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Research Article

The Negotiations of the Ideal Worker Norm: A Close Analysis of the Work/Life Portrayal in *the Intern*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the portrayal of work-life balance in the movie *The Intern,* focusing on the character of Ben Whittaker, played by the iconic Robert De Niro, who takes on the role of a senior intern at a bourgeoning fashion e-commerce company under the leadership of the young, dynamic, and driven chief executive officer (CEO), Jules Ostin, portrayed by the brilliant Anne Hathaway. Two research questions were posed (How is the work/life of Jules Ostin portrayed in *The Intern*?; How does this portrayal shape conceptualizations of work and life in important ways?") to understand how this cultural artifact adds to the literature on work-life balance. The analysis reveals that while some representations reinforce the ideal worker norms, others challenge them and suggest that work and life can coexist in balance. However, the role reversal mentoring and power dynamics in the film raise concerns about whether it subtly perpetuates traditional organizational structures and stereotypes. Two themes emerged from the analysis: Normalized Work and Ideal Worker Norms, and Reverse Power Dynamics concerning Gender and Age. The first theme shows how Ben and Jules navigate ideal worker norms. The second theme examines the reversal of power dynamics by age and gender. The film depicts a young woman as CEO and an older man as her intern, normalizing work and reinforcing ideal worker norms. Additionally, Ben's dressing style visually reinforces societal expectations of an ideal worker, normalizing the work concept.

Keywords

Work/Life Intersection, Work/Life Balance, Boundary Negotiations, Power Dynamics, Reverse Role

1. Introduction

The portrayal of specific themes and ideas in popular culture can be a tool for constructing or reconstructing a particular worldview [5, 14]. The media, including films, can significantly influence what people know and think about and shape their perception of the world. Such depictions can reinforce established societal norms or present alternative viewpoints that challenge them. Some scholars have argued that pop culture has served as a vehicle for perpetuating some common discourses surrounding work-life balance and intersections [7, 10, 18].

Pop culture plays a significant role in shaping our worldview by portraying cultural artifacts. Studying and analyzing these representations continuously is essential to comprehend their impact fully. In this study, I closely examine the movie 'The Intern,' a work of art written, produced, and directed by the talented Nancy Meyers. The plot revolves around the story of an older man named Ben Whittaker, played by the iconic Robert De Niro, who takes on the role of

a senior intern at a bourgeoning fashion e-commerce company. Under the leadership of the young, dynamic, and driven chief executive officer (CEO), Jules Ostin, portrayed by the brilliant Anne Hathaway, the movie provides a fascinating insight into work-life balance and intersections with twists of some of the challenges and opportunities of intergenerational collaboration. This paper makes a valuable addition to the existing cultural artifact literature, focusing on the crucial topic of work/life balance and intersections. By thoroughly analyzing the various representations of this topic, this paper aims to shed light on how these depictions can either perpetuate or challenge the societal norms associated with this subject matter.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Ideal Worker Norms

The ideal worker norm suggests that complete dedication to one's career is necessary, and those who demonstrate this commitment should receive high rewards [3, 6]. However, societal expectations often dictate that women conform to traditional gender roles, making it challenging to fit into the ideal worker norms [3]. The societal expectation of men, typically viewed as breadwinners, makes it easier for them to meet these ideal worker norms and standards than women. Women are assigned caregiving responsibilities [6, 8]. Although there have been changes in societal norms regarding household and parenting responsibilities, women still bear the brunt of domestic labor and childcare.

Unfortunately, women who adhere to these norms may have to compromise their work-life balance and overall well-being because separating men and women into these traditional roles, while no longer dominant, still has a significant impact [6]. Hatfield's research delved into the representation of gender roles and housework in television sitcoms. The results indicated that, despite increasing paternal participation in domestic duties and child-rearing, these shows consistently convey that women are primarily responsible for household chores [6]. This persistent confirmation of gender stereotypes places a considerable burden on women, who must successfully balance housework, employment, and family duties, making it difficult for women to be both good homemakers and ideal workers at the same time. Eventually, women are faced with the unnecessary decision of choosing between family duties (life) and work. Kirby expands upon the concept of an ideal worker by introducing the idea that "work should always come before life" (p. 7) [8]. This makes it difficult to define work and life and calls for the constant negotiation of boundaries between these two. This resulted in the research question:

RQ1: How is the work/life of Jules Ostin portrayed in *The Intern*?

2.2. Conceptualizing Work, Life, and Boundaries

Drago states, "we view employment as work" (p. 25) [3]. Work encompasses any task that individuals undertake as part of their employment for which they receive some form of payment or compensation, such as salaries and wages. Consequently, employees are responsible for delivering specific results and are held accountable for their performance. Work typically adheres to a scheduled timetable, is time-limited, and is carried out within a designated area, all while affording financial rewards to workers. Historically, work environments have been designed to facilitate employees' focus during standard work hours, with the expectation that they can work without distractions [6]. These are some of the characteristics of work that make it a significant part of life. It is essential to differentiate between paid and unpaid work [3]. This adds complexity to the definition of work, making it relative to each person.

Additionally, Schulte points out that societal expectations often place the responsibility of being the primary caregiver on women, even when they are employed outside the home. This can result in added pressures and challenges for women balancing work and family responsibilities [21]. Drago also suggested that life involves engaging in enjoyable activities or leisure that bring happiness [3]. However, separating work from life can be difficult when considering the distinction between paid and unpaid work. Given the complexities of differentiating between work and personal life, some scholars argue that it is essential to establish and maintain boundaries to manage or minimize spillovers [1, 3, 9, 18]. Clark defines their work/family border theory as "how individuals manage and negotiate the work and family spheres and the borders between them to attain balance" (p. 750) [1]. Hence, separation and boundaries are still desired when creating workplace identity, often by differentiating between professional and private spheres [1, 8]. Although expectations have shifted for women in the workforce, there is still a perception that family should come before the occupation, and clear boundaries should be set [3, 8, 10].

Furthermore, the understanding of work, life, and the boundaries amongst them has changed considerably in recent research, emphasizing the complex relationship between these areas and their outcome. Some researchers stress the importance of balancing work and life, arguing that this balance is crucial for improving employee job satisfaction [16]. Their study highlights the necessity of establishing clear boundaries between work and personal life to mitigate stress and prevent burnout, fostering a sense of fulfillment in both domains. This equilibrium requires organizational policies that support flexibility and employees' autonomy in managing their responsibilities.

Other researchers have acknowledged the spillover between work and life and advocate for an agentic approach to work-life balance, emphasizing individuals' proactive role in shaping their experiences [7]. Their review emphasizes the importance

of personal agency in setting work-life boundaries. It discusses how contextual factors—such as cultural norms and organizational practices—can support or hinder this agency. Similarly, Steffens and their colleagues explore the idea of "work-life blending," which blurs the traditional lines between work and personal life [23]. While this blending can provide greater flexibility, it also poses a risk of spillover effects, where stress or demands from one area adversely affect the other.

Sahay and Wei focus on managing spillover effects during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, through effective communication [20]. They drew on nurses' experiences to highlight how open communication within families and workplaces can help mitigate negative spillovers and foster a supportive environment.

This also resulted in the research question:

RQ2: How does the portrayal of work and life in The Intern shape conceptualizations of work and life in meaningful ways?

3. Methodology

I employed Critical Thematic Analysis [12] to analyze the movie and followed Tracy's iterative method to identify patterns and themes [25]. Drawing on Owen's thematic analysis focusing on reoccurrences, repetition, and forcefulness [15], this thematic analysis identified patterns, themes, and relationships within the data based on the generated transcript from the movie. Tracy's constant ("iterative") comparison method involves reading the transcripts multiple times, going back and forth between them for emerging similarities and then themes [25]. This process involves "focusing on specific aspects of the data that extend theory or address practical problems, and encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data" (p. 209) [22]. More specifically, I generated codes, starting with initial in vivo codes and then a secondary round of descriptive codes [19], then categorized and finally arrived at themes (manual coding) with essential examples as evidence. According to Spradley, "thematic analysis involves a search for the relationships among domains and how they linked to the culture as a whole" (p. 94) [22]. The primary objective of this analysis was to investigate the behaviors and actions of the characters Ben and Jules and to gain a comprehensive understanding of their roles in reinforcing or challenging the work-life discourse portrayed in the film.

3.1. Data Collection

The first step in the data collection involved choosing the film and watching it multiple times. I choose the Intern for this project because it explores contemporary work-life discourse, intergenerational mentorship, and gender dynamics in leadership. The film provides a compelling narrative that challenges traditional workplace roles and expectations, making it an ideal text for thematic analysis. Next, I generated a tran-

script with time stamps of the movie's dialogue between the two main characters under review (Ben and Jules), including detailed annotations of nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures. These annotations captured the nuances of the interactions between the characters, providing comprehensive data for analysis.

3.2. Analysis

Next, I began coding with initial in vivo codes [19], extracted directly from the transcripts using the character's exact words and phrases to preserve the contextual significance. For example, Jules' repeated use of terms like balance and sacrifice served as in vivo codes that highlighted her work-life-issue perspective. A second coding round grouped the in vivo codes into broader descriptive categories. For instance, phrases reflecting Jule's challenges as a leader were categorized under workplace responsibilities, while Ben's consistent actions to help and guide Jules were categorized as mentorship and support. The iterative method [25], through multiple transcript readings and repeated constant comparison of codes, was used to refine both in vivo and descriptive codes to identify emerging patterns and themes. For example, categories such as mentorship, advising, and supportive actions were treated as distinct initially, but through iterative comparison, significant overlaps were identified and re-grouped.Finally, patterns were grouped into two themes based on reoccurrences, repetition, and forcefulness. For example, reoccurrences reflect patterns of dialogue and behaviors reflecting similar sentiments or actions, such as Ben repeatedly stepping in to assist Jules during pivotal moments. Repetitions reflect frequent references to key concepts, including Jules' ongoing discussions about the importance of work-life balance with other characters. Lastly, forcefulness reflects emphasis conveyed through tone, nonverbal cues, or narrative significance. For example, there were a few emotionally charged scenes where Jules had to confront her feelings about motherhood, highlighting the tension central to the work-life balance discourse.

4. Findings

Two themes emerge from the analysis – Normalized Work and The Ideal Worker Norm and Reverse Power Dynamics with Gender and Age. The first theme is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that working women and mothers are "jugglers" and must be constantly navigating between work and love, with the constant portrayals of a lack of boundaries and the need to set and negotiate some boundaries [1, 3, 10, 21]. The second theme talks about the power dynamics at play because the woman is in what may be seen as a role reversal (young female in an older male-dominated leadership role, older male intern in a young female-dominated starter role). The film calls into question what we know about women regarding work and life.

4.1. Normalized Work and the Ideal Worker Norm

This theme reflects how work seems to be normalized through both the characters of Ben and Jules as they navigate the ideal worker norms. The film starts with the phrase "work and love; love and work, that's all there is" (00:01:12 – 00:01:18); "keep moving; get up, get out of the house, and go somewhere, anywhere" (00:01:49 – 00:01:55). This was Ben describing his day as the film started. Schulte (2014) also said that no matter how you feel, dress up, show up, and never give up. She used this to describe the ideal worker. With this mindset, he found the flier advertising the senior intern position. Ben eventually is among the few interns that the company hires and goes back to work, even though he said from the beginning that his life during retirement is unhappy (00:02:46 – 00:02:57). The depiction provided highlights the idea that work holds significant importance and is a crucial aspect that cannot be overlooked or underestimated. Ben finishes his description with the phrase, "I still have some music in me" (00:05:42 – (00:05:48), which, in addition to the way Ben dressed throughout the movie, reinforces the ideal worker norms and normalizes work.

Drago's concept of the "motherhood norm" sheds light on the expectations placed on women by society to fulfill traditional gender roles, including motherhood, providing unpaid family care, and offering low-paid care for those in need [3]. This expectation often leads to women being unfairly burdened with caregiving responsibilities, limiting their ability to pursue other personal or professional goals. This was the reverse case for Jules. Jules was portrayed as a young, dynamic CEO with immense love and passion for work. She described herself as happy with all aspects of her life. Ku (2021) suggests some individuals find happiness in balancing their work and personal lives while still meeting the ideal worker standards, a phenomenon known as eudaimonic happiness. Alternatively, some research suggests that pursuing non-traditional career paths for women may lead to greater fulfillment [17].

Jules' husband was a stay-at-home dad, while Jules ran her growing business. According to Dempsey and Sanders' analysis, entrepreneurs tend to prioritize their company over their personal life, leading to a lack of work-life balance [2]. This often results in them spending long hours at work, taking on additional responsibilities, and neglecting their well-being. Dempsey and Sanders argue that entrepreneurs have the tendency to get buried in their business, and they may end up doing almost everything. But if people do everything by way of multitasking, it makes them less productive [2, 4].

Also, some researchers argue that the "ideal worker" is expected to prioritize work above all else, often at the expense of their personal life and well-being [3, 6, 10]. This includes arriving at work early, staying late, and failing to take advantage of vacation days. This expectation can lead to burnout and negatively impact the worker's mental and physical health. Despite shifts in family structure, Jules embodies the ideal worker with her ambition and low commitments outside of work. For example, Jules takes a customer service call, and below is the conversation with her assistant (PA) afterward:

Jules: Oh my God, how did that happen?

PA: (Walks in calling her) Jules?

Jules: I know, I know! I'm late for something.

PA: Yeah, everything

Jules: You see why I take customer service calls? I mean it's so good. You learn so much. Okay, what's up? What am I doing?

(00:07:14 – 00:08:00)

Jules gets on her bicycle while her PA follows her around, reading out the rest of the meeting itinerary to her. This portrayal makes Jules embody the idea of working mothers as jugglers [10, 13], only in Jules' case, she is juggling between so many office work commitments with little family obligations as her husband is a stay-at-home dad, who did most of the traditional roles that are assigned to women. Jules' boundary issues mostly had to do with having too many work commitments, especially with her desire to be hands-on with everything from taking customer service calls to teaching people how to fold clothes at the warehouse.

4.2. Reverse Power Dynamics with Gender and Age

There appears to be reversing power dynamics based on age and gender. The film does a good job trying to portray a young woman playing the role of CEO and an older man being assigned to her as an intern. However, the presence of an older male assigned to Jules perpetuates the stereotype that the middle-aged man is the leader and has a young, active woman as an assistant in a reversed form. When Jules was informed that Ben was going to be her senior intern, she vehemently pushed back against it with the excuse that she did do well with old people, using her relationship with her parents as a reference, with an extraordinary prejudice for older women (00:11:16 – 00:12:36). This representation fits the stereotype that older people can be troublesome [24]. Jules and Ben's relationship starts rather rough but progresses to some form of reverse mentoring. In several instances, Ben's experience as a senior came to the fore as he gave advice (both solicited and unsolicited) and provided good guidelines for Jules and most people in the workplace. There were big moments that fit into the societal expectational role of a senior male playing the role of a role model or mentor to younger people and raised the question of whether the reverse power structure portrayed in the film was a subtle way of perpetuating stereotypical power dynamics in organizations or challenging that traditional organizational setup. Some big moments and the transformational mentoring processes occur in these two separate conversations below.

First, after the conversation about finding a seasoned CEO, Jules sets out to meet one of the guys on the search list. Ben offered to drive Jules after he saw her assigned driver go

missing in action after Ben caught him drinking alcohol on the job, and he had to leave. When Ben finally dropped Jules off at her house, this conversation transpired:

Jules: I just wanted to say thank you for helping out with Mike today and for getting me chicken soup. Oh! And for cleaning that mess, that was awesome, seriously.

Ben: you're very welcome. (He hesitates as if he wanted to say something else)

Jules: It's okay, I really won't bite.

Ben: You started this business all by yourself a year and a half ago and now you have a staff of 220 people. remember who did that…and I hate to say it but try to get some sleep. (00:35:33 – 00:36:05)

In the traditional stereotypical organizational setup, where a middle-aged or older male was the boss, it would be normal for a character like Ben to offer such advice. With the reverse power dynamics portrayed in the film, Jules accepted the advice and showed a great deal of appreciation. In another scene, Jules is working late as usual, but this is the first time for Ben as her intern/ driver. Jules looked over and saw Ben behind his computer and walked over to his desk with her pizza box and drinks:

Jules: I hate eating alone.

Ben: (standing up at this point and trying to button up his suit) Absolutely!

Jules: You know, you don't have to keep doing that (referring to his standing ovation) …

Ben: (as they eat together) I noticed that a couple of hours ago you had a meeting with another possible CEO. I saw him arrive. How did it go?

Jules: It was going well until he called this place, the term he used was a chick-sake, and I didn't hear anything he said after that. Apparently, selling clothes makes us a chick-sake. I mean really? How is this not legit?

Ben: I couldn't agree more. I find that surprising.

The conversation continued, and Jules ended up helping Ben create a Facebook profile. As they got to the question "who inspires you?" Ben's answer was Jules Ostin, and this was his explanation: "I'm not trying to brown-nose you, but I have been in business for a long time, and I have never run across anyone quite kindda like you." Ben added that his favorite quote is "you are never wrong to do the right things." They realize they have some similar interest in the kind of music and books they like. As they wrap up the night:

Ben: this was great, Jules

Jules: Yeah! (smiling from chin to chin) it was nice having an adult conversation with an adult man. You know what I mean? Not about work, …

Ben: I know what you mean.

(00:51:00 – 00:56:06)

Another significant mentoring event occurred when Jules and Ben went to San Francisco to meet another possible CEO. They start to have a conversation about marriage in Jules' room, and she opens up about her failing marriage and how she found out her husband was cheating on her with a mom from her daughter's school.

Jules: It's a classic though, isn't it? A successful wife, a husband feels like his manhood is threatened, so he acts out? A girlfriend, I guess makes him feel like a man. You know what I mean? I'm not sure I know how to deal with that.

Ben: Hold on, hold on…you are not actually taking the wrought for any of this, are you?

Jules: No, no,..he is the one doing something wrong. I get that. Monogamish is not what I am after. I'm taking this up as an awful act of misjudgment, not love. And once we move through this, we will eventually be okay again. What do you think about that?

Jules continues to rant about how she knows things would work out between her and her husband if somebody else were calling the shots because she would have enough time for her family. Ben's response was this: "That's it. I hate to be the feminist here between the two of us. Still, you should be able to have a huge career and be who you are without having to accept that your husband having an affair is some payback" (01:35:00 – 01:40:08). Jules constantly asking for Ben's opinion all the time shows how she believes that because he is an older man, he has the experience to deal with most of the issues life throws at her. She goes back to Ben at his house for one last piece of advice before hiring the CEO, and this is Ben's response: "No one else is ever going to have that kind of commitment to your company, Jules. To me, it's pretty simple, About the Fit needs you, and if you don't mind me saying, you need it" (01:49:20 – 01:49:33). Ben's role help put a lot of things into perspective for Jules.

Again, when Ben walked into the office, his age was questioned. For example, one of the associates who interviewed Ben said "this is the first time we are hiring a senior intern. So, some of your questions may not exactly fit your profile, but we will go for it anyway." She went on to ask what college Ben attended and what his major was but added "do you remember?" as if being a senior means you become irrelevant in the workplace. (00:09: 45 – 00:10:08). Another instance is when Ben was asked the question, "where do you see yourself in the next ten years?" (00:10:40 – 00:10:46) Right after the interviewer asked the question, he retracted, realizing that the question was out of place for a senior who 70 years was already. The interviewer, by way of compliment, added, "you look great, I mean, you *still* look great, and you are way overqualified" (00:11:00 – 00:11:14). Finally, when Ben reports for the meeting with Jules that her PA set up, this conversation transpires between them:

PA: (Casually looking up from her computer) Hello

Ben: Hi, I'm Ben Whittaker, I have a 3:55 appointment with Miss Ostin

PA: (looking at her computer for confirmation) 3:55? I thought she was meeting with her new intern…

Ben: Yes, that's me. How are you doing?

PA: (chuckles and looks up from her computer surprised) I'm sorry but how are you an intern?

Ben: (very composed) There's a new senior intern program

starting today.

PA: Oh my God! (whispering) how old are you?

Ben: 70. And you?

PA: I'm 24. I know I look older. It's a job that ages you. Which would be great in your case. (realizing what she just said) sorry!

Ben: I actually thought you looked younger

PA: You bet

(00:16:47 – 00:17:24)

The whole expression during this conversation portrayed Ben as being in the wrong place. The latter part of the conversation presented age as some competition or older age as some abstract thing that is unpleasant to look forward to.

5. Implications

First, the portrayal of Ben from the beginning, where he had to find something to do after being on retirement for some time, in some ways, normalizes work and makes us think that we cannot live without work and that we must be constantly working to find fulfillment [3, 6, 11]. Ben's character also added that he had to go back to work because he still had some music in him, even though he is a 70-year-old man on retirement. So, as research on work-life balance is encouraging healthy strategies to improve work-life (such as having distinct work, love, and play times) and retire the ideal worker norm" (p. 279) [21], this portrayal of work, As Ben put it in the movie as "having a place to go every day" normalizes work and continues to perpetuate the ideal worker norms. Furthermore, Ben's overall dressing style serves as a visual cue that reinforces the societal expectations of an ideal worker, thereby normalizing the concept of work.

Second, Jules' characterization questions the leader-subordinate role in the organization, being the young female CEO and having a male senior intern of 70 years. Immediately, this may be seen as a good representation of challenging the status quo. However, throughout the movie, Ben does not just play the role of a traditional intern as we know it. Instead, their relationship becomes more of a reverse mentorship. This brings up the question of whether this portrayal is perpetuating the traditional structure and power dynamics in organizations where a middle-aged or elderly man (like Ben) is the boss and a young woman (like Jules) starting at an entry-level role such as an intern.

Furthermore, Drago's theory of the "motherhood norm" delves into the societal expectations placed on women to conform to traditional gender roles, particularly regarding motherhood, providing unpaid family care, and offering low-paid care for those in need [3]. This expectation often leads to women being unfairly burdened with caregiving responsibilities, which limits their ability to pursue other personal or professional goals. The implications of this phenomenon are wide-reaching, as it affects women of all socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, women who choose to prioritize their careers over family life are often stigmatized as being selfish or unfulfilled. Conversely, women prioritizing family life over their careers are often viewed as unambitious or lacking ambition. This societal expectation can also impact women's mental health, as the stress of balancing caregiving responsibilities with work and personal goals can take a toll on their well-being. However, in the case of Jules, the opposite was true. Jules didn't have to choose between family and work even though she came to the verge of making that decision, if not for Ben's timely advice and intervention. This portrayal conveys that it was possible to blend work with family life, and not having success in either sphere was not necessarily a result of not managing these two spheres well.

Even though none of the prospective CEOs were seen in the movie, they were all referred to as a 'he,' which raises the concern of whether her gender was part of why her investors were looking to replace her as CEO. Overall, Ben plays the feminist and becomes the hero despite being subordinate. He is the intern but has more experience and guides his "boss" through some significant decisions. This raises the concern of whether the female leader is challenging the traditional organizational structure or the role reversal is subtly perpetuating it.

6. Conclusions

The paper analyzed how *The Intern* as a cultural artifact portrays work-life balance and intersection through the characters of Ben and Jules and how such representation helps shape how people conceptualize work and life intersections in various ways. Through critical thematic analysis, the film presented the juggling nature of Jules's character and how that had a negative toll on her family, bringing her to the point where she had to choose between work and life. In this film, Ben says people don't have to do that and pushes against that idea, implying that it is possible to have a good balance between work and life and that one is not necessarily more important than the other. Both characters embodied the ideal worker norms, and work was normalized such that Ben left retirement to return to work as a senior intern, even though he said he was still happy with his life as a retiree. The role reversal mentoring was interesting, and I questioned whether the idea subtly perpetuates traditional organizational structure and norms or challenges them. Furthermore, the interesting twist is that Ben suggests in the movie that 21st-century women can have a fulfilling work life and a successful family life. Ben helps shape the narrative by supporting and challenging Jules to fight for her company and marriage.

Most existing and previous research has stopped at the challenges a woman leader faces with her work/life intersection. Still, the representation in this film took it a step further that it is possible to have a balanced work/life intersection by setting reasonable boundaries that make the passion for our work manageable (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010). Future research can follow up on this dimension to see if it has held up over the years.

Abbreviations

CEO   Chief Executive Officer

Author Contributions

Gertrude Misornu Nartey is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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