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Investigating the impact of outsourcing children social services on the workforce: A three-year matched-control evaluation of social work practice in England[1]

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Abstract:

This article discusses the workforce implications of recent government policy direction in England to move some statutory social work responsibilities from the usually larger more complex organizational structure of local authorities to independent organisations. Such outsourcing of social services is not a new phenomenon in England, however, it has been gaining further pace over the last decade. This paper discusses findings from an evaluation of five social work practices (SWPs), independent or semi-independent of local government, which were established in 2009 with an intention to improve outcomes for looked after children as well as for practitioners supporting them. The policy aspirations were to develop smaller social worker-led organizations, independent of local authorities, that were envisaged to improve the morale and retention of children's social workers, reduce bureaucracy, and facilitate professional decision making. The model hypothesized that better outcomes for children and young people would result through greater consistency and improved stability of care for children in out-of-home care and care leavers, which may be

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facilitated by this new model of working. Based on a three-year matched case control evaluation that took place from the onset of the SWP pilots in 2009 to 2012, we discuss the interdependence of public and private sectors in responding to a top-down policy aspiration. In relation to specific implications for practitioners, we highlight the importance of key work practices, which are not directly related to the outsourcing model, in influencing improved practitioners' outcomes. We conclude by discussing the practical implications of the public-private shift in children's service provision within the experience of SWPs, particularly in relation to their impact on the workforce.

BACKGROUND

Across northern Europe, systems of public welfare were established or developed following the Second World War (WWII). In England a series of 'Poor Laws' from the late 16th century gave Boards of Poor Law Guardians the powers to provide for children of parents deemed 'unfit'. Following the Curtis report in 1946 and other policy/legal changes, the Children and Young Persons Act (1969) introduced more compulsory measures bringing the concepts of 'care and control' providing the state with a clear duty and power to care for the most vulnerable children and young people. Further developments including the Children Act (1978) gave local authorities a professional role in providing services to extended groups of children.

Outsourcing – from the public sector to private and not-for-profit organisations - of children's services, alongside other public sector services, grew in prominence during the period 1979-1997 when Conservative governments were in power – specifically during Mrs Thatcher's prime ministership. However, this policy continued, and formed a key feature of the New Labour government policy as well as the current Coalition Government.

Debate around privatization of public services has revolved around the construction of quasi-markets of social care, the impact of audit and new managerial culture of organization and service delivery thereby shifting concerns about the 'sale of public services' to the broader implications and consideration of the delivery of public services by private for-profit or other organisations (Grimshaw, Vincent and Willmott, 2002). The initial argument around outsourcing public services was associated with the deteriorating macro-economic conditions since early 1970s, and the perceived inability of the state to regulate the economy, leading to the 'fiscal crisis of the state' (O'Connor, 1973). O'Connor specifically argued that a

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competitive private sector has a direct relationship with workers' exploitation when compared to the state sector, which does not produce surplus value. Such analysis leads to certain expectations when a non-marketed commodity, such as children services, is outsourced to the private competitive market in relation to the potential impact on the workforce, which is the focus of this paper. In the current analysis we are particularly interested in examining whether the new models of outsourcing SWPs had significantly influenced practitioners' working dynamics and the quality of their work when compared to those remaining within the statutory sector. Previous analysis has examined the impact of outsourcing on practitioners' stress and burnout levels, job insecurity and job satisfactions (Hussein et al., 2014).

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES

The intention to pilot Social Work Practices (SWP) with looked after children (LAC) emerged in a government consultative Green Paper 'Care Matters: Time to deliver for children in care' (Department of Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2006) produced by the New Labour government. The policy aspirations were expressed as an intention to develop smaller social worker-led organizations, independent of local authorities. These were envisaged as improving the working conditions and subsequently retention of children's social workers, reducing bureaucracy, and facilitating professional decision-making. The pilots' aspirations went beyond workforce outcomes and included improving outcomes for looked after children, their parents and carers. The model hypothesized that better outcomes for children and young people would result through greater consistency and improved stability of care which might be facilitated by this new model of working (Le Grand, 2007). The development of SWPs was encouraged by those originating the idea in the New Labour government and then subsequently in the Coalition government.

Five social work practice (SWP) pilots started in England between December 2009 and May 2010. These independent organisations were commissioned by local authorities to provide services for looked after children and care leavers (contract arrangements were different in each locality). The pilots were specifically introduced to discover whether smaller social work-led organisations independent of local authorities could improve the morale and retention of social workers and bring decision making closer to front-line practice. These changes were expected to deliver increased consistency and stability of care for looked after children and care leavers. The pilots differed substantially in their organizational forms and their origins and in the numbers and profiles of looked after children (LAC) and young people

they supported. None of the pilots 'took over' child protection functions, such functions remained the responsibility of the host local authorities. They ranged from an in-house SWP, remaining with the local authority, but as a discrete unit, to a professional practice run as a social enterprise established by a group of social work practitioners. A sixth pilot failed to start due to a number of factors, prime among them an Ofsted inspection report of the local authority recommending it to focus on its core functions. Towards the end of the evaluation (May 2012), three pilots looked set to continue, at least when their contracts with the local authorities were due for renewal.

EVALUATION DESIGN

The evaluation took place from December 2009 to March 2012 and employed a matched control design with integral process evaluation. A cohort study approach allowed us to examine the relationship between a postulated 'cause', in this case the organizational change of introducing social work pilots, and the 'effect', achieving some or all of desired outcomes, over a period of time. The comparison group allowed a rigorous programme evaluation by providing an estimate of the desired effect without the exposure to the new work model (Schlesselman, 1982; Howell & Yemane, 2006).

A mixed methods approach was adopted allowing quantitative and qualitative data to complement and enhance one another, particularly to take account of practitioners' and other stakeholders' own perception of change (Shaw and Faulkner, 2006). The evaluation captured a range of perspectives including the views of children and young people, families, carers, local authority social workers and SWP staff, as well as professionals working in other agencies (for full details see Stanley et al., 2012a). Ethical approval for the evaluation was provided by the Institute of Education's Research Ethics Committee and from research governance committees in participating local authorities.

The evaluation had the following key aims: 1- analyse the advantages and disadvantages of the overall Social Work Practice concept, and the specific benefits (or otherwise) of the different models employed and any lessons for alternate models; 2- identify the impact of SWP pilots on children, their carers and their families; 3- discover the impact of the SWP model on the children's social care workforce; 4- identify the impact of SWP pilots on statutory child care social work in the host local authorities and on the work of other agencies. Other articles reported on the investigation of different aspects including: impact on

practitioners' relationships with LAC (Ridley et al., 2013); evaluating the impact on job-control, burnout and job satisfaction of SWP practitioners (Hussein et al., 2014); LAC and their parents' perspectives on contact (Larkins et al., 2013); early evidence on the process of establishing the SWPs (Stanley et al., 2012b); foster carers and family contact (Austerberry et al., 2013); and the process of privatisation in children care (Stanley et al., 2013).

DATA AND METHODS

A wide range of data were collected as part of the evaluation; for the current analysis we draw on data collected through surveys of children and family social care practitioners at two time points (prior to SWP start-up and 12 months after their onset). The survey was piloted and sent electronically to all staff identified by local authorities as working with children and families in the six original pilot local authorities (referred to as 'host' local authorities) and six comparison authorities in 2009-10 prior to start-up of the pilots (hereafter referred to as T1). Data were collected from staff in the host and comparison authorities at T1, then from staff in the pilot SWPs, and host and comparison authorities a year later (hereafter referred to as T2), 12 months after the pilots' onset. The survey was designed and managed using the 'Survey Monkey' online tool. Data were then imported and analyzed using R software version 2.1 (R Development Core Team, 2007). T1 survey achieved a highly creditable 50 per cent response rate (n=1101 responses). It was repeated in 2011 (T2) when pilot staff also participated in the survey with a response rate of 43 per cent (n=949 responses).

The survey aimed to explore changes across time and between groups in relation to key workforce outcomes. One aim was to measure and examine changes in job control-demand model (Karasek, 1979), this analysis is reported in details elsewhere (Hussein et al., 2014). The current analysis focused on practitioners' expectations of the new models of working, changes experienced in different elements in their day-to-day job such as time expenditure and perceived workload as well as their perceived impact on their quality of work with looked after children, their carers and parents.

FINDINGS

Expectations of SWPs

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a 4-point Likert scale, including a 'not sure' option, on 5 statements relating to some of the anticipated consequences of SWPs, such as continuity of care, enabling staff to work in frontline practice for longer, improving the relationships between staff and other professionals and with carers, as well as reducing the amount of time spent in filling in forms and in meetings (aspects mentioned as indicative of reducing time spent with children, Le Grand 2007). At Time 1, the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed (around 70%) with all potential impacts of SWPs outlined above, except in relation to their potential to reduce the amount of time staff spend on form filling and in meetings. Levels of agreement were close among participants from both pilot and host local authorities at T2. However, notably, the expectations of participants from the comparison sites increased over time, while those among the group from host local authorities tended to decline over time. One of the main differences in expectations between pilot and host authority participants related to 'fewer changes for LAC'; because SWP staff tended to have higher expectations for this (82% vs. a range of 60% to 71%).

Time expenditure

We asked how much time had been spent on different tasks during the past six months (including an option to indicate if a task did not apply). Around a third of participants said that 'direct work with LAC', 'their birth families' and 'foster parents' were not part of their roles. After adjusting for this, Table 1 shows how much time participants felt they spent on each task relative to how much they felt they should be spending.

One main finding relates to the close match in responses from host and comparison groups, indicating a high validity of the measures and the likelihood that time allocations are similar across local authorities in relation to working with LAC/care leavers. Overall, there was considerable agreement that the amount of time spent on direct work with LAC/care leavers was not enough or not nearly enough, while the amount of time spent in completing forms and reports generally, but not always, consumed too much or much too much time. There was also little change over time in both the host local authorities and the comparison sites. Participants from the SWPs were more likely to report spending the 'right amount of time' in direct work with LAC, their birth parents and foster carers. These elements are

examined further below in a model that accounts for different characteristics of participants as well as site (clustering) effects.

Table 1 Distribution of participants' perceived time allocation of different elements of working with LAC/care leavers for host, comparison and pilot sites over time

Time expenditure elements	Host Local Authorities		Comparison Sites		SWP Pilots
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 2
Direct work with LAC					
Not enough	60.78	64.6	62.82	61.33	41.07
Just right	32.99	30.68	32.37	35.94	50.00
Too much	6.23	4.72	4.81	2.73	8.93
N	385	339	312	256	56
Direct work with LAC birth parents					
Not enough	54.78	58.05	50.36	56.64	39.22
Just right	40.45	37.58	45.36	39.38	50.98
Too much	4.78	4.36	4.29	3.98	9.8
N	356	298	280	226	51
Direct work with LAC carers					
Not enough	45.81	48.6	49.69	47.55	35.29
Just right	46.86	44.94	45.96	47.55	52.94
Too much	7.33	6.46	4.35	4.91	11.76
N	382	356	322	265	51
Communicating with other professionals					
Not enough	23.68	23.63	21.34	23.26	20.00
Just right	61.38	62.53	64.78	64.95	67.27
Too much	14.94	13.84	13.88	11.78	12.73
N	435	419	389	331	55
Completing forms					
Not enough	7.3	7.59	4.16	4.83	10.53
Just right	15.45	16.74	13.39	20.17	19.3
Too much	77.25	75.67	82.45	75.00	70.18
N	466	448	433	352	57
Meetings and reviews					
Not enough	7.3	7.59	4.16	4.83	10.53
Just right	15.45	16.74	13.39	20.17	19.3
Too much	77.25	75.67	82.45	75	70.18
N	466	448	433	352	57

A free text option allowed participants to indicate the single aspect of their work with LAC/care leavers that they perceived to be the most positive. The most common theme centred round aspects of direct work and relationship building with young people. This option was available at the two time points of the survey and three main themes were highlighted across time: 1) Direct work with children and young people; 2) Engaging and developing trusting relationships with LAC/care leavers; and 3) Building relationships with LAC/care

leavers, birth parents and foster families and empowering them. Relationships with birth families were more likely than other types of relationships to be described as poor at Time 1.

At Time 2, SWP practitioners reported being better able to build relationships than others. They also considered they spent the right amount of time working directly with LAC; in the free text responses they explained that such direct work was aided by having lower caseloads and more time:

> *'Having a smaller caseload frees me up to work more directly with not only the young person but with foster carers, parents and other professionals to ensure a holistic approach/positive communication.'*
>
> (Practitioner, SWP)

By contrast, a practitioner from a host local authority identified the one thing that they would like to change about their current job:

> *'To have less children on my caseload which would enable me to undertake more effective work with children and parents rather than working in crisis intervention all the time'*.
>
> (Practitioner, Host site)

Host and comparison practitioners also talked positively about the value of having 'consistent relationships' and undertaking direct work with young people and families:

> *'By working with the same young people from age 18 to 21years I have been able to develop good relationships with most of them which means they are more receptive to accept support, advice and information.'*
>
> (Practitioner, Comparison site)

Perceived workloads

The second round of the survey at Time 2 collected information on perceived workload, asking if this had changed over the previous 6 months. There were no significant differences in the perceptions of workload between the two different arms of the study (SWPs v host LAs & comparison LAs), with most reporting that their workload felt 'much too much' or a bit 'too much' for the available time. There was a significant negative

correlation (R_s= -.08; p<0.001) between participants' perceptions that they were spending the 'right amount of time in direct work with LAC' and their perception of their workload as 'much too much' or 'a bit too much' across all sites. Nearly three-quarters of participants who felt they spent the right amount of time with LAC reported that their workload was acceptable or 'too little' compared to 65% among those who felt they either spent too little or too much of their time in direct work with LAC. Such correlation was strongest for the pilot sites (R_s= -.357; p=0.006) and statistically not significant for the comparison sites. Asked if they felt that their workload had changed over the past six months, overall around a third reported their workload had increased, 60% indicated it had stayed the same, while 10% felt it had decreased, however this was not significantly different between pilot, host and comparison sites ($X_4^2 = 7.48; p = 0.113$).

Views on quality of care and relationships

We collected practitioners' views on different statements designed to capture some of the intended effects and consequences of SWPs (as outlined by Le Grand 2007). These included continuity of care provided by the same worker to LAC and their carers and birth parents, providing continuous support through the transition from care to independence, practitioners' availability to offer time when needed, as well as type and quality of relationships with children and their families.

Participants indicated their level of agreement with nine separate statements on a 4-point Likert scale. An option of 'not applicable' was offered for those whose job did not include this specific task. Table 2 details the percentages of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with different statements. Overall, the majority of participants in all sites tended to agree/strongly agree that they worked with the same cases over time; they worked to ensure that LAC stayed in the same placement, and that their relationships with LAC were usually good. There was positive change in participants' views over time in the host and comparison groups. While the variations between comparison and host responses at Time 1 were not significantly different, at Time 2, SWP participants were significantly more likely to agree with the majority of these statements.

Table 2 Percentages of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements relating to nature of their work with looked after children /care leavers by site groups and over time

Elements of quality of care and relationships	Host Local Authorities		Comparison Sites		SWP Pilots
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 2
Work with the same cases over time and maintain close contact with LAC	88.7%	91.4%	85.8%	91%	96.3%
	363	302	295	245	54
Work to ensure that LAC stay in the same placement	94.16%	96.6%	95.08%	94.95%	98.15%
	377	324	325	277	54
Care leavers receive consistent and continuing support through the transition from care to independence	90.65%	89.92%	87.29%	90.52%	98.11%
	278	238	236	211	53
I am usually available or can make time for LAC/care leavers, carers and birth families I work with	75.95%	80.97%	78.39%	80.31%	88.89%
	370	310	310	254	54
The relationships between me and LAC/care leavers I work with are good	94.16%	95.57%	94.82%	96.5%	100%
	377	316	309	257	44
The relationships between me and LAC/care leavers' birth family are good	81.27%	86.6%	80.85%	86.25%	92.45%
	347	291	282	240	53
The relationship between me and LAC's foster carers and/or children's home staff are good	93.37%	96.01%	95.62%	96.64%	92.59%
	377	326	320	268	54
The relationships between me and the staff in other agencies when working with LAC/care leavers are good	92.82%	94.67%	93.25%	92.86%	92.45%
	390	338	326	280	53
I ensure that planning for LAC/care leavers is effective and follow such plans through.	90.43%	91.16%	90.6%	92.05%	94.34%
	376	328	319	264	53

Views on staff autonomy, participation and support

The survey explored practitioners' levels of agreement with different statements exploring staff autonomy, participation in decision-making, and learning and support at work. These were designed to capture anticipated changes consequent to the introduction of SWPs. Perceptions of the involvement of frontline staff in decision-making processes within their organisations were captured using a 4-point Likert scale. The same scale was used to measure perceptions in relation to different aspects of working relationships in their organisations.

Overall, most participants felt that 'frontline staff participate in decision making'; that 'innovative practice is encouraged'; 'mistakes are considered opportunities for learning';

'supervision is a priority' and that they 'feel confident to challenge practice decisions'. On the other hand, very small percentages agreed that 'form filling is kept to a minimum'.

It is worth noting that differences between comparison and host responses were not significant at both time points; however, SWP participants tended to significantly agree more with positive statements. At Time 2, participants indicated their agreement with two further elements: whether 'Team or group discussion of cases happens regularly' and 'staff are supported in making difficult decisions'. With regard to the first statement, 73% of SWP participants agreed or strongly agreed compared with 56% of host and 50% of comparison sites. In relation to the second statement, 98% of the SWP staff agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 80% of host and 82% of comparison practitioners. Our findings from interview data enabled us to consider this area in greater depth. By Year 2, SWP staff were being mostly supervised by a manager or external consultant. Formal peer supervision for social workers operated in only one SWP and had proved too time-consuming to continue in the others. However, interviews confirmed that the informal peer support operating in all SWPs was fostered by the small cohesive teams. All SWP staff reported feeling happy about their professional support in making decisions, valuing its high quality and accessibility. Staff in some sites wanted more clinical supervision as well as case management and, for some, this was obtained from the local authority.

In addition, the survey collected standardised data on staff decision authority and psychological job demand as part of Karasek job content model and measured levels of burnout and job satisfaction. The detailed results of these models are reported elsewhere (Hussein et al 2014); to sum up, the overall results indicate that working in the SWP did not have any significant effect on practitioners' job demand or decision latitude. The results, however, indicated that higher levels of job satisfaction significantly improved decision latitude and reduced psychological job demand among practitioners in all groups. One of the main differences observed among SWP staff was their high level of perceived social support from co-workers and supervisors. Analysis of Maslach burnout scales indicate that SWP staff had a significantly lower levels of burnout scores, however, when controlling for other factors such differences were not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

While there has been much debate in the past decade about the role and function of children's social work, as evidenced by the Social Work Reform Board and the Munro Review, the introduction of SWPs in 2009 generated considerable debate in England in broader social policy spheres. Such debate was recently revived following the Department for Education's 2014 proposals to open up virtually all children's services, including child protection, to privatization. Following a public consultation over April - May 2014, the Department for Education amended the original proposal that all children's services (with the exception of adoption, which can be delegated only to registered adoption agencies) could be outsourced to third party organisations, including for-profit providers. The amended draft regulations propose that the extended range of services, including child protection, could only be delegated to non-profit making organisations such as charities and social enterprises (Department for Education [DfE], 2014. However, the revised draft regulations continue to attract heated debate (e.g. Community Care, 2014).

SWPs varied considerably in their size and range of activities, however, such activities excluded child protection functions that remained the responsibility of the host local authority. Additionally, some budget decisions also remained under the control of the local authority, particularly in the case of very small SWPs where responsibility for the placement budget, for example, was deemed to be too risky a proposition for a small organisation. Thus, while the small size of the pilots allowed a more dynamic workplace with reliance on key people and is reflected in the higher workplace social support experienced by the pilot staff, it hindered the ability to take certain decisions. The analysis of job-demand and control indicating a negative correlation between Karasek control and demand among SWP practitioners may reflect some of these dilemmas potentially placing them at risk of 'unresolved stress' (Hussein et al 2014).

The evaluation of SWPs shows that practitioners' expectations of SWPs appeared quite high at the start of the pilots among all comparison groups, but especially among pilot and local authority staff, the ones most affected by such changes. Levels of agreement with the conceptual aims of SWPs were significant except for the expectations of the ability of the new model to reduce levels of paperwork. However, by the end of the evaluation, levels of agreement with the same statements, representing different aims of the pilots, appeared to

decline among SWP and host local authority staff, while the opposite occurred among those most distant from the experience, practitioners in the comparison sites.

The analysis points to considerable agreement in the amount of time spent on different activities by practitioners working in host and comparison local authorities, albeit with slight differences among SWP staff. In general, practitioners felt they did not spend enough time in direct work with LAC and their birth parents. In the free text boxes, SWP practitioners elaborated on the importance of having continuity of work with a small cohort of children or young people in building relationships with both LAC and their carers. The analysis also showed a positive relationship between perceived workload and spending the right amount of time in direct work with LAC. Views of practitioners working in the new SWP model on the quality of their work and relationships were also more likely to improve over time when compared to other practitioners. This was especially the case in relation to their perception that LAC receive consistent and continued support including remaining in the same placements. Other elements of the evaluation indicated that most SWPs were successful in reducing placement change rate during their first year of operation (Stanley et al. 2012b) - however not all cases were 'passed' to the pilots and in only one SWP, that which remained within the local authority, did staff work with child protection concerns. Such factors would appear to influence the time available for face-to-face work, continuity of care and contacts.

SWP participants tended to agree more with positive statements about their work. There are a number of possible explanations for such observations, including the 'Hawthorne effect' (McCarney et al, 2007) which entails improved performance in groups that are the objects of study; the shorter life span of the pilots, limiting exposure to workplace problems; as well as SWPs being conducive to positive work experiences, in particular, making a reality of peer and supervisory social support. This latter factor may be protective; SWP workers had lower levels of depersonalisation than staff in host and comparison sites.

One of the main findings related to the higher perception of SWP practitioners of their levels of work autonomy and levels of participation in decision making. However, the standardised measures of decision authority and job demand did not indicate significant differences when controlling for other factors. Factors such as the perception of spending the right amount of time in direct work with children as well as providing the support at the right time appear more relevant. While lack of significant difference between the three groups may relate to the lagged effect of the large organisational changes associated with outsourcing

some of children services functions, they point to the importance of addressing core elements of working with LAC, such as positive relationships and continuity of work with the same cases. Some of these findings might also relate to the novelty of the new model and feeling of 'ownership' of workers to the new model. These strong associations might be tested if further workers are employed in these models, who may not perceive themselves as 'pioneering' such ideas or do not ideologically associate with the core concepts of outsourcing.

CONCLUSION

Our findings point to the potential benefit of reforms that concentrate on the expenditure of time with LAC and birth families and carers; not simply because of the outcomes of such engagement but also because such use of time seems to play a part in reducing social workers' emotional exhaustion. Time spent with 'cases' would seem highly likely to be related to caseload size, which appeared lower in SWPs and to be of less complexity. Team and supervisory support emerged as being higher among SWP staff and this is interesting in light of these possibly protective factors. Interestingly, the findings do not suggest that support from colleagues could compensate for lack of supervisory support; the SWP staff were more likely to report that both types of support were higher than the others surveyed and it is this that contributed to higher social support. There may be other influences at play; for example, the fact that SWPs received substantial external support with their professional practice and training, as well as help with set up; limited caseloads and more predictable cases (as noted above); needs to be acknowledged and successor SWPs may not be so advantaged. Overall, further debate is needed about how the SWP models fit with the developing critiques of social work becoming dominated by bureaucracy and risk management and these will be further developed by the evaluation team.

In 2014, the Department of Education launched a consultation on privatising social care services, including safeguarding activities, following which, after a large response with only two per cent agreeing with the proposal; it issued a response amending the proposals. The amended proposal at the time of writing continued the argument for outsourcing all functions except for child protection which would not be outsourced to for-profit organisations but may potentially be delegated to other organisations such as social enterprises or non-profit making organisations (DfE, 2014). The evaluation did not find significant evidence to support such outsourcing; rather it highlighted the importance of

addressing the quality of core work elements when providing such services, which in theory could be implemented in any organisational setting.

Acknowledgment and Disclaimer

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