The Homelessness Outcomes Star: A Brief Response to Criticism of Our Paper

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Last year we published a paper that examined the Homelessness Outcomes Star (HOS), one of several products developed and supported by Triangle. We have no commercial interest in the Homelessness Outcomes Star, or any other measurement tools.

This edition includes a response to our paper, written by Joy MacKeith, a Director from Triangle. In this short piece, we consider MacKeith's criticism of our paper and present some counter arguments to her criticisms of our work.

MacKeith begins by criticizing us for never having used the tool and for not conducting primary research with service users, managers and commissioners to evaluate the tool. We have not tested the HOS in the field, but then again, the aim of our paper, as we made clear, was to critically examine the ideological framework and the theoretical and methodological approaches that inform the HOS. We also need to be clear what our criticism of the HOS was. We can see some merit in the tool as a way for workers to track individual progress. However, the HOS cannot be employed as a rigorous means of social scientific analysis, if it really is being suggested that HOS can be used in that way. The flaws are simply too great. From our perspective 'testing' the HOS makes no sense.

In defending the HOS MacKeith makes seven specific claims. We can respond briefly to each.

Claim 1: The Star does not pre-determine service user goals. This is a fanciful claim. The HOS predetermines the areas for measurement, all of which are grounded in the idea of moving from 'weak' to 'strong'.

Claim 2: The Star is not based on an individual pathology analysis. We think it is because the HOS makes no allowance for anything else. For instance, the HOS ignores the possibility that progress toward independent living may be constricted by poor access to affordable housing supply. Indeed someone can only 'fail' to be resettled into independent housing because of their own lack of progress. The whole logic of the HOS is that an individual is made 'housing ready' and that through behavioural modification, changing their (presumed) 'bad' habits and complying with treatment, lies the route to settled housing. The HOS ignores people's strengths and capacities, it is predicated on overcoming individual deficits that create barriers to exiting homelessness. MacKeith cites 'empirical research' that claims the HOS empowers individuals to 'define their own reality'. Scrutiny of that paper confirms that the claims are indeed made. However, they are not backed by any empirical evidence.

Claim 3: The Star is a holistic tool and the scales should not be used in isolation. This is, we think, a difficult criticism to sustain. What our paper does is criticise the logic of the HOS and highlight individual examples to illustrate a broader point. As we note at one point: "In every domain, the effects of structural, biographical and situational factors are ignored". Stepping back from the individual domains, consider the "journey of change" which underpins the HOS (Burns *et al*, 2013). The stages of this "journey of change" are described as "stuck", "accepting help", "believing", "learning" and "self-reliance" which we are now told by MacKeith, are not, in any sense, grounded in individual pathology.

Claim 4: The Star is not a self-completion tool. We agree. We do not say it is. We refer to self-report data, in the sense that workers fill it in and ask people how they're getting along. We make the point that self-report data suffers limitations. This is well established in the scholarly literature. We also investigated the claim made by Triangle Consulting that the HOS is tried and tested. We found no independent evidence that the HOS meets standard criteria of reliability and validity.

Claim 5: HOS data is meaningful for service users, worker and managers. It may be in relation to tracking individual progress, something we do note carefully. Our criticism is directed at the use of these data as any form of comparable metric or outcome measure.

Claim 6: Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a separate technology to the HOS. We raised the issue that the logic of MI is central to the way the HOS is operationalized. Indeed, as MacKeith's response acknowledges the HOS gives MI a 'high prominence'. We presented evidence that questions the effectiveness of MI, something that services should be aware of, irrespective of whether they use the HOS.

Claim 7: The fact that HOS has not turned back the tides of austerity does not mean it has failed. Fair enough, but the motivation behind developing something like HOS was in part to give homelessness services a way to evidence their activities. One could not reasonably expect a system of outcome measurement to necessarily stop a right-wing administration from cutting homelessness service funding. However, our point here is that measurement and quantification are hallmarks of new managerialism. Some things are easy to measure; others are not. Services exist in a highly competitive environment, where there is constant pressure to demonstrate efficient and effective service delivery. New managerialism has opened opportunities for profit making organisations to exploit services by offering products that appear to satisfy the needs of new managerialism. However, commercial organisations have a vested interest in their products; they need to market and sell them. If public money is spent on commercial products – be it case management, assessment or outcome measurement tools – it is vital that they are credible products that can stand up to rigorous and independent scrutiny. We leave it to readers to decide if the HOS meets these requirements.