.

- Traditional media (newspapers, radio, or television)
- Online news websites
- The Children's Aid Society's webpage
- The Children's Aid Society's social media accounts (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.)
- Social media posts by others about your local Children's Aid Society
- Children's Aid Society newsletter
- Speaking with Children's Aid Society employees
- Speaking with Children's Aid Society volunteers
- Speaking with those who have adopted or fostered through a local Children's Aid Society
- Speaking with current or former clients of my local Children's Aid Society
- Information shared by my friends/colleagues about my local Children's Aid Society
- Information from the Ontario Government or Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
- Other _____
- I rarely hear anything about my local Children's Aid Society
- I am employed or volunteer with my local society
- Prefer not to answer

What is your most preferred method to learn about your local Children's Aid Society? Please choose one.

- Traditional media (newspapers, radio, or television)
- Online news websites
- The Children's Aid Society's webpage
- The Children's Aid Society's social media accounts (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.)
- Social media posts by others about your local Children's Aid Society
- Children's Aid Society newsletter
- Speaking with Children's Aid Society employees
- Speaking with Children's Aid Society volunteers
- Speaking with those who have adopted or fostered through your local Children's Aid Society
- Speaking with current or former clients of my local Children's Aid Society
- Information shared by my friends/colleagues about my local Children's Aid Society
- Information from the Ontario Government or Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
- Other
- I do not wish to know anything about my local Children's Aid Society
- Prefer not to answer

If you have been/ever become a client of a Children's Aid Society, for either fostering, adoption or child protection services, what are the factors that would determine your satisfaction with the

society? Please identify your top three factors items in order of importance. 1 represents the item most important to you.

- The society is transparent in sharing information about my case
- How the worker treats me
- The worker's qualifications
- The worker/society keeps promises and follows through on commitments
- The society makes decisions based on evidence
- My ability to provide input, feedback, and influence the process
- The society's ethical standards
- The speed and efficiency of service
- Whether the society follows its policies, as well as government rules and regulations
- The society's reputation
- Don't know/Prefer not to answer

Thank you for your participation in this study. It is greatly appreciated!

Do you have any final thoughts you would like to add about the study or Children's Aid in Ontario?

Open text answer