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Title
Hybridity in Public Accountability of Private Social Service Operators: A Comparative Case Study

Abstract
The New Public Management movement in the 1980s has led to the use of quasi-markets and contracts in service provision. Research on social service contracting revealed contract development and management difficulties particularly in respect of developing measurable and objective indicators of social outputs and outcomes (Brown, Potoski, & Van Slyke, 2015; Hefetz and Warner 2011; Van Slyke, 2006). Intangible service outcomes are conducive to ambiguity in operation and performance management. The difficulties in social service contracting increase the risk of principal-agent problems.

Contract is not the only tool to ensure the accountability of private service operators. In explaining public accountability, Hupe and Hill (2007) looked at the social relationships of street-level bureaucrats in which they feel an obligation to explain and to justify their actions. Accountability regimes are sets of guidelines for action that prevail within social relationships. These sets of guidelines stem from rules and regulations, professional ethics, and expectations from the clients and society. When studying private policy implementer, Thomann, Hupe, and Sager (2017) found for-profit implementer experienced dilemma arising from rule pressure and meeting customers’ demands, thus introducing the market as an additional accountability regime alongside state, profession and society.

Private service operators could face multiple accountability regimes in operation and dilemmas arising from competing accountability regimes and quality standards. In view of the difficulties in social service contracting, the question of what accountability regimes and dilemmas do private operators of different ownership structure face lies at the core of understanding hybridity in public
accountability and governance. In addition to ownership structure, hybridity in public accountability of private operators also depends on the governance modes of public-private partnerships in service delivery: the autonomous mode and the integrative mode. While the former underlines efficiency gain and allows for a relatively high degree of private managerial discretion, the integrative mode of governance is characterized by labor division with public partners (Kivleniece & Quelin, 2012). It is assumed that the more integrative the governance mode, the more pressure from the public-administrative accountability.

In short, this research is aimed to examine how ownership structure and governance mode affect hybridity in public accountability through a comparative case study. A typology was constructed using the two explanatory variables. Service operators (i.e., nonprofit, for-profit) of Residential Care Homes for the Elderly (autonomous mode) and Integrated Family Service Centres (integrative mode) were interviewed.

Findings suggest that autonomous nonprofit operators were held accountable by their mission, vision and professional ethics whereas autonomous for-profit operators were held accountable by service contract and the market. Nonprofit service operators under the integrative mode were held accountable by service contract, professional ethics, government partners and society. Autonomous nonprofit operators were found to experience the dilemma arising from high professional standards and efficiency gain expected by service contract. Public service gap was found to cause dilemmas among autonomous for-profit operators due to higher government quality standards in comparison to market standards, and among nonprofit operators under the integrative mode due to insufficient backup in comparison to their government counterparts.

**Keyword**

public accountability; social service contracting; comparative case study