Careers and Contingencies:

Constructing Careers in the Music and Building Industries

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The idea of understanding working life in terms of a 'career' may seem commonsense for societies characterised by a complex division of labour and individual progressions through a hierarchy of positions. This is not always the case. The activities, understandings and contingencies associated with many careers are not widely understood, and it is these career-oriented activities and understandings that are apt to be of particular significance in establishing an identity for the worker. In this paper we explore how careers are made and understood in two workplace cultures: the orchestra and the building industry. Our argument is that while these workplaces are structured in very different ways, there are distinct similarities in the constraints and possibilities faced by their respective workforces. Through a comparative account of these two workplace cultures we seek to show that we can better understand each by teasing out ethnographic insights that illuminate features of the other.

Keywords: Career, Workplace Culture, Orchestra, Building Industry

"Career, the word, has itself had a career" (Hughes 2003, p. 130).

Introduction

As an objective pattern of jobs or positions, a career has traditionally been associated with progression and advancement through the ranks of an institution typically organised on rational, bureaucratic principles and occupying "a central position in the life and consciousness of urban man" (Faulkner 2003, p. 139). In this usage, career advancement often corresponds with increases in status and prestige and is coupled with an increasing income. This is, of course, a model of career that is not applicable to all occupations or to all parts of the economy. Indeed, it is more of a middle-class

notion than anything else (Moen 2005) and no longer accurately portrays the lives and experiences of a growing number of workers.

The idea of progression and advancement through a set of identifiable positions at work comprises a narrow understanding of career; hence many studies of work and occupations have found a somewhat broader notion of career to be a useful organising concept (Hall 1996). In ways that are suggestive of both structural and experiential features of social life, this concept provides a way of seeing analytical connections between current, previous and future positions while simultaneously calling up the experiential understandings of any worker so positioned (Moen 2005). In a Janus-faced way, then, the concept of career looks both to objective social structures and processes and, simultaneously, to workers' subjective or experiential understandings of their careers. Such a perspective allows us to grasp how those employed in particular occupational locations shape their work opportunities and, in so doing, play an active role in constructing their careers. A significant factor in these considerations is a general shift from a traditional, linear career progression to meeting more intrinsic goals and values such as personal satisfaction and life-fit (Schor 1997). It is the particularity of the objective structures and subjective experiences of each of our fieldsites that we mean to identify as workplace cultures.

In this paper we explore some aspects of the careers of those working in the two distinct workplace cultures of the building industry and the orchestra. Each workplace offers different opportunities and constraints, and our aim is to draw out connections between the ways in which opportunities are structured, while identifying some of the strategies employed by the sub-contractors (subbies) and musicians to make their work intrinsically meaningful. We argue here that those employed in each workplace must come to terms with the particularity of their workplace cultures as they craft careers within and outside of the context of their workplace culture.

The importance of bringing two disparate ethnographic locations into dialogue is particularly significant here. It is through this juxtaposition of very different workplace cultures that the idiosyncrasies of each is made most apparent. Comparison therefore allows us to see each case against the backdrop not just of abstract theoretical concepts but as distinct workplace cultures. We bring to the study not only

our differing disciplinary approaches, but long-term industry based research and practice in music (Bennett, symphony orchestra) and anthropology (Moore, building industry) to pursue a shared analytical interest. After discussing some of the key concepts for this account we provide brief case studies of orchestral work and subcontracting tradesmen.[1] We then use the developed case studies to identify significant features of careers in each workplace culture.

Careers, Contingencies and Getting Ahead

The concept of career was significantly advanced in a number of sociological accounts from the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago (Barley 1989). The precise location is important because the Department of Sociology at Chicago is famous for the ethnographic focus of much of its early research, and it marks important features in the 'career' of the notion of career. While Chicago ethnographer Everett Hughes went on to examine the etymology of the word 'career' following the epigram that precedes this paper, we are more concerned with the history of its use as a concept for organising social analysis. It was in this intellectual context that the concept of career was used by Hughes and his students as they explored the social lives of a variety of different peoples (Hughes 1958).

The concept of career for the Chicago ethnographers was an orienting notion rather than a particularly well-developed analytical concept. The researchers understood that the notion of career was a useful way – a pragmatic way (Barley 1989) – of organising their ethnographic evidence precisely because it captured both a sense of objective structural arrangements and the subjective experiential world of those living lives beyond occupational life. As a tool in their ethnographers' took-kit they used this notion to help them understand how the lives they sought to understand were constructed. The notion of career is indeed Janus-faced in this sense. To cite but one example, Howard Becker's classic and influential account of 'becoming a marihuana user' (Becker 1953) used the notion of career to help bring order to the social process that typically led from occasional use to an increased enjoyment in this non-occupational activity. Over several decades, Hughes and his postgraduate students –

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[1] We understand that the term 'tradesman' constitutes the use of exclusive language; however, it is the accepted term within and outside of the sector, largely because of its almost total dominance of male workers. We have used the term 'subbie' or sub-contractor wherever possible.

many of whom would become seasoned sociological professionals themselves – employed the notion of career to help them make sense of their own particular bodies of ethnographic evidence. This broad use of the notion of career avoided its restricted application to the hierarchical model of advancement limited to occupation.

A number of accounts have tried to shape career into an analytical variable for their studies. Demographic and statistical accounts have reshaped the concept of career and have turned the notion into a static, timeless, abstract category for their analyses (Moen 2005). This has worked directly against the sort of ethnographic contexts considered by Hughes and his collaborators. These structural accounts emphasise collective evidence and major trends. What they lack, of course, is a sense of how particular individuals find their way through such structural arrangements. The messier evidence of the experiences and agency of individuals is sacrificed for analytical rigour found from the manipulation of data constructed as clean and objective. For our purposes, even though our focus is on two different workplaces, we seek to use the broader and more ethnographic approach to career as developed by Hughes. We do so to emphasise the Janus-faced aspects of career and the social processes that it entails. We adopt this broader approach because of the way it allows us to deal with both structure and agency in our accounts. This is particularly important when we consider the notion of contingency in the study of careers.

The notion of career contingency can be found in a number of writings that consider career in terms of social analysis (Faulkner 2003; 1974). It is this notion that pushes us to maintain a sense of agency for those whose careers we seek to understand. A career constructed in any workplace culture is shaped in part by the particular opportunities that the workplace offers. Faulkner characterises career contingencies by the ways in which an organisation manages the possibilities for change and mobility within itself (Faulkner 1974). Different sorts of organisations will create different sorts of contingencies. For Faulkner, managing progression through the ranks of organisations featuring high-achieving occupations such as orchestral performance and professional athletics is of fundamental concern. Any person engaged in making a career must interpret and understand the workplace in order to realise available opportunities. The 'career contingencies' of a workplace, institution or activity shape the potential experiences and agency of those whose lives are played

out there. The notion of contingency nicely captures that careers are not produced in some mechanical fashion but are constructed through social action in particular contexts.

Both musicians and subcontracting tradesmen have a sense of what it is to 'get ahead' in their respective workplaces; however, getting ahead is construed in very different ways. For an orchestral musician there is indeed a hierarchical institution through which advancement, to some limited degree, is possible. And orchestras are connected into a world of music where movement from one orchestra to another remains a desirable possibility if one is willing to relocate to seek career advancement (Westby 1960; Faulkner 2003). Musicians also have a sense of accomplishment and commitment to their work that goes beyond simply earning a living. Classical music is publicly construed as a 'calling' and as one of the high arts, and the practice of music accrues status to those so employed. For building subcontractors, a career in construction is a means of making a living. In the relatively unstructured workplace of the building industry there is little sense of career advancement, and improvement is cast as increased earnings, typically in the short term of one or more contracts. Understanding particular aspects of the careers possible in these two different workplaces is our next task.

Orchestral Musicians

Concert orchestras originated in the nineteenth century in line with increased demand for popular music. Although the orchestra moved from the pit to the stage, the invisibility of orchestral players has remained almost unchanged. The emergence of the orchestral conductor and virtuoso soloists presented audiences with front-of-stage superstars, and the cost of virtuosi prompted concerts to move from intimate settings to larger, publicly owned venues, with ticket prices often set to ensure the attendance of 'a cultured *elite*' (Raynor, 1972, p. 355). Orchestras remain as part of the 'high culture' of contemporary society and attract status and prestige for those associated with them. And, of course, not all orchestras are equal. There is a pecking order among national and world orchestras and career advancement and recognition is to be found in playing more senior roles and in more prestigious orchestras.

A professional symphony orchestra is a large, bureaucratically organised institution. The workings of an orchestra are not commonly known, and are vital to understanding the dynamics of this unique workplace. Most professional orchestras are structured as companies with boards, sponsors, artistic directors, conductors and full concert seasons featuring sought-after soloists and conductors. Most orchestras rehearse and perform for approximately thirty hours each week. Players are organised into sections according to instrument, and each section is led by a principal player. Directives from the conductor are communicated to a principal player who communicates to the section. For this reason, the names of section players are rarely known to the conductor. An orchestra is a single entity with a cohesive and sometimes distinctive sound, and individual voices are unwelcome. In this way, Osborne suggests, musicians become "highly responsive machines, musical constructs, fantasies of the conductor's mind" (1999, p. 72). A key result of the conductor's autonomy is that creativity and artistic decision making is removed from individual musicians. Ironically, the flow chart of many orchestral companies does not include the musicians themselves, who are very much the tools of the orchestra.

For many young musicians the ideal culmination of years of practice is to find professional employment in an orchestra. Indeed, employment as a musician can confer on an individual a musical legitimacy that is otherwise difficult to imagine (Roberts 1991). Gaining a position in an orchestra is the result of a successful audition, and it can take years for even the most able performer to secure a permanent position. As performance skill is the sole criterion, players enter the workforce having already acquired the practical skills they require for the job. If it is a musician's first orchestral appointment there is much to be learned about the organisation of the orchestra, the structure of the work and the relationships with others. The orchestral workplace is learned on the job and every orchestra has myriad unwritten rules about practice parts, seating or marking the music. There are also accepted 'cheats' within the orchestral repertoire to overcome passages that are technically impossible to play. One learns these from colleagues as new repertoire is covered. Learning the workplace is the domain of the musicians, and it is here that the musicians have the expertise and control.

Orchestras are stratified both nationally and internationally and a career-minded musician will be thinking about the contingencies for advancement or progression in the sector (Faulkner 2003; Menger 1999). Career options within any orchestra are limited to principal positions in the specialist instrument; therefore advancement most often involves auditioning for a principal chair in another similarly ranked orchestra, or auditioning for a similar position in an orchestra with higher status and prestige (Westby 1960). Ironically, many orchestral players find that the rapid turnover of repertoire leads to a loss of technical proficiency, which lessens their chances of a further successful audition. Reputation is irrelevant as auditions are 'blind' so that player identity is hidden. Musicians may find that in order to get ahead they must move backwards, perhaps taking a principal's chair in a less prestigious orchestra in order to gain the necessary experience to a similar position in a more prestigious orchestra. Being a musician is, therefore, potentially a mobile occupation with a career made in a number of different places with a number of different orchestras. Because moving orchestras very often necessitates a move of city or even country, the lack of mobility is compounded by family and outside commitments.

While performing great music on a grand scale can be an exhilarating experience for an instrumentalist, working in an orchestra can also be stifling. In a letter dated 1911, Busoni described orchestral players as akin to "a suppressed crowd of rebels … they loathe their work, their job and, most of all, their music" (in Bonavia, 1956, p. 242). Attracted to the work by a love of music and a desire to take part in making music – what could be more satisfying than getting paid to do what one already loves – musicians often find the reality of working in an orchestra quite different to what they had expected (Bennett 2007). Everything from repertoire selection to the tempo and dynamic of the music is determined for the musicians: creative control is in the hands of the conductor, programming with the conductor and artistic director, and scheduling with the management team (Osborne 1999). Of course, there are good times too, both musically and collegially. Cottrell has nicely captured the humour and enjoyment that can accompany working in an environment where a group of people share the experience of an oppressive working culture, and who resist in all sorts of creative ways (Cottrell 2004) whilst, as shown at Figure 1, the plight of musicians has provided amusing material for cartoonists and animators.

Figure 1: Creative control and the orchestra (Lynch, M. n.d.)

Orchestral work is often not highly paid, and it can be necessary for musicians to develop a secondary income stream. However, as well as providing additional income, activities such as chamber music performance, teaching, arts management and a wide range of arts and non-arts small businesses – all of them outside of the orchestral workplace – provide opportunities for creativity and control. The majority of these activities are undertaken on the basis of self-employed income, which entails the organisational and accounting demands of managing a 'double' career. Yet most conservatory and university courses do not much look beyond the performance of music in their programs (Bennett 2006). Indeed, orchestral musicians (as other musicians) tend to learn these skills on their own. Ironically, it is likely that the increasing economic insecurity of orchestras will, in the future, see more orchestras become community oriented organisations in which musicians' skills are directly involved in operational and artistic decision making (Bennett 2007).

For an orchestral musician, then, a career is likely to be constructed outside of the orchestra as well as inside of it. Taking on different sorts of musical and other work and finding opportunities to regain a sense of creativity can become important as musicians seek to overcome the alienation that can so often be experienced within an orchestral setting (Moore and Bennett 2007). In this way, an orchestral career can become emotionally dependent on the career outside of it. Rather than experiencing

the hierarchy and control of the orchestra as the core of one's professional career, the orchestra can become simply one source of income, one way of plying one's craft. A career, then, is organised in opposition to the formal hierarchy and structure of the orchestra and can be experienced in very different ways – as creativity, control and an authentic sense of accomplishment.

Subcontracting Tradesmen

The building and renovating of homes in Perth, Western Australia, is carried out by subcontracting tradesmen, identified locally by themselves and others as 'subbies' and hired on the basis of competitive quotes. Although entry into the housing sector in Perth is relatively easy, it is work which requires tradesmen to work as subcontractors (Moore 1995). While there is a strong union movement in the building and construction industry, unions largely control the large general contracting jobs located in the city. As building and renovating houses tends to be dispersed throughout the suburbs on a large number of very small building sites, the unions have little impact on the conditions of this work (Moore 1991). Many subbies see their interests in opposition to those of the unions as they can earn more working as a subbie than for a union-organised job.

The system of subcontracting in this sector of the economy is much celebrated by economists (Hutton 1970), the Master Builders' Association and the Housing Industry Association (Campbell 1991; Greig 1992; Mitchell 2000). For members of these organisations, subcontracting creates a system of management that is 'flat', wherein the perduring hierarchical relationships typical of enterprise are replaced by dyadic contracts between builder and worker for the duration of a particlar job. Rather than manage a permanent workforce, a builder or contractor manages the flow of trades through a building site. This is said to create 'flexibility' in the industry because builders can avoid having to maintain a permanent workforce, hiring tradesmen only when they are needed and, thus, reducing the overall cost of houses. In maintaining the 'independence' of the subcontracting tradesmen, this method of organising work reduces the responsibilities of the builder and shifts responsibility for a range of accounting and other paperwork matters to the independent subcontractors. This method also shares the financial risk among all those involved as no single party has

to assume responsibility for all of the costs. As such, it allows ease of entry into the industry, negates the need for large amounts of capital, and it has ensured that the industry is characterised by the presence of a large number of small firms (ACIL 1996). Organising work through the use of subcontractors is very different when examined as an economic or organisational system than when it is understood from the perspective of an individual subbie. In this industry, tradesmen are independent subcontractors who are responsible for a broad range of activities that stretch well beyond expertise in their trade. The need to organise work, prepare quotes for future work, complete necessary paperwork and seek payment for work already completed, extends the day of a working subcontractor by several hours. Akin to orchestral musicians who establish work outside of the orchestral workplace, subcontractors find themselves managing small businesses in support of their physical work.

The building and renovating sector of the economy is characterised by large swings in the numbers of people employed. Most subcontractors in this industry gain entry either by finding work as a labourer and then adding to their skills until they achieve recognition as a tradesman, or by taking on an apprenticeship in a recognised trade. Because the industry is fairly unregulated – only electricians and plumbers require formal training recognised by the government – entry into the industry is fairly easy. It is most usual to find work in this industry in the late teens to early twenties. Even though there are a number of trades who work in the house building industry, apprenticeships remain problematic because few tradesmen have enough economic security to commit to training apprentices. Indeed, even employing a labourer can be difficult as they constitute "someone whose money I have to make before I make my own".

The on-site work of subbies is comprised primarily of hard physical activity. Working as an independent tradesman requires that the physical work of the trade is not undertaken with any set limit on the amount of work to be completed in a day; the more work subbies can complete, the greater their earning potential. Subcontracting is often said to encourage hard work for the added rewards that can be achieved. Subcontracting is a form of piece-work and there is a large literature dealing with how these payment systems provide incentives to reward workers (Lupton 1972; Whyte 1955). Being paid by the job or, for example, by the number of bricks laid, provides

an incentive for subbies to work as hard as they can. Given the nature of the work that they do, the potential for a subbie to earn more money without putting more hours 'on the tools' is very limited. To realise the financial rewards of subcontracting, a subbie must be willing to work longer hours than are typical on union-controlled building sites and, commonly, work more days during the week. At one point during my fieldwork I worked with a team of subbies that worked for some 52 days in a row. Subcontracting, then, is often an attractive way of organising work for those who are young and fit. It allows those who can accomplish much in a day's work to earn far more than a union tradesperson might earn. However, because it tends to be hard physical work it comes at a cost to the person doing the work. A subbie who is perceived by a builder as not working hard enough will not be rehired in the future, because the ability of the builder to manage the flow of trades through any particular job depends on deadlines being met. If a builder hires a team of plasterers and the site is not ready for them, they are apt to be grumpy! Paid only if they are working, they will be unlikely to give that builder's work priority in the future. Similarly, a tradesman who fails to arrive when scheduled is unlikely to be rehired by the builder.

Subbies in all trades tend to peak early: that is, they learn their trade and are at their fastest when they are young and fit. This is one of the features of building and construction that sees younger tradesmen favoured over their more experienced (but slower) counterparts. Bricklayers may reach their peak, in terms of speed, quite early on in their twenties. In boom times, when there is a lot of work around, speed is the primary concern. It is when the industry slows and work becomes scarce that there may be more choice for a builder and the quality of work will become more important. However, as skill and knowledge increase over time, the capacity for hard physical work declines. This is, perhaps, one reason why many subbies place considerable emphasis on building their own homes early in their careers. At a relatively early age, a subbie is confronted with choices about the future and must think about how to structure future career plans. It is at this time of life that many subbies turn to the union and begin to look for the protection that collective bargaining can provide; however, many firms undertaking union work are also reluctant to employ older and slower tradespeople. The result is discontinuity between jobs and declining income. Subbies typically face the option of either shifting their focus away from new housing and onto smaller renovation and repair work, or

moving out of the industry altogether. One subbie noted that to put an advertisement in the local paper announcing 'no job too small' is to accept that your working life had irreversibly changed.

What sort of careers do subbies have in the house building industry? Looked at objectively, subcontracting tradesmen are likely to work as subbies for their entire time in the industry. Because of the 'flat' managerial structure of the industry there is little sense of promotion or advancement. A few tradesmen, typically carpenters, may indeed move from carpentry to building, but this is not a career path that many take. The career of a subcontracting tradesman is dictated by the structure of the industry and offers few choices in terms of work.

Discussion

The physicality of the two workplaces is important. Working as a subcontracting tradesman or working as an orchestral musician can put enormous physical strains on practitioners' bodies. Indeed, this physical stress is part of what shapes the expectations and opportunities for workers in both workplaces. Playing a musical instrument has intense physical demands on the body of a musician. There is a higher rate of injury amongst musicians than athletes, largely related to overuse during conservatorium training or through work in an orchestral setting. Orchestra-related concerns relate to ineffective rehearsal techniques, uninformed programming and the performance of contemporary orchestral music "designed for machines and not human beings" (Bennett 2005, p. 208). However, should injury prevent them from meeting their performance obligations, permanent orchestral musicians enjoy a degree of financial security with their organisations. Physically, subbies peak rather early in their working lives, usually in their twenties, and then suffer physical decline as their bodies respond to prolonged physical work. For them, there is no such organisational protection and the risk of declining income drives them to smaller, more complicated jobs or out of the workplace altogether. Whereas musicians forced from performance roles due to injury can draw upon their performance skills as the basis of alternative employment, subbies have fewer options for redirecting their practical skills.

An instrumentalist will undertake years of tuition and training in order to reach the standard required for an orchestral position, and the retention of technical skill is a life-long commitment. Conversely, tradesmen tend to take up their tools rather later in life. For a subbie, basic skills are learned quickly and then used through application, again and again, on the job. Orchestral musicians are respected by the communities in which they live. Players often charge a premium for their teaching, and are the centre of the instrumental teaching staff at many conservatoires around the world. Smaller groups of orchestral players form highly respected chamber ensembles or perform as soloists, and many musicians run businesses outside of their orchestral lives. On stage, musicians (as the collective orchestra) are applauded by audiences. Within their workplace, however, musicians are the mechanics of the organisation: the manual labourers, the tools. In this respect, subbies, who are 'on the tools', have a much greater degree of control over their physical work.

An orchestra is an institution well-entrenched in high culture. However, in this structured and hierarchical workplace culture there is little room for career advancement within the one orchestra. Indeed, in many respects a musician must cede control of his or her musical creativity and judgement. This lack of control is often cited as a reason for musicians' dissatisfaction at work. In the building and construction industry there is a flatter organisational structure and, for subcontractors and builders, greater importance placed on the ongoing negotiation of dyadic contracts rather than formal hierarchical structures shaping the workplace and its culture. Subbies have the freedom to carry out their work relatively independently as long as they meet the temporal demands for the coordination of work on job sites. This control of their own work is often cited as a reason for satisfaction with their work.

Subbies working in the building industry do essentially the same work tasks on successive building sites, all the while remaining 'on the tools', engaged in the tasks of their trade. The same might be said for musicians; however, whilst subbies' work is contained entirely within the workplace, musicians have opportunities to apply their skills and to take creative and administrative control in a variety of different contexts. Neither workplace, however, offers great hope or possibility for progression through a range of positions that would be associated with career advancement. Rather, those

working in these two occupational cultures must find other ways to make their careers satisfying. To make a career in music that is intrinsically satisfying, a musician will typically look beyond employment in the orchestra, taking additional work rather than leaving behind the status, prestige and security of an orchestral role. Orchestral musicians can also aspire to advancement through the fairly shallow ranks of positions available in an orchestra, and more particularly through the larger network of national and international orchestras, but such a strategy typically requires geographical relocation. For subbies, the work that they do today, or have done in the past, will be essentially the work that they do tomorrow and on into the future. Their trade skills are used repetitively as they are applied to each new situation.

Concluding Comments

Our argument has been that while these workplaces are structured in very different ways, there are distinct similarities in the constraints and possibilities faced by their respective workforces that make a comparison, even as brief as this one, very useful. They are both grounded in a physicality that can take a considerable toll on the bodies of those engaged in them. While this may be most obvious for tradesmen, it is also the case that musicians suffer physical pain, injury and, at times, disruption to their work. And practitioners in both workplaces must, over time, deal with the results. The routine of physical work is also very similar, and it is ironic that subbies have more creative control when they are 'on the tools' than do the orchestral musicians whose role is to 'be the tools'. Whereas this leads to orchestral musicians engaging in creative work outside of the orchestral workplace, which is frowned upon but accepted by the majority of orchestras, subbies face an uncertain future due to the limited opportunities for the transfer of their skills to other situations.

Working life increasingly concerns the horizontal construction of careers around short learning stages, each of which requires the expansion of competencies, connections and identities. Psychological success, determined by both personal and professional goals, is increasingly the primary driver of work choice. Fundamental to this is the expansion of professional identity and the acquisition of the new knowledge required to meet the demands of each stage. Orchestral musicians are employed purely as performers; hence they do not acquire other skills within the workplace and it is highly unusual for musicians to move to an administrative role within their orchestra.

Subbies are self-employed and have control of their businesses; however, their practical skills are of little use beyond the building site. The result is that both workforces face a relative lack of progression within the workplace. Without this progression, they require a lifelong approach to both learning and career management, and neither is well supported in this regard.

Here, with our comparative project announced, we have only begun to scratch the surface of what might be said about careers and their contingencies in these particular workplaces. Each of the workplace cultures we have looked at set different challenges and possibilities for those who find employment there. The notion of career as developed by Everett Hughes and his collaborators has been useful for us as it helps focus attention on the objective possibilities and the subjective experiences of the musicians and subbies. Even with very different senses of what it is to carry out work, the contingencies that they face, and what it means to get ahead, the comparative analysis of these two cases demonstrates that career is a particularly fecund concept for social research across substantive topics and disciplines.

Acknowledgement

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