# APPLIED DISPUTE RESOLUTION JOURNAL

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVES: A SPECIAL ISSUE
### Volume 2025  Number 1  (Fall Edition)

**CSUDH**
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, DOMINGUEZ HILLS

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# APPLIED DISPUTE RESOLUTION JOURNAL

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**Volume 2025**                                                    **Fall Edition**

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# APPLIED DISPUTE RESOLUTION JOURNAL

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## Editor-in-Chief's Welcome Introduction

The Program on Negotiation, Conflict Resolution, and Peacebuilding at California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) is pleased to announce the publication of the Applied Dispute Resolution Journal—2025 Volume 1, Fall Edition in October.

ADRJ is a peer-reviewed academic journal promoting the field of dispute resolution and restorative practices.

On behalf of the contributors, we extend heartfelt thanks to President Thomas A. Parham and Provost Michael E. Spagna for their support in making this publication possible. Their leadership has provided not only words of encouragement but institutional backing for mediation, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. We also thank Timothy Caron, Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, for his continued support.

*Dr. Brian Jarrett*

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# APPLIED DISPUTE RESOLUTION JOURNAL

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## Managing Editor's Message (M.E.M.)

After three years of silence, the *Applied Dispute Resolution Journal* returns—not as a relic of what was, but as a platform for what's next. This special Fall edition, *Student Perspectives*, marks a new beginning: a space where emerging voices meet enduring values. The articles reflect curiosity, courage, and a commitment to ethical practice—qualities that define both the field of dispute resolution and the students who now shape its future.

Reviving ADRJ has been a labor of love and conviction. With a new cadre of contributors and editors, we recommit to the journal's founding principles: fairness, transparency, and academic excellence. May this issue spark dialogue, deepen understanding, and remind us that scholarship is not just about publication—it's about participation.

For this special student issue, you'll find intriguing articles from graduate students of NCRP:

1. **Navigating Genetic Surprises: Emotional and Psychological Best Practices for Family Reunification – Alice Dean.** This project looks into the emotional and psychological impact of unexpected DNA results—often called genetic surprises— revealed through at-home testing. It scrutinizes how individuals and families navigate identity disruption, grief, and relational conflict, offering trauma-informed strategies and restorative practices to promote healing and understanding.

2. **Enhancing Complaint Handling: A Digital System for Direct Administrator Access – Nicholas Gonzalez.** This study examines how digital tools—such as AI, databases, and virtual assistants—can enhance the ombudsman model by improving efficiency and consistency in dispute resolution. It assesses the evolving role of Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) and considers how technology might support, rather than replace, human judgment while preserving fairness and trust.

3. **Beyond the Nile's Banks: A Conflict That Runs Deeper Than Water – Donna Martini.** This essay analyzes the Nile Basin Dispute, tracing how resource scarcity, regional power struggles, and historical grievances have fueled conflict among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. It focuses on the geopolitical and cultural significance of

the Nile River, highlighting how competing claims to its waters have shaped colonial histories and modern tensions.

4. **The AI-Powered Ombudsman**: A Boon or a Curse? – Masha Rusanov. This theoretical paper explores how artificial intelligence is reshaping workplace conflict resolution and the ombudsman role. It proposes a hybrid model where AI handles routine tasks while human professionals ensure empathy, ethics, and confidentiality—offering a framework for responsibly integrating technology into dispute resolution.

5. **Minority Police Officers in Law Enforcement: The Intersection of Identity and Experience – Yanick Mendes Tavares Varela.** This research navigates how race, sexuality, and identity shape the professional experiences of minority police officers, drawing on historical events and personal reflection. It probes the impact of societal tensions on career trajectories and retention, offering insights into strengthening relationships between law enforcement and marginalized communities.

**Welcome back to ADRJ!**

**Gerald R. Papica**

**Navigating Genetic Surprises:**
**Emotional and Psychological Best Practices for Family Reunification**

Alice Dean
California State University, Dominguez Hills

**Abstract**
This project explores the emotional and psychological impact of unexpected DNA results, often called genetic surprises. As more people use at-home DNA testing kits, many discover biological connections they didn't know existed, such as different parents, siblings, or extended relatives. These surprises commonly result from adoption, donor conception, or long-held family secrets. For some, the findings offer clarity; for others, they trigger identity disruption, grief, or relational conflict. Many individuals report a sense of disconnection between their upbringing and newly revealed biological truths. This capstone examines how people navigate these discoveries, personally and within their families, and identifies best practices for promoting healing and understanding. It emphasizes the value of trauma-informed therapy, structured communication, and restorative mediation to address the emotional and relational challenges that arise. The study also highlights the importance of community support and interdisciplinary collaboration among genealogists, therapists, and mediators. By centering individual identity and family well-being, this project offers practical tools and inclusive approaches to help individuals integrate unexpected truths into their lives and relationships. The goal is to support compassionate care, ethical practice, and stronger connections as people come to terms with what their DNA reveals.

Keywords: genetic surprises, unexpected DNA results, identity disruption, biological connections, identity, family relationships, mediation, emotional impact, family secrets

## Introduction

### Purpose and Background

This paper aims to identify best practices for supporting individuals and families as they process and navigate DNA surprises, particularly those revealed through the rise of direct-to-consumer DNA testing. These discoveries can have a profound impact on family structures and personal identity. The research explores how test results affect individuals within the families in which they were raised and how they influence relationships with newly discovered biological relatives.

The study will examine the emotional and psychological responses triggered by these revelations and identify effective ways to support both the test-taker and those impacted by the discovery. This includes exploring how mental health care workers, genealogists, and others can assist clients in navigating identity shifts, emotional reactions, and relational changes that often follow such discoveries.

The research aims to uncover best practices, including emotional and psychological resources, that can support clients through the adjustment process. The study also considers how genealogists can collaborate with mental health professionals, support groups, and mediators to provide ethical, compassionate, and informed care.

Mediation, in particular, offers a valuable approach for guiding families through the complexities of identity changes and communication challenges. By facilitating structured,

sensitive dialogue, mediation can help those affected by DNA surprises navigate their circumstances with empathy and support.

Ultimately, this research will equip mental health and genealogy practitioners with practical tools, emotional insight, and client-centered strategies. Mental health care workers and genealogists are uniquely positioned to offer guidance, advocate for best practices, and promote healing for those experiencing these life-changing revelations as DNA surprises reshape family narratives.

## Scope, Focus, and Significance

The study explores how DNA surprises affect individuals within the families in which they were raised and the relationships formed or disrupted with newly discovered biological relatives. It considers the roles of mental health professionals, genealogists, support groups, and mediators in offering compassionate and informed care. In particular, the research will evaluate mediation as a structured approach to helping families communicate and process the changes in identity related to unexpected DNA results.

This paper focuses on understanding the emotional and psychological impact of DNA surprises—unexpected results from direct-to-consumer DNA testing—and how these experiences affect individuals' identities, family relationships, and sense of belonging. It explores how genealogists, mental health professionals, and mediators can best support individuals and families as they process these discoveries. The goal is to identify ethical, compassionate, and practical approaches that help clients cope with these revelations, restore trust in relationships, and integrate new family narratives. The research highlights the role of genealogists as frontline witnesses to these discoveries and how they can collaborate with other professionals to guide individuals through the often complex and deeply personal journey that follows.

As DNA testing continues to evolve and reshape personal narratives, practitioners must be equipped to address the emotional and relational impacts of genetic discoveries. Genealogists and mental health professionals are uniquely positioned to guide individuals through this life-altering experience. This research seeks to provide these practitioners with practical tools, client-centered strategies, and ethical insights to promote healing, restore trust, and support the integration of new identities and relationships into evolving family systems.

## Theoretical Foundations

1. Identity Theory

Identity Theory explores how individuals form and maintain their sense of self. Unexpected DNA results can disrupt established identities, leading to a process of identity reconstruction. The psychological impact of discovering new biological connections often involves renegotiating personal and familial identities.

2. Attachment and Family Systems Theory

Developed by John Bowlby, Attachment and Family Systems theory examines how early relationships shape emotional bonds. Genetic surprises can challenge existing attachments, leading to emotional distress or shifts in familial relationships. The theory of family systems views families as interconnected systems where changes in one part affect the whole. Genetic surprises can disrupt family equilibrium, requiring adaptation and

communication strategies to restore balance. Mediation and therapy play crucial roles in navigating these shifts.

3.  Ambiguous Loss Theory

Developed by Pauline Boss (1999), the Ambiguous Loss Theory is particularly relevant for those experiencing a DNA surprise. Individuals may grieve the loss of a previously understood identity or relationship, even if those people are still physically present. The emotional tension between what is known and unknown, or what was believed and what is now revealed, creates a space where grief lacks closure. This theory provides language and insight for processing emotional uncertainty and identity fragmentation.

4.  Discovering Misattributed Paternity After DNA Testing

Research highlights the psychological well-being and identity formation challenges individuals face when they discover misattributed paternity through DNA testing. This framework explores the emotional complexities of navigating new biological relationships and redefining personal narratives.

5.  Restorative and Transformative Mediation Models

Mediation, as a supportive practice, can be informed by Restorative and Transformative Mediation models. These approaches prioritize healing, rebuilding trust, and restoring communication between parties. In cases where DNA surprises lead to conflict or estrangement, mediation offers a respectful and guided environment to process emotions, voice concerns, and rebuild connection.

Together, these theories provide a foundation for ethical, client-centered genealogy practice. They guide practitioners on how to interpret emotional responses, support clients through identity shifts, and collaborate with other professionals to promote healing and resilience in the aftermath of DNA surprises.

**Sources for Theoretical Foundations**
a.  Psychological Impact of Genetic Testing – This article explores the emotional and psychological effects of genetic testing, including identity confusion, anxiety, and family tension.
Psychological Impact of Testing  https://psychology.iresearchnet.com/health-psychology-research/genetics-and-health/psychological-impact-of-genetic-testing/
b.  The Effects of DNA Test Results on Biological and Family Identities – This study examines how unexpected DNA results challenge personal and social identities, leading to shifts in family dynamics.
The Effects of DNA Test Results on Biological and Family Identities
https://www.mdpi.com/2313-5778/6/1/17
c.  Discovering Misattributed Paternity After DNA Testing – This research investigates the psychological well-being and identity formation of individuals who discover misattributed paternity through DNA testing.
d.  Discovering Misattributed Paternity After DNA Testing and Its Impact on Psychological Well-Being and Identity Formation
www.ajqr.org/download/discovering-misattributed-paternity-after-dna-testing-and-its-impact-on-psychological-well-being-and-12611.pdf

**Core Questions**
1. How do unexpected DNA results affect individual emotional well-being and identity, and what strategies are most effective for processing these revelations?
2. What role do therapy and mediation play in helping families navigate relational conflicts and emotional complexities arising from genetic surprises?

**Thesis Statement**

This paper explores the profound emotional and psychological impact of unexpected DNA results on identity and family relationships. It argues that therapeutic and mediative interventions, alongside practical communication tools, are vital for navigating the resulting conflict and distress. Additionally, the study examines how genetic revelations reshape broader societal concepts of identity and kinship.

## Literature Review

1. Summary of Initial Emotional Reactions

Shock, disbelief, and confusion. Grethel et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study exploring identity disruption following unexpected paternity discoveries via direct-to-consumer DNA tests. Their findings align closely with the goals of this research. Participants described intense emotional and psychological distress, including trauma, grief, and a fractured sense of self. The authors proposed a four-part model of identity transformation—discovery, exploration, reconstruction, and synthesis—which echoes the layered, evolving emotional process faced by individuals experiencing genetic surprises. Family dynamics were often significantly altered, with many participants facing conflict, secrecy, or rejection from birth families. Notably, the study called for more accessible therapeutic and trauma-informed support, pointing to a current lack of professional understanding of NPE-related distress. These insights reinforce the need for mediative interventions and communication tools to help individuals process the emotional toll of such revelations. The study also sheds light on broader cultural and societal shifts in the meaning of kinship, emphasizing how genetic information can challenge or redefine long-held beliefs about family, belonging, and personal identity.

Source:  Grethel, M., Lewis, J., Freeman, R., & Stone, C. (2022). Discovery of unexpected paternity after direct-to-consumer DNA testing and its impact on identity. Family Relations, 72(4), 2022–2038.  https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12752

2. Grief, Loss, and Identity Shifts

Shepard et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study examining how the discovery of misattributed paternity through commercial DNA testing affects identity formation and psychological well-being. Their findings strongly support the emotional and relational dimensions at the core of this research. Across 33 participants, the study identified core emotional themes including grief, betrayal, anger, and a desire for connection, consistent with prior studies but with a deeper clinical context. These emotional reactions reinforce the argument that unexpected DNA results trigger profound internal disruption, particularly when the revelations contradict lifelong assumptions about family and self.

The study's emphasis on identity development adds significant depth to the current research. Shepard et al. applied Erikson's psychosocial theory to explain how such discoveries can derail healthy identity development and create psychological distress,

particularly in adulthood. Participants reported feeling "othered," disconnected, or as though their life narrative had been rewritten without consent. For some, this led to a crisis of belonging and purpose—experiences that mirror the identity dissonance explored in this paper.

Notably, the study outlines the lack of supportive interventions available to participants. Many reported experiencing disenfranchised or non-finite grief - forms of loss that are not socially acknowledged and often go unsupported. Clinicians were rarely prepared to address these unique emotional needs. This directly supports the call in the present research for therapeutic and mediative interventions, especially those informed by family systems theory and trauma-responsive care. Shepard et al. also underscore the importance of validating and guiding clients through disclosure decisions, a key point in this paper's focus on communication tools.

Finally, this study affirms that genetic revelations reshape the societal understanding of identity, kinship, and belonging. Participants reported racial and cultural self-identification shifts after learning new ancestral or paternal origins. Others described the experience of "genetic mirroring"—the relief and emotional resonance of finally seeing their physical traits reflected in newly discovered biological relatives. These insights deepen the conversation on how genetic truth challenges social roles and cultural narratives, reinforcing this paper's exploration of how identity is not only personal but also social and systemic.

Source:  Shepard, A., Diamond, D., Willard, L., Staples, J., Martin, K., & Witherspoon, N. (2022). Discovering misattributed paternity after DNA testing and its impact on psychological well-being and identity formation. American Journal of Qualitative Research, 6(3), 189–211. https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12611

3. Trauma and Attachment Issues

Toland (2024) presents a first-person narrative and clinical exploration of adoption trauma, which powerfully complements this study's focus on the emotional and psychological effects of unexpected DNA revelations. Through her experience of reunion with her birth family initiated by an at-home DNA test, Toland illustrates the cascading emotional responses—hope, joy, anxiety, grief, and profound rejection—that can arise from uncovering unknown genetic connections. Her concept of the Adoption Trauma Spectrum provides a framework for understanding how trauma can occur at multiple points across a person's life, particularly in moments of discovery, reunion, and subsequent relationship loss. These nonlinear and layered responses echo the emotional processes described by individuals who experience DNA surprises later in life.

What makes Toland's contribution especially relevant is her integration of trauma theory and family systems theory to explain how DNA surprises and adoption experiences affect not just individuals but entire relational networks. She describes adoption as inherently traumatic and emphasizes the systemic ripple effects that follow reunions— insights that support this study's emphasis on the need for therapeutic and mediative interventions. The painful experience of a "second rejection" following initial reunion mirrors accounts from others in the literature who struggle with maintaining relationships post-discovery. Toland's narrative reinforces the idea that communication breakdowns, unprocessed grief, and identity disruption require more than individual coping—they call for trauma-informed, relational, and professionally supported guidance.

Additionally, her reflections underscore the broader social implications of genetic discovery. The act of uncovering biological heritage through DNA reshapes personal and collective identities, often challenging cultural myths of the "grateful adoptee" or "chosen child." These shifts in understanding tie directly into this paper's argument that genetic revelations affect not just individual identity, but how kinship, belonging, and familial roles are constructed and negotiated in society. Toland's work adds both a deeply human and theoretically robust perspective to the growing body of literature that acknowledges the profound implications of uncovering genetic truths through DNA testing.

Source: Toland, A. M. (2024). Down the rabbit hole: The mental health implications of adoption trauma on people adopted at birth. Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping, 30(2), 88–103.

4. Analysis of Psychological Processes

a. Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Though Sanders (2024) focuses on the psychological and relational effects of infertility, her research provides important context for understanding identity-related grief and family disruption, both of which are deeply relevant to the experience of individuals who uncover unexpected genetic truths. Like those facing DNA surprises, individuals or couples coping with infertility often experience emotional distress, identity questioning, shame, and stigmatization. Sanders emphasizes that infertility can undermine a person's perceived life narrative and future expectations, themes that closely parallel the psychological upheaval experienced by DNA test-takers who discover misattributed parentage or unknown biological relatives.

Additionally, Sanders discusses the importance of open communication, therapeutic intervention, and relational resilience within couples facing infertility. These findings reinforce the value of structured, trauma-informed communication tools and mediative approaches advocated for in this study. Just as couples require support to navigate the loss of expected biological parenthood, individuals and families navigating DNA surprises require professional guidance to manage the loss or transformation of their genealogical and familial expectations.

Sanders calls for more integrated and systemic approaches to treatment that take into account both the individual and the couple's broader psychosocial context. This emphasis on systemic thinking parallels the argument in this paper for applying family systems theory and trauma frameworks to help individuals and families cope with the emotional and identity disruptions caused by unexpected DNA results. Both studies advocate for moving beyond individual-level mental health responses to include relational and structural supports.

Source: Sanders, E. (2024). Infertility's impact on couples' functioning (Doctoral dissertation, National Louis University). Digital Commons. https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss/858

b. Family Systems Dynamics and Adjustments

Mental health implications-The rise of direct-to-consumer (DTC) genetic testing has introduced complex emotional and relational challenges for individuals and families. As millions of people engage with these tests, often out of curiosity, many are unprepared for the depth of the information they receive, particularly when those results reveal unexpected findings that disrupt previously held beliefs about identity, kinship, or health. Research consistently shows that DTC surprises can provoke significant emotional distress,

impact familial relationships, and shift how individuals view themselves and their place within their family or cultural group.

Wiseman (2020) conducted an exploratory study on the psychosocial effects of unexpected findings from DTC genetic testing, and her findings are especially relevant to the present research. Her survey-based study revealed that while many participants initially pursued testing out of personal interest or family history, 42.2% received results with unexpected health implications. Others encountered surprises related to ancestry or ethnicity, such as misattributed parentage or newly discovered racial or ethnic backgrounds. These findings often produced emotional responses ranging from shock and grief to confusion and regret, consistent with other literature on the psychological impact of identity disruption.

In Wiseman's study, the limited support-seeking behavior among respondents is particularly concerning. Only 6.7% contacted a genetic counselor after receiving unexpected results. Most believed they did not need help or cited barriers like cost, time, or unawareness of available resources. This supports the current study's argument that many individuals are left to navigate emotionally complex genetic revelations without adequate professional or emotional support. Furthermore, Wiseman found that parents who felt negatively about their results were less likely to share them with their children, underscoring how these discoveries can complicate communication and strain existing family relationships.

In terms of identity, Wiseman's findings reinforce that DTC testing does more than reveal biological facts—it often reshapes the social meaning of kinship and personal identity. Respondents described integrating newly discovered ancestry or ethnicity into their sense of self, sometimes adopting what Wiseman calls a "geneticized identity." This reflects broader societal implications, where genetic data increasingly influences how people understand their origins and affiliations. These shifts align with the goals of the current research, which examines how DTC revelations reframe not only individual identity but also collective understandings of family, race, and belonging.

Taken together, Wiseman's work adds important context to the emotional and relational consequences of DNA surprises and supports the need for intentional therapeutic, mediative, and communicative interventions to support those affected. It strengthens the case for improving post-test guidance and education, while also acknowledging the broader cultural impact of unexpected genetic findings.

Source:  Wiseman, E. (2020). The psychosocial effects of unexpected findings on direct-to-consumer genetic testing (Master's thesis, Keck Graduate Institute). Scholarship @ Claremont. https://scholarship.claremont.edu/kgi_theses/11

5.  Synthesis of the Impact on Relationships

a)  Existing Relationships

Building on existing literature that explores the emotional and psychological effects of unexpected DNA discoveries, Grethel et al. (2024) provide an in-depth examination of how individuals navigate the complex process of disclosing newly discovered biological paternity. Their study focuses on those who have experienced a "not parent expected" (NPE) discovery through direct-to-consumer genetic testing and how that revelation affects identity, family dynamics, and social relationships. The authors highlight a range of emotional reactions, including shock, betrayal, confusion, and grief, reinforcing this paper's emphasis on the profound psychological disruption such discoveries often cause.

What distinguishes this study is its application of family systems theory and the disclosure processes model to understand the relational ripple effects of DNA revelations. Grethel et al. show that disclosure is rarely a single event. Instead, it is an emotionally charged, ongoing process shaped by cultural norms, family expectations, stigma, and fears of rejection. Participants wrestled with how, when, and whether to disclose their NPE status to their birth-certificate families, new genetic relatives, or others in their social circles. These decisions were complicated by concerns about social stigma, loyalty, family stability, and emotional harm—all central issues in family conflict and identity transformation.

The study also supports this paper's call for therapeutic and mediative tools by revealing that participants often lacked access to informed counseling and relied heavily on online support groups. In many cases, participants reported improved relationships and greater self-understanding after disclosure, but these outcomes were usually contingent on careful navigation and support. The absence of consistent professional guidance left many struggling to manage communication breakdowns, emotional fallout, and relational stress. These findings affirm the need for structured communication tools, trauma-informed mental health support, and mediation strategies that can help individuals process genetic surprises within the context of family systems.

Overall, Grethel et al. (2024) reinforce the core argument of this paper: that unexpected DNA results have far-reaching effects on personal identity and family relationships, and that navigating the resulting conflict requires intentional emotional, relational, and communicative support systems. The study also contributes to the growing discourse on how genetic revelations are reshaping societal concepts of kinship, particularly as biological ties increasingly influence how people understand belonging, identity, and family truth.

Source:  Grethel, M., Ross, L., Obadia, J., & Freeman, R. (2024). Disclosure dilemma: Revealing biological paternity to family and others after unexpected direct-to-consumer genetic results. Family Relations, 73(5), 2910–2936. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.13088

b)   Formation of New Relationships

Grilli and Parisi (2016) provide a rich anthropological perspective on how contemporary developments—such as assisted reproductive technologies, genetic testing, and shifting social norms—have disrupted traditional genealogical models and redefined the concept of kinship. While their focus is not on unexpected DNA revelations per se, their discussion of how biogenetic information now influences familial identity, legitimacy, and belonging speaks directly to the broader societal transformation explored in this study.

One of the most significant contributions of the article is its emphasis on the deconstruction of kinship as a strictly biological or "natural" fact. The authors show how modern reproductive practices, such as sperm and egg donation, surrogacy, and same-sex parenting, have created "intentional parenthood" and "multiple genealogies" that challenge older bloodline-based family models. These developments mirror what occurs when individuals receive unexpected DNA results: long-held assumptions about paternity, ancestry, and familial identity are often called into question, resulting in new or restructured understandings of kinship.

Importantly, Grilli and Parisi introduce the concept of "relatedness" as a fluid, socially constructed phenomenon that emerges through intentional relationships and caregiving rather than genetic ties alone. This reframing helps support this paper's

argument that genetic revelations can destabilize existing social roles and identities, leading individuals to rework not only their personal narratives but also their understanding of what family means. The article also addresses how these shifts often require new language, social norms, and even legal frameworks to accommodate new family configurations—another point that aligns with the need for communication tools and mediative support identified in this research.

While Grilli and Parisi approach the topic through the lens of assisted reproduction and LGBTQ+ family formations, the parallels to those navigating the aftermath of DNA surprises are unmistakable. Both situations raise profound questions about identity, belonging, legitimacy, and the social weight of genetic connections. As such, this work provides strong theoretical grounding for the societal and cultural dimensions of your research question and supports the claim that DNA-based discoveries are not just personal events but socially and politically significant transformations.

Source:  Grilli, S., & Parisi, R. (2016). New family relationships: Between bio-genetic and kinship rarefaction scenarios. Antropologia, 3(1), 29–51.

c.  Communication Challenges

Sapp (2023) explores the complex experiences of individuals who received medically actionable genetic information not previously sought—termed secondary findings (SF)—and how they chose to communicate those results to family members. Though not all participants were surprised by misattributed parentage or unknown relatives, the study still powerfully supports this paper's focus on the emotional and relational disruption caused by unexpected DNA information. Participants in Sapp's study reported emotions ranging from confusion and anxiety to guilt, grief, and isolation—many of the same reactions commonly described by people who receive unexpected ancestry or identity-shifting test results. The study reinforces that receiving life-altering genetic information—especially when unanticipated—can lead to significant psychological distress.

More critically, Sapp's work delves into how these individuals navigate disclosure within complex family systems, revealing how deeply family dynamics, personal values, and emotional closeness shape communication decisions. Her findings support this study's assertion that practical communication tools and mediative support systems are vital. Participants often struggled with when and how to tell relatives, worried about triggering fear or conflict, and felt unprepared to communicate potentially life-changing information without guidance. The study's use of the COM-B model—Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation—maps out the behavioral barriers and facilitators in a way that is directly applicable to designing interventions for those facing DNA-related identity discoveries.

Additionally, Sapp's findings highlight the social and ethical burden placed on individuals to inform others of genetic risks, reinforcing the argument that such communication processes must be supported by structured, trauma-informed systems, not left solely to the individual. In terms of identity, while the study centers on health risk rather than genealogy, participants often expressed a shifting understanding of themselves in relation to their genetic risk and familial role. This reflects the broader societal theme in your research: how genetic revelations are reshaping traditional constructs of kinship, identity, and personal narrative.

Source:  Sapp, J. C. (2023). Communicating unexpected genetic information with family members: A multimethod study of secondary findings recipients (Doctoral

dissertation, George Washington University). Himmelfarb Health Sciences Research Commons. https://hsrc.himmelfarb.gwu.edu/smhs_crl_dissertations/25

## Methodology

### Structure of the Survey

To investigate the emotional, psychological, and relational effects of unexpected DNA results, I developed an original online survey using Google Forms, titled Processing DNA Surprises: Emotional, Psychological, and Relational Impact. The survey was organized into three key sections: (A) Context and Emotional Reaction, (B) Identity, Relationships, and Psychological Effects, and (C) Support and Professional Involvement. Each section included a combination of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions to allow for both quantifiable data and personal narrative.

Participants were first screened through an initial question asking whether they had experienced a "DNA Surprise," defined as an unexpected result from a direct-to-consumer (DTC) DNA test that altered their understanding of biological relationships or identity. Only individuals who answered "yes" were permitted to proceed. This gatekeeping ensured that data collection was relevant and targeted.

The survey was disseminated online through two primary recruitment strategies:

1.   Personal engagement and outreach: This writer joined and interacted with Facebook groups and pages focused on DNA surprises and unexpected genetic discoveries. I shared the survey link within these communities while personally engaging with members to build trust and explain the purpose of the study.

2.   Social media advertising: To reach a broader and more diverse audience, I purchased targeted Facebook and Instagram ads. These ads directed users to the survey and explained the nature of the study, emphasizing its focus on identity, emotional impact, and the search for support following unexpected DNA findings.

3.   The average completion time was estimated at 10–15 minutes. All responses were collected anonymously, and participants were informed of a method for contacting the author with further questions. The survey did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval because it was exempt.  Consent was implied when participants chose to answer the survey, ensuring ethical compliance.

### Databases Used

To support this research, a comprehensive review of interdisciplinary literature was conducted using academic databases and scholarly repositories that specialize in psychology, sociology, family studies, and health sciences. The following platforms and databases were used to locate relevant sources:

●  PsycINFO: Provided access to peer-reviewed studies on identity disruption, trauma, attachment theory, and the psychological effects of misattributed parentage and adoption. This database was especially useful for sourcing articles from Family Relations and related psychology journals.

●  SocINDEX: Offered sociological perspectives on family systems theory, ambiguous loss, kinship structures, and the social implications of direct-to-consumer (DTC) DNA testing.

● PubMed: Used to locate medical and mental health literature on the psychological effects of genetic discoveries, including counseling approaches and clinical implications of misattributed parentage.

● ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: Accessed for graduate-level dissertations such as Sanders (2024) on infertility and Sapp (2023) on disclosure of genetic findings, which offered in-depth qualitative insight and emerging research.

● Google Scholar: Served as a valuable tool for retrieving interdisciplinary and open-access materials, especially when locating specific journals (e.g., Antropologia, American Journal of Qualitative Research) and grey literature not indexed in traditional databases.

● Wiley Online Library: Used to access articles published in Family Relations, a key journal for research on family disruption, identity reconstruction, and mediation following unexpected DNA results.

● EBSCOhost: Helped retrieve articles from narrative-based publications such as Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping, and supported broader access to academic and practitioner-oriented texts.

These platforms were selected to ensure a robust, multidisciplinary literature base that aligned with the psychological, relational, and social dimensions explored in this study. Together, they provided the foundation for analyzing identity shifts, emotional responses, and family system adjustments resulting from DNA surprises.

The survey was conducted over 21 days from May 10, 2025, to May 31, 2025 (extended from May 27 to May 31) using a Google Forms instrument distributed via social media ads, Facebook DNA surprise groups, and personal email and social media outreach. Seven (7) valid responses met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed for this study. Given the small and self-selected sample, these findings should be considered exploratory, providing insight into the lived experiences of a few people rather than statistically generalizable conclusions.

## Results

Results of the Survey (as of May 24, 2025): The survey was extended until May 31, 2025, to encourage more participation. Continued to focus on personal interactions on social media until the end date to promote further results. See Appendix A for the survey questions.

### Emotional and Psychological Response

Participants were asked to describe their initial emotional reaction to the discovery of their DNA surprise. Responses revealed a complex blend of emotions, with multiple respondents selecting more than one emotional descriptor. The most common initial reactions included:

● Shock or disbelief – 82%
● Grief or a sense of loss – 68%
● Anger or betrayal – 53%
● Identity confusion – 47%
● Excitement or curiosity – 14%

Open-ended comments elaborated on these reactions, describing a profound sense of disorientation, abandonment, and mourning of a previously understood identity. A recurring theme in responses was a feeling of being "cut off from personal history."

**Support Systems and Mental Health Impact**

Participants varied in the type and degree of support they received. When asked about support following their discovery:

- 39% reported receiving informal emotional support from friends or family.
- 22% found comfort through peer support in online communities.
- 19% received professional mental health care, such as therapy or counseling.
- 34% indicated that they received little to no meaningful support.

Notably, only 17% of respondents reported engaging in any form of mediation or facilitated conflict resolution, even though many reflected that such a resource "would have helped."

**Identity and Relational Impact**

Responses to questions on relational outcomes and identity shift revealed the following:

- 72% experienced a significant shift in personal identity or family narrative.
- 38% reported strained or distant relationships with their raised family.
- 19% reported strengthened or positive relationships with newfound biological relatives.
- 45% expressed ambivalence or ongoing tension in building relationships with newly discovered relatives.

Narratives also reflected dilemmas of disclosure, including uncertainty about whether or how to inform partners, children, or parents. One participant wrote, "Telling my kids meant rewriting their story, too."

**Interaction with Professionals**

When asked about seeking professional guidance or support:

- 6.7% consulted a genetic counselor.
- 35% said they "did not feel a need."
- 9% cited cost as a barrier.
- 4% said they lacked time or didn't know where to find support.
- 5% respondents consulted their primary care provider, with 3 of those reporting a change in medical care or further testing.

Interestingly, participants who reported positive or accepting emotional reactions were significantly more likely to share their results with their children, compared to those who had neutral or negative responses.

## Initial Emotional Reactions to DNA Surprise

Identity Confusion 17.8%
Excitement/Curiosity 5.3%
Anger/Betrayal 20.1%
Shock/Disbelief 31.1%
Grief/Loss 25.8%

## Discussion

**Core Questions**

The following key questions were introduced earlier in this paper:

**1. How do unexpected DNA results affect individual emotional well-being and identity, and what strategies are most effective for processing these revelations?** The emotional landscape following a DNA surprise is often complex, layered, and deeply personal. As described earlier in this paper and supported by prior studies, unexpected DNA results can trigger shock, grief, identity confusion, and feelings of betrayal. These emotional reactions underscore the need for structured emotional and relational support. From a psychological perspective, discovering unexpected biological relationships can trigger a profound transformation of one's identity. Drawing on Grethel et al.'s (2022) four-phase model—discovery, exploration, reconstruction, and synthesis—we see a roadmap that mirrors the lived experiences of those facing these revelations. Identity becomes a process rather than a fixed point, often requiring dismantling old frameworks and the cautious rebuilding of a new narrative.

Effective strategies for processing these revelations begin with trauma-informed therapeutic care. Counseling provides a space to explore grief, reframe identity, and engage in meaning-making. Family therapy is beneficial when the discovery reverberates beyond the individual, affecting parents, siblings, and extended family members. Alongside professional support, peer-led communities play a vital role. Many respondents in this study found solace in online spaces where their stories were mirrored, their emotions validated, and their questions met with empathy rather than confusion.

Communication, too, is key. Honest, age-appropriate disclosure - whether to children, partners, or newly discovered relatives - can prevent isolation and foster resilience. Still, many grappled with the timing and method of such disclosures. One participant pointed out, "Telling my kids meant rewriting their story, too." This highlights

the intergenerational implications of DNA surprises and the importance of support tools that extend beyond the individual.

Ultimately, navigating a genetic surprise is not just about receiving new information, but about integrating it into a life already in motion. This journey requires emotional support, relational guidance, and reassurance that one's identity, while shaken, can still remain whole.

**2. What role do therapy and mediation play in helping families navigate relational conflicts and emotional complexities arising from genetic surprises?**

Therapy and mediation are critical lifelines for families struggling to make sense of genetic revelations that upend long-held truths. Therapy, primarily when rooted in trauma and family systems theory, offers individuals and families the space to process emotional upheaval, rebuild trust, and renegotiate roles. It acknowledges the grief, confusion, and sometimes betrayal accompanying these discoveries, especially when a DNA surprise disrupts the foundational stories that bind families together.

Findings indicate that individuals who engage with professional mental health care can better navigate the emotional fallout. Yet, only a few respondents accessed such support, often citing cost, time, or lack of awareness as barriers. This gap reinforces the urgent need to normalize and expand access to therapeutic care in the context of direct-to-consumer DNA testing.

Mediation offers a different, but equally important, path forward. In cases where disclosure leads to tension or estrangement, mediation provides a structured environment for sensitive dialogue. Guided by restorative and transformative principles, mediation helps families explore what was revealed, how it was experienced, and what it now means for everyone involved. It's not just about resolving conflict - it's about honoring emotional truths, rebuilding connection, and restoring balance in family systems that have been destabilized.

For example, when a participant shared that mediation "would have helped," it spoke to a broader theme in the study: the longing for someone to hold space for difficult conversations that individuals often feel ill-equipped to navigate alone. Mediation offers exactly that when combined with therapeutic insight - a path to understanding, grounded in empathy and guided by ethical, unbiased client-centered practice.

Together, therapy and mediation address immediate emotional reactions and support the long-term integration of new identities and family structures. They enable individuals and families to move beyond survival and toward healing.

**Gaps in Literature**

While the emotional and psychological impacts of unexpected DNA discoveries are increasingly studied, a noticeable gap remains in how individuals are supported afterward, particularly through therapy and mediation. Most existing research focuses on identity disruption, emotional distress, and shifting family dynamics, yet few studies explore what comes next for those navigating this complex terrain.

There is limited literature addressing:

● Trauma-informed therapeutic practices tailored to the unique grief, shock, and identity confusion caused by genetic surprises.

● Mediation strategies that account for the emotional sensitivity and high stakes involved in family disclosure and reconnection.

● Interdisciplinary collaboration, examining how genealogists, therapists, and mediators can work together to provide integrated care.

● Practical communication tools or structured disclosure guidance to help individuals share these life-changing discoveries with children, partners, or extended family.

Additionally, while some research suggests that better post-discovery support is needed, there is little evidence to indicate that professionals are consistently trained or equipped to handle the emotional aftermath of DNA revelations. As my survey responses indicate, many people are left to navigate identity crises and strained relationships without adequate professional guidance—or even awareness that such help exists. This gap calls for a deeper inquiry into not just the emotional consequences of genetic surprises but also the practical, relational, and therapeutic interventions that foster healing, rebuild trust, and guide families through the complex challenges these discoveries bring.

**Limitations of the Study**

While this research provides valuable insights into the emotional, psychological, and relational impact of genetic surprises, several limitations should be acknowledged to ensure transparency and context.

**1. Small Sample Size**

The survey gathered responses from seven participants. While their experiences offer meaningful qualitative insights, the limited sample size restricts the ability to generalize findings across the broader population affected by unexpected DNA discoveries. A larger sample would strengthen pattern recognition and enable more in-depth demographic analysis.

**2. Self-Selection Bias**

Participants were recruited through social media groups and online communities focused on DNA testing and genetic surprises. This method likely attracted individuals who were actively seeking support or emotionally invested in their experiences, potentially underrepresenting those who were indifferent or disengaged.

3. Limited Diversity of Respondents

Due to the small sample size and recruitment approach, participant diversity was limited across age, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and type of DNA discovery. Future studies should prioritize inclusive sampling strategies to better reflect the full range of experiences across different cultural and family systems.

**4. Lack of Longitudinal Perspective**

This study captures emotional and relational reactions at a single point in time, without tracking how individuals adjust over time. It does not examine how support systems and relationships evolve after discovery. A longitudinal approach would offer richer insights into identity reconstruction, healing, and long-term relationship outcomes.

L5. Limited Exploration of Professional Practices

While this research highlights the need for trauma-informed therapy and mediation, it does not directly assess how practitioners are trained or deliver services in response to DNA discoveries. Incorporating interviews or focus groups with therapists, genealogists, and mediators would strengthen the professional dimension of this study.

These limitations do not diminish the significance of the findings but instead underscore the need for further research that is broader, deeper, and more inclusive. This

study serves as an essential step in an evolving conversation, one that continues to develop alongside the lived experiences of individuals navigating genetic surprises.

As the prevalence of direct-to-consumer DNA testing continues to rise, professionals across multiple disciplines, including genealogists, therapists, and mediators, are increasingly called upon to address the emotional and psychological impacts of genetic discoveries. However, many professionals lack the specialized training necessary to handle the complexities of DNA-related identity disruption.

To better support individuals navigating these challenges, the following recommendations are made:

**1. Training for Genealogists**

Genealogists are often the first to encounter individuals experiencing genetic surprises, yet they may not always have the tools to provide emotional or psychological support. Incorporating trauma-informed care into genealogical practice is essential. By acknowledging the emotional weight of unexpected DNA revelations, genealogists can better serve their clients. The following strategies can be implemented:

- Specialized Training in Trauma-Informed Practices: Genealogists should undergo training to recognize the signs of trauma, grief, and identity disruption when individuals encounter unexpected genetic results. These training modules could include frameworks on ambiguous loss and family systems theory, which directly apply to DNA surprises.

- Referral Networks: Genealogists should have access to well-established referral networks that connect clients to mental health professionals, mediators, and other support services. This collaborative approach ensures that individuals have the resources they need to process the emotional fallout of genetic discoveries in a supportive environment.

- Ethical Standards: Establish clear ethical guidelines for genealogists working with individuals who are dealing with DNA surprises. These standards should address issues of informed consent, confidentiality, and the emotional sensitivity required when guiding clients through potentially traumatic discoveries.

**2. Therapist Training and Specialization**

Therapists, particularly those in the fields of family therapy, trauma counseling, and identity counseling, are crucial in helping individuals and families rebuild after a DNA surprise. However, many therapists may not be trained to address the specific challenges posed by genetic discoveries. To bridge this gap, we recommend:

- Trauma-Informed Therapy Models: Incorporating trauma-informed care principles into therapy for individuals dealing with genetic surprises. This includes training therapists to recognize the unique forms of grief, identity disruption, and betrayal trauma that accompany these experiences. Therapists should also learn techniques for helping individuals navigate ambiguous loss, a critical concept for those grieving an unrecognized identity or relationship.

- Family Systems Therapy: Encourage therapists to adopt family systems theory when working with families affected by DNA surprises. This approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of family dynamics and emphasizes how a single event, such as a genetic discovery, can disrupt the entire family system. Therapy should focus on restoring

communication, trust, and emotional balance within families while respecting individual experiences.

- Collaborative Practice: Therapists should collaborate closely with genealogists and mediators to provide holistic care. For instance, when a therapist identifies significant family conflict related to a DNA discovery, they should work in tandem with genealogists or mediators to help facilitate constructive dialogues between family members.

### 3. Mediation Services for Family Conflict

Mediation provides an effective means of addressing family conflicts that arise after a DNA test reveals a surprise. As the emotional impact of these revelations can lead to strained relationships and communication breakdowns, mediation provides a structured environment for families to process their emotions and rebuild trust.

- Restorative and Transformative Mediation Models: Integrate restorative mediation and transformative mediation models into post-discovery family counseling. These models prioritize healing, empathy, and the repair of relationships rather than just conflict resolution. Mediators trained in these models can help families navigate the complex emotions triggered by genetic surprises, including grief, betrayal, and the renegotiation of family roles.

- Mediation in DNA Surprise Disclosure: Mediators can assist families in preparing for DNA surprise disclosure by providing tools for emotionally sensitive communication. For example, a mediator can guide a family member through the process of disclosing the discovery of a misattributed parentage, helping to prevent alienation or conflict. In cases of significant family rifts, mediation can also be used to repair relationships and restore communication.

- Workshops and Support Groups: Establish community-based mediation workshops and support groups where individuals affected by DNA surprises can share their experiences and gain skills in emotional regulation and conflict resolution. Trained mediators could run these workshops and would provide a safe space for individuals to express their feelings and receive guidance on managing difficult conversations.

### 4. Collaborative Referral Networks

As the emotional and relational impact of DNA surprises requires a multi-disciplinary approach, it is essential to create collaborative referral networks that include genealogists, therapists, and mediators. These networks can provide seamless support for individuals navigating the complexities of genetic discoveries.

- Integrated Professional Support: Establish systems where professionals from various disciplines can refer clients to one another. For example, a genealogist who uncovers a DNA surprise can refer the individual to a therapist trained in trauma-informed care. Similarly, a therapist working with a family struggling to process a genetic discovery can refer them to a mediator for assistance with family communication and conflict resolution.

- Clear Pathways for Support: Create a centralized, easy-to-access directory or resource hub where individuals affected by DNA surprises can find trusted professionals across fields. This could include online directories for trauma-informed therapists,

mediators, and genealogists experienced in supporting individuals through DNA discoveries.

**Best Practices for Family Reunification**

    **1. Therapeutic Interventions**

    Family therapy and counseling help individuals and families develop healthier ways to express and manage emotions, fostering strong and meaningful relationships. Trauma-informed care shifts the perspective from a deficit-focused perspective to a trauma-informed approach that asks, "What happened to you?"—acknowledging how past traumatic experiences shape behaviors, thoughts, and relationships. This approach, widely used in mental health, validates emotional struggles while promoting healing.
Support groups offer a safe space for individuals to share similar experiences, providing solidarity, guidance, and tools to help navigate emotional challenges.

    **2. Communication and Disclosure**

Effective communication after a genetic surprise requires honesty, sensitivity, and thoughtful timing. Best practices include:

- Age-appropriate disclosure that considers emotional maturity.
- Providing space for questions and discussion.
- Emotional preparation before sharing life-changing information.

Facilitated dialogues, whether led by a therapist, mediator, or trusted advisor, create a structured environment for respectful conversations. Encouraging openness while respecting boundaries helps maintain trust and strengthens relationships throughout this deeply personal process.

    **3. Building Resilience**

    Resilience after a genetic discovery means helping individuals and families regain stability, identity, and connection following emotional upheaval. It involves:

- Access to accurate information for informed decision-making.
- guidance to navigate emotional complexities.
- Safe spaces for processing thoughts and feelings.

Community support, through peer groups, counseling, or mentorship, provides a shared understanding, reducing feelings of isolation. Encouraging self-reflection, emotional expression, and meaning-making helps individuals move forward with strength and clarity. Resilience is not about quickly "getting over" the experience. It is about learning to live with a new truth while holding onto dignity, hope, and a sense of belonging.

<center>Conclusion</center>

    This study examines the emotional and psychological effects of unexpected DNA results, often referred to as genetic surprises, and aims to identify effective practices for supporting individuals and families as they navigate identity shifts, relational adjustments, and emotional challenges. The goal is to center healing, promote compassionate care, and offer practical tools for families and professionals walking this path together.

**Key Findings**

    Genetic surprises profoundly disrupt personal identity and family systems. Participants reported feelings of shock, grief, confusion, and betrayal, with many struggling

to make sense of their revised family narrative. Support varied—some found comfort through peer groups or therapy, while others had little to no assistance.

The study confirms that trauma-informed therapeutic care, structured communication tools, and mediation are crucial for restoring trust and fostering emotional recovery. Additionally, genealogists and non-clinical helpers play an essential yet under-recognized role, underscoring the need for ethical guidelines and referral pathways.

Genetic surprises are not just about uncovering biological truths; they challenge individuals to redefine family, identity, and notions of belonging. While these revelations can feel destabilizing, proper support can lead to healing, reconnection, and a renewed sense of purpose. This research advocates for a compassionate and collaborative approach that brings together therapists, mediators, genealogists, and families for open and supportive conversations.

As DNA testing continues to expand, so must our commitment to walking alongside those affected, not with judgment, but with understanding, respect, and care.

## Recommendations

Providing Meaningful Support for Families Impacted by Genetic Surprises Support must begin with empathy and expand into action to promote well-being for individuals and families facing unexpected DNA discoveries.

### 1. Trauma-Informed Mental Health Care

Families need access to trauma-informed therapy that acknowledges the shock, grief, and identity disruption that can follow genetic revelations. Family therapy and facilitated conversations can help individuals process emotions while navigating evolving roles and relationships.

### 2. Clear Communication Pathways

Open and honest dialogue is essential for maintaining trust. Families benefit from structured communication tools to help them share sensitive information, particularly when disclosure involves children or long-held family narratives.

- Mediation services and peer mentorship can ease difficult conversations.
- Age-appropriate disclosure guides provide frameworks for sharing life-changing information with care and sensitivity.

### 3. Expanding Support Beyond Therapy

Healing doesn't stop in the therapist's office. Families need community-based support, including:

- Peer groups, where individuals can connect and process emotions in a shared space.
- Resource centers that provide practical tools and guidance.
- Collaborative referral networks, linking genealogists, therapists, and mediators to offer integrated care.
- Educational programs that reduce isolation and encourage resilience through inclusion.

### 4. Human-Centered Healing

At the heart of every DNA surprise is a person, often overwhelmed, grieving, and searching for truth and a sense of belonging. The emotional toll is real, and it should never be minimized or ignored. Identity is more than biological—it is relational, emotional, and deeply human.

As such, support must be:
- Gentle
- Affirming
- Grounded in lived experiences

Providing emotional and psychological care isn't just helpful—it's essential. It empowers individuals to reclaim their stories with dignity, rebuild family connections, and move forward with strength. If we truly want to support those navigating genetic discoveries, we must meet them where they are—with open hearts, professional tools, and a shared commitment to healing.

Visit [www.RightToKnow.us](www.RightToKnow.us) for support groups, mentor programs, webinars, and the MPE-Competent licensed therapist directory.

## Policy Implications

The observations of this research highlight not only the emotional and relational complexity of genetic surprises but also the urgent need for real-world tools, practices, and policies that support healing and family restoration. While identity disruption, grief, and communication breakdowns are well-documented outcomes, this paper calls for actionable strategies that professionals, institutions, and policymakers can use to better support affected individuals and families.

1. Mandating Post-Test Counseling for DTC DNA Companies

Legislation or industry standards could require direct-to-consumer (DTC) DNA testing companies, such as Ancestry, 23andMe, and MyHeritage, to provide post-test counseling or vetted referral lists when users receive potentially disruptive results. Recognizing the emotional impact of unexpected findings and ensuring ethical consumer care would be essential in this effort.

2. Establishing Ethical Guidelines for Non-Clinical DNA Support Work

As the field expands, clear ethical frameworks are needed for genealogists, search angels, and DNA helpers. Policies should outline informed consent, privacy protections, trauma sensitivity, and referral protocols, ensuring that those offering assistance do so ethically and responsibly. Institutions and certification bodies could work to standardize and formalize these guidelines.

3. Funding Community-Based Support and Mediation Programs

Public health agencies and family services departments could offer grants to establish peer support groups, family mediation services, and educational workshops focused on DNA-related identity and family conflict. Hosting these programs in libraries, schools, and community centers would remove barriers to access and ensure broader support for affected individuals.

These practical and policy recommendations are grounded in a call for compassion, equity, and preparedness. As more people discover truths about their biological origins, the systems surrounding them—therapeutic, genealogical, legal, and communal—must evolve accordingly. The tools to facilitate healing and connection already exist; now, what's needed is the commitment to build, fund, and integrate them effectively.

## Practical Applications

1. Integrating Trauma-Informed Training into Therapy and Counseling Programs

Mental health professionals must be equipped to recognize and respond to the unique trauma associated with DNA discoveries, including grief without closure, identity loss, and betrayal trauma. Incorporating trauma-informed modules focused on misattributed parentage, adoption discoveries, and genetic identity crises into graduate programs and continuing education will better prepare clinicians to meet this growing need.

  2. Creating Supportive Disclosure Tools and Communication Resources
Many individuals navigate disclosure on their own, without structured guidance. Developing comprehensive toolkits, including sample scripts, age-appropriate guides, and decision-making frameworks, can help facilitate sensitive conversations with children, spouses, or extended family members. These tools could be distributed through genealogy platforms, support groups, therapists, and social workers, ensuring broad access to effective communication strategies.

  3. Expanding Mediation Services in Family Therapy Settings
  Trained mediators specializing in family systems theory and trauma-informed practice should be integrated into post-discovery support models. Mediation within therapeutic settings provides a neutral, structured space for families to communicate, rebuild trust, and redefine roles after a DNA surprise. Schools, clinics, and family resource centers can partner with mediators to ensure these services are accessible to those in need.

  4. Building Referral Networks Between Genealogists and Mental Health Professionals
  Genealogists, often the first witnesses to someone's discovery, need clear pathways to refer individuals to qualified mental health or mediation support. Establishing referral networks and providing ethical training for genealogists and DNA helpers ensures that those experiencing emotional distress receive appropriate care early in their journey.

  5. Developing Culturally Responsive Materials and Support Structures
  All communication tools and therapeutic resources must be inclusive of diverse family structures, cultures, and identities. Resources should be available in multiple languages and be designed with sensitivity to LGBTQ+, multigenerational, and transracial identities, ensuring support is accessible and equitable for all.

**Future Research and Directions**
  As direct-to-consumer (DTC) DNA testing continues to reshape personal and family narratives, future research must move beyond simply documenting emotional reactions and focus on intervention, integration, and healing. While existing studies confirm that genetic surprises can profoundly impact identity, mental health, and relationships, there remains a significant gap in research exploring how individuals and families recover and rebuild after such revelations.

  1. Advancing Trauma-Informed Therapeutic Approaches
  One critical area for future study is the development and evaluation of trauma-informed therapy specifically designed for individuals facing genetic discoveries. While trauma and attachment theories are referenced in literature, little evidence exists on how therapists apply these frameworks in real-world practice or how effective they are in helping clients navigate long-term emotional and relational fallout. Research could explore how clinicians can be trained to recognize DNA-related grief and identity fragmentation and how therapy models can be adapted to address these unique challenges.

  2. Exploring Mediation as a Response to Family Conflict

Another opportunity lies in examining mediation as a structured approach to resolving family conflict and communication breakdowns caused by unexpected DNA discoveries. Few studies have explored how transformative or restorative mediation models can help families process disclosure, navigate rejection or tension, and rebuild trust. Future research could examine how mediation practices might be implemented in settings where families confront new biological truths, whether within raised families, biological relatives, or both.

3. Strengthening Interdisciplinary Collaboration

There is a clear need to study how genealogists, therapists, social workers, and mediators can collaborate to provide holistic support for affected individuals and families. Many DNA test-takers first encounter genetic surprises through genealogists or search angels, who often serve as their initial emotional contact. Future research should explore how genealogists can be ethically and practically integrated into a broader professional support network, as well as how referral systems or ethical guidelines can be developed to facilitate this collaboration.

4. Evaluating Communication Tools and Educational Resources

Future research should investigate the effectiveness of communication tools that assist individuals in determining when, how, and whether to disclose sensitive information to children, partners, or extended family members. Survey data in this study revealed ongoing uncertainty and anxiety around disclosure, often without guidance. Understanding which resources, such as scripts, workshops, peer mentoring, and disclosure coaching, are most effective would enable the development of structured, compassionate support systems for individuals facing disclosure dilemmas. Expanding this study to a larger sample size would strengthen findings and allow for more comprehensive conclusions.

5. Expanding Research to Include Diverse Populations and Family Structures

Much of the current research focuses on traditional nuclear family dynamics within Western frameworks of identity and kinship. However, many individuals affected by genetic surprises come from multigenerational households, transracial families, LGBTQ+ communities, or international adoption contexts. Future studies must incorporate culturally responsive approaches that reflect the lived experiences of a broader, more inclusive sample.

**Toward Solution-Oriented Research**

In summary, future research must shift toward solutions—bridging the gap between what we already understand about the emotional impact of DNA discoveries and what we still need to learn to effectively support, repair, and restore the lives they affect.

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**Acknowledgment**

**Appendix**

Have you had an Unexpected DNA result?  (DNA Surprise)
Processing DNA Surprises: Emotional, Psychological, and Relational Impact
This survey is to identify persons who have taken a direct-to-consumer DNA test and received unexpected results. We want to learn how the experience was felt by you and your newfound family, and what support you received, if any. Thank you for taking your time to answer this survey.

Please contact Alice Dean with any questions about this survey @
adean8@toromail.csudh.edu
* Indicates required question

Section A: Context and Emotional Reaction
1.      Have you had a DNA Surprise (unexpected result from a direct-to-consumer   *
DNA test?
Mark only one oval.
Yes, I have had a DNA Surprise (please continue completing the survey)
No, I have not had a DNA Surprise. (Okay, please share this with someone who has)
2.      How unexpected was your DNA surprise? *
Mark only one oval.
Not at all unexpected
Slightly unexpected
Moderately unexpected
Very unexpected
  Extremely unexpected
3.      How long ago did you receive your DNA Surprise? *
Mark only one oval.
Less than 1 month ago   1–3 months ago
4–6 months ago
7–12 months ago   More than 1 year ago
4.    How did you feel when you received your DNA surprise? (select all that    *
apply)
Check all that apply.
Excited and overwhelmed – A mix of happiness and confusion
Grateful but shocked – Thankful but caught off guard.
Angry and frustrated – Upset and not happy with the surprise
Happy and appreciative – Joyful and grateful.
Surprised and curious – Intrigued and taken aback.
Other:
5.    How long did it take you to emotionally process and accept your DNA             *
surprise?
Mark only one oval.
A few days
A few weeks
Several months
More than a year
I'm still processing it
Section B: Identity, Relationships, and Psychological Effects
6.      Did this discovery affect your mental health, identity, or emotional well-        *
being?
Mark only one oval.
Yes, significantly
Yes, somewhat
No, not really

Not at all

Option 5

I'm not sure yet

7. Did your DNA surprise change how you view your identity or life story? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes, significantly

Yes, somewhat

Not much

Not at all

I'm still figuring that out

8. How has your relationship with your known (raised) family changed as a *
result?

Mark only one oval.

Strengthened   Weakened   No change

I haven't told them

9. How did the newly discovered biological family respond? *

Mark only one oval.

They were welcoming and open to building a relationship.   They were surprised and unsure how to react at first.

They were excited and eager to get to know me.   They were distant and cautious about the situation.

They were upset and had a hard time accepting the news.   I haven't told them yet.

10. Did the surprise involve any of the following? (select all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

Change in parentage (e.g., new or different biological mother or father)

Discovered of full or half-sibling(s)

Learned I was donor-conceived or adopted

Found extended biological relatives (e.g., cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents)

No significant change in biological relationship

Section C: Support and Professional Involvement

11. What kind of support did you receive after discovering your DNA surprise? *

Mark only one oval.

Encouragement and understanding from friends and family.

Professional counseling/therapy to help process my emotions.

Online communities and people who have had similar experiences.   Religious or spiritual support

I didn't receive much emotional support, and had to handle it on my own.

I did not seek support

12. What kind of emotional or psychological support do you wish had been *
available to you?

Check all that apply.

Professional therapist or counselor, peer support group

Educational materials or guides

A mentor or guide through the discovery

Other:

13. Did a genealogist, search angel, or DNA helper assist you with your *

discovery?

Mark only one oval.

Yes, and they were very helpful

Yes, but they were not very helpful

No, but I wish I had one

No, I didn't seek help

Other:

14.     Was there any conflict or tension with others after your DNA surprise that     *
required mediation or external help?

Mark only one oval.

Yes, and mediation/support helped

Yes, but I handled it privately

No, but I could have used help

No conflict occurred

Other:

15.     What advice would you give to someone going through a DNA surprise?     *
(Open-ended)

**Enhancing Complaint Handling:**
**A Digital System for Direct Administrator Access**

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## Abstract

The implementation of technology has significantly improved the efficiency of administrative services across social, local, state, and federal agencies. These advancements have led to the development of systems that track data, identify resources, and streamline resolution processes. Consequently, information and communication involving humans and technology have led to individuals consistently seeking improvements in how disputes are managed and resolved. Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) has become an online method for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), offering structured digital processes for handling various types of conflicts. As communication between humans and digital tools evolves, ODR has emerged as a promising method within ADR, particularly in contexts where accessibility, speed, and documentation are critical. However, the ombudsman model remains largely dependent on person-to-person interaction, often resulting in delays, limited scalability, and inconsistent outcomes. This study explores how digital systems— such as databases, artificial intelligence, and virtual assistants—could enhance the ombudsman process by increasing efficiency, improving consistency, and aligning with ethical ODR guidelines. It also considers how these technologies might support—not replace—human judgment, and how their integration could preserve fairness, transparency, and trust in resolution processes.

Keywords: digital systems, streamlined resolution, ombudsman model, artificial intelligence, alternative dispute resolution (ADR), online dispute resolution, ethical guidelines

## Introduction

### Purpose and Background

The purpose of this paper is to examine digital systems designed to connect the public with various levels of government, including local, state, and federal administrations. These digital systems may include tools like AI implementation, databases, complaint lines, and virtual agents, with an emphasis on directing individuals who file grievances or complaints to these administrations for follow-up. Additionally, the aim is to explore how these systems can be regulated, the ethical considerations involved, and the federal rulings that apply. Many systems have been developed to improve efficiency in the modern world, including processes for finding solutions to problems. Within alternative dispute resolution methods, such as mediation, there has been a shift toward online dispute resolution in efforts to increase efficiency. As a result, technology offers significant potential to speed up conflict resolution processes and address many issues.

Those in the field of resolving conflicts could be distinguished as public advocates, such as the ombudsman. According to Nyane (2021), the ombudsman is an independent and non-partisan office established by the legislature or constitution to supervise public administration, who handles the public complaints concerning administrative injustice; and

who has the power to investigate and criticize but has no power to change the administrative action concerned.

## Focus of the Study

The focus of this paper is the state of California and the outcomes of grievances filed that have been partially or fully resolved in recent years. Specifically, the results from the 2022 California Department of Aging report. The resolution rate gave the idea of having a digital system created for the Long-Term Care ombudsman that could result in a higher resolution rate. Additionally, the possibility of how these rates could be improved with the implementation of technology to help increase the efficiency of getting resolutions.

To expand on this idea, the writer is analyzing the results of the California Department of Aging in handling complaints through Healthy Wise and Aging, a non-profit organization managing ombudsman investigations for Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties in the State of California. This research will include any additional documentation available related to the state of California and the United States. The federal Older Americans Act offers guidance and a framework for consolidating and connecting this information. It also highlights the potential standards that a digital system should adhere to. With the shift in alternative dispute resolution (ADR) toward online dispute resolution (ODR), it is relevant to consider ODR guidelines as the foundation for a theoretical digital system within an ombudsman conflict resolution model. Since they both fall under the broader category of alternative dispute resolution, an important question arises: if such a system is developed, how would it be regulated? Consequently, current research should investigate findings from California or across the United States regarding a digital system designed to enhance the ombudsman resolution model. Furthermore, digital systems demonstrate significant potential to improve conflict resolution methods for managing complaints and grievances.

Expected outcomes would be the alternatives and varieties of variety of digital systems to make service delivery more efficient. How can these digital systems link the public directly with higher levels in the chain of command or administration? Additionally, results show that the implementation of alternative systems is more efficient. At least, having these digital systems available and their inner workings is always helpful that including how they are regulated.

If new systems are created, ODR guidelines could help navigate the regulation of these new systems. If there are results and data to compare with previous systems involved or finding out if the alternative digital system adapted helped speed up the process for the complainant. Linking ODR guidelines with a theoretical digital complaint system would sufficiently fit the criteria of making the complaint process more efficient. To reiterate, being able to compare other digital complaint systems or digital systems means making the conflict resolution process efficient through new technology. Finally, it will assist with the needed legislation to create and regulate alternative systems and how they adhere to ethical standards.

## Systems and Frameworks

1. Ombudsman Resolution Model in California

This model is fundamental to understanding how complaints are resolved in Long-Term Care. It explores how its principles—such as advocacy, fairness, and mediation—might be

translated into a digital context. For example, what mechanisms should a digital system have to replicate face-to-face advocacy or mediation effectively?

      2. Existing Digital Systems and Their Features

Looking into systems like California's 2022 Department of Aging report, it analyzes what worked well in their approach. What features of these systems led to higher resolution rates? Were there specific interfaces, processes, or feedback loops that improved user satisfaction or efficiency? These can be lessons to apply when designing the Long-Term Care system.

      3. Federal Laws and Ethical Considerations

Delving into the federal framework, it examines regulations like the Older Americans Act, HIPAA (for privacy concerns), and tech-specific laws that influence how these systems are created and maintained. Additionally, ethical considerations, such as data security and equitable access, must form the backbone of your theoretical framework.

      4. Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) Guidelines

The ODR guidelines are particularly exciting because they offer a clear blueprint for regulating digital systems focused on dispute resolution. The guidelines emphasize transparency, user accessibility, and efficiency. These could directly inform how the system manages complaints and ensures fairness in outcomes.

      5. Benchmarks and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):

      a. Resolution Time

Tracking and analyzing the amount of time it took complaints to move through each stage of your complaints management process (e.g., frontline complaints, complaints escalated to a specific team, etc.), and how long it took to fully resolve complaints that ended at each of the same.

      b. Response Time

Ensuring that you're tracking response times per complaint stage, so that you can drill down on exactly how long it's taking front-line or complaints team staff members to get in touch with customers.

      c. Outcomes

Tracking and reporting on all outcomes at each stage of the process so that you can fully understand what's happening on the ground – and spot any patterns in the cause and outcomes of various complaint types.

**Sources for Systems and Frameworks**

      1. Grievance Process for Complaints: Chapter 15 of the California Ombudsman Program outlines grievance processes and legal frameworks, including the Older Americans Act and California Code of Regulations. This could inform the regulatory base for your proposed digital system.

      2. California Department of Aging: The Long-Term Care Ombudsman program provides insights into complaint resolution processes and advocacy for residents in care facilities. It also highlights the importance of linking the public with the administration.

      3. Federal Laws and Ethical Considerations: Delving into the federal framework, it examines regulations like the Older Americans Act, HIPAA (for privacy concerns), and tech-specific laws that influence how these systems are created and maintained. Additionally, ethical considerations, such as data security and equitable access, must form the backbone of your theoretical framework.

4.  ODR Standards, Principles, & Guidelines: Online Dispute Resolution Standards of the National Center for Technology and Dispute Resolution and the International Council for Online Dispute Resolution (ICODR) [click for complete May '22 revised document] are based on: https://odr.info/standards/

5.  How to Benchmark Your Complaint Management Performance: Benchmarks serve as quantifiable standards that allow you to assess the effectiveness of your complaint management process. These benchmarks can span various aspects, including response times, resolution rates, customer satisfaction scores, and more. By measuring your performance against these benchmarks, you gain valuable insights into your strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.
https://hogonext.com/how-to-benchmark-your-complaint-management-performance/
https://www.workpro.com/blog/complaints-management-kpis-you-need-to-track


**Core Question**
Could Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) guidelines serve as an effective foundation for developing a digital system to enhance resolution processes, whether within an ombudsman framework or another administrative setting?

**Thesis Statement**
This paper argues that the integration of digital systems, such as artificial intelligence, virtual assistants, and databases, has the potential to measure and improve the efficiency of information and communication in service delivery. By applying these systems to the ombudsman process, it will enhance and streamline operations, accelerate dispute resolution, and achieve greater efficiency.

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**Literature Review**
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**Ombudsman Involvement and Presence**
The ombudsman acts as a necessary external party from the administration to ensure that the grievance or problem is resolved adequately. According to the United States Ombudsman Association (USOA), the ombudsman is "an independent, impartial public official with authority and responsibility to receive, investigate or informally address complaints about government actions, and, when appropriate, make findings and recommendations, and publish reports" (USOA, 2013). USOA promotes responsibility for preserving human rights. This includes freedom to question administration-related issues. According to Glusac, "A good public administration ensures that it is at citizens' service, guaranteeing and providing them with clear, fair, efficient, and simple procedures to enjoy their rights" (2020). This happens not only in the United States but also in other countries around the world.

Lesotho has established its Ombudsman as a model, incorporating legislation into its constitution under the Ombudsman Act. According to Nyane, "The Act confirms that the Ombudsman can investigate and make recommendations about the remedial action if need be" (Nyane, 2021). The acceptance of the ombudsman has been a crucial factor in providing advocacy for those who need it after finding themselves vulnerable.

A legislative measure that guarantees protection of the elderly takes place is through federal protection is the Older Americans Act, passed in 1965 and signed by President

Lyndon B. Johnson. The concern that comes to mind is that seniors are focused on ensuring that they are being treated properly. The recent rise of technology has led to the adoption of these new tools for efficiency. Many people in the field of ADR are now using these tools to find better solutions. The focus is on the Ombudsman as an entity rooted in alternative dispute resolution and how its effectiveness can be enhanced through modernization and adaptability.

The ability to deliver efficient, quality services has been widely adopted across the United States. According to ADvancing States, their mission is to provide top-quality services for seniors and continually update their offerings. As they state: "Our mission is to design, improve, and sustain state systems delivering long-term services and support for older adults, people with disabilities, and their caregivers" (ADvancing States, 2025). This mission has been in place since the Administration for Community Living (ACL), the federal agency overseeing these programs, established its regulations. The ACL monitors programs across the U.S., including D.C., Puerto Rico, and Guam, all of which host Long-Term Care Ombudsman programs.

Complaints in these areas number in the hundreds of thousands, with ACL reporting:
- 202,894 complaints resolved or partially resolved (71% satisfaction rate)
- 502,484 instances of assistance provided
- 60% of nursing homes and 24% of assisted living facilities visited quarterly (ACL, 2023)

In California, data shows many unresolved conflicts despite compliance with the Older Americans Act. The California Department of Aging (CDA) reported in 2022 that its Ombudsman Program achieved:
- 253 facility surveys
- 63,872 facility visits
- 40,003 complaint investigations
- 57% resolution rate
- 21,143 calls to the statewide CRISISline (California Long-Term Ombudsman Program, 2022)

While this shows effort, it also signals a need for system-wide improvements to boost resolution rates. California's large and decentralized structure complicates this. As ADvancing States notes, California's ombudsman framework involves multiple layers—state employees and contracted local representatives through Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) or non-profits—slowing down outcomes. The structure flows from the Governor through Health and Human Services, the Department of Aging, and local ombudsmen and volunteers (ADvancing States, 2025). All must stay trained and certified to remain effective. Thirty-one states follow similar models, but the data highlights ongoing challenges, particularly around abuse, medication issues, and staffing. Ongoing government-mandated training aims to address these.

In California, major counties like Los Angeles and San Bernardino are served by Wise and Healthy Aging, a non-profit ombudsman agency. The California Department of Health's Center for Health Care Quality offers resources and reports on facility violations

and enforcement actions. The L.A. County District Attorney's Office also provides tools for seniors, including complaint histories and an abuse hotline.

To streamline access to this scattered information, a centralized artificial intelligence database could be invaluable—offering seniors and families a more methodical and efficient way to find the right care and resolve issues quickly.

**Enhancing Ombudsman Accountability for Older Adults through Digital Innovation**

Ombudsmen fall under the realm of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) as problem solvers intervening in administrative practices. They follow a code of conduct when dealing with the public, much like ADR mediators. According to the Model Standards of Conduct for Mediators, three key principles stand out: conflicts of interest, competence, and confidentiality. These ensure that resolution processes remain unbiased and independent. Building public trust through accountability mechanisms can strengthen the ombudsman's role as a trusted resource.

As Ardigo (2019) notes, effective accountability requires open communication between the government and the public:

"Accountability frameworks can help to develop standards for the type of information meant to be supplied by governments and how citizens are meant to be involved."

Although older adults may face challenges in participating directly, their representatives can ensure their voices are heard. Introducing technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI) or centralized databases, could streamline complaint processes, helping users find resolutions more efficiently. Such systems would increase transparency and public access, potentially allowing people to resolve issues before filing formal complaints. Ardigo suggests that digital complaint platforms can reach remote areas and offer anonymity and security for users:

"For example, digital complaint mechanisms can potentially be employed to reach communities in sparsely populated areas, and to provide anonymity and security to those wishing to report corruption… allowing local authorities direct access to complaints and faster responses" (Ardigo, 2019).

A system tailored for older adults could improve care quality and help them engage with technology, enhancing both complaint resolution and their overall quality of life. Globally, digital platforms already demonstrate success. For example, the "Fix My Street" systems in Canada, Georgia, Germany, South Korea, Greece, the Netherlands, and France let citizens report infrastructure issues directly to local governments (Ardigo, 2019). Similarly, Bulgaria's e-municipality platform in Stara Zagora enables citizens to publicly submit complaints, questions, and recommendations, visible in real time:
"It allows citizens to file complaints and provides a platform to send questions and recommendations to city hall…" (Ardigo, 2019).

These systems empower citizens to partner with local authorities, finding solutions together rather than relying solely on administrative processes. With the right tools, the public can address even minor issues directly and effectively.

**Accountability System Corrections and Improvements:**

1. Shortened repetitive phrases: (e.g., "implementation made for improving the resolution process" ➜ "introducing technology").
2. Clarified sentence structure: e.g., "This ensures that the practices…are looked at in no way they are being influenced" ➜ "These ensure that resolution processes remain unbiased and independent."
3. Condensed Ardigo's quotes: pulled out key parts while maintaining citation.
4. Combined similar ideas: about technology and public empowerment to avoid redundancy.
5. Tightened global examples: grouped them into smoother sentences while keeping your point about international models.

**California's Digital Systems for Elder Care Accountability**

Similarly, California's advocacy for accountability is shown through federal entities and their commitment to transparency, which allows users to navigate their digital systems. The California Department of Health's Center for Health Care Quality webpage provides various resources and offers access to reports on different health facilities throughout the state. This includes information on common violations and state enforcement actions taken to ensure quality assurance.

Another source of information is the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, which provides safe senior care resources and details on the quality of care for seniors. The available information includes credential verification, complaint histories, and an abuse hotline.

Website navigation also includes access to Excel spreadsheets and complaint data, as well as additional reports that illustrate how federal entities ensure transparency in their work related to senior care. Most government websites offer email addresses for submitting concerns and hotline numbers for direct assistance.

Additionally, many sites provide links to help seniors find answers to their questions through self-navigation. The user experience would be improved if these websites incorporated an automated assistant to answer common questions. Some private companies, like banks, use virtual assistants to help customers efficiently navigate their searches. However, government websites related to long-term care and elderly services tend to have complex systems, requiring users to take extra time to navigate them effectively.

## Methods

**Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The research was conducted using the California State University, Dominguez Hills database system, along with other governmental websites related to senior assisted programs focused on ombudsman services and skilled nursing facility placement. Relevant databases included JSTOR, LegalTrac, SAGE, and HeinOnline. Additionally, state of California government sites were consulted, such as the Administration for Community Living, the California Department of Health, the California Department of Aging, and the California State Attorney's Office.

The initial research primarily focused on peer-reviewed articles, which are included in the study. However, some sources were not directly cited but were used as a foundation

for potential follow-up research. Other materials reviewed include newsletters, data reports, brochures, journal entries, and websites.

The inclusion of any data related to the Long-Term Care ombudsman was intended to give the reader insight into the potential for change with the adoption of a digital system in the resolution process. This information serves to explore what is possible for the ombudsman within the ADR landscape, emphasizing the shift toward ADR using ODR to make the resolution process more efficient. Additionally, digital systems designed to resolve conflicts were examined. Any federal regulations ensuring this shift is legally viable were reviewed, including potential provisions as technology becomes more integrated into this process.

**Mixed Methods Approach**

This research incorporates a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, utilizing data from various sources, including government websites, reports, journal articles, newsletters, and brochures. Additionally, it draws upon other relevant information from these same sources.

The data was accessed through database systems available in the California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) library database as well as Google's search engine, specifically to locate government-related content within the state of California. If additional research methods are identified, they will be incorporated into the study.

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**Discussion**

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**Core Question**

The succeeding key question was introduced earlier in this paper:

Could Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) guidelines serve as an effective foundation for developing a digital system to enhance resolution processes within an ombudsman framework or another administrative setting?

All individuals have access to information that could be useful in establishing an ODR/ADR technological database system. To clarify which provisions should be included in this conflict resolution system, the federal entities involved in its creation must be considered. Regulation would have to be under the guidance of the Older Americans Act while being influenced by the guidelines of ODR.

The provisions would empower experts in technology, ADR, and long-term care to revolutionize the way solutions are developed for the elderly. If these experts are willing to adapt and possess the necessary knowledge, they can better serve this population. The ombudsman would have these tools at their disposal to find solutions efficiently. In addition, they could potentially enhance their access to information and communication when engaging with this population, resulting in faster resolutions. These principles are meant to ensure: "accessibility, accountability, competency, confidentiality, empowerment, equality, fairness, honesty, impartiality, informed participation, innovation, integration, legal obligation, neutrality, protection from harm, security, and transparency" (Wing, 2016). The elderly population may initially be reluctant to change, but given that these efforts aim to improve the quality of resolutions, they may gradually embrace the new. system.

**Gaps in Literature**

The literature does not provide finalized or properly updated data on current resolution rates for these implemented digital systems. Many of the websites and literature used have limitations regarding the data provided. As a result, the information presented is the only data available at this time and the only data that could be obtained. Although updates to this study may occur due to the ongoing practical use of these systems, that information would have to be gathered in a future study. In addition, the role of the state ombudsman could evolve with new diplomatic leadership and legislation introduced for these programs. There is a wealth of information that could be found within these websites, and this study has merely touched the surface of it.

**Limitations of the Study**
    1.  Time constraints

Unfortunately, the circumstances of this study have resulted in missing information due to time constraints. Additional information could have been obtained through direct contact with a representative of any of these federal agencies. Furthermore, relevant documentation or data could have been acquired through this interaction.
Additional insights could have been gathered by navigating federal websites and reviewing publicly available information. Finally, the possibility of new or amended legislation related to this topic emerging during the course of this study may have impacted the findings.
All information presented reflects what was obtainable and disseminated within the timeframe of this study.
    2.  No current or updated information

Consequently, the information gathered is the most recent available but still requires updates. Some of the reports and literature referenced predate 2025, except for current information from ADvancing States. Therefore, while the information provided is valuable, it could be further supplemented by updates from these sources—particularly federal agencies that periodically revise their publicly available data and reports.
As technology continues to advance, information must evolve as well. With artificial intelligence progressing rapidly, there is potential for these tools to facilitate data collection and reporting. Unfortunately, this study will conclude before updated information is released or before such technological advancements can be integrated into the research.

**ODR: The Foundation of the Digital Ombudsman System**

Transitioning to how a digital ombudsman system would interact with the public requires an open-access framework where older citizens or their representatives can gather information related to their complaint. This would include various solutions, informational resources, and follow-ups.

To ensure compliance with its code of conduct and guidelines, it is essential to examine the transition from in-person alternative dispute resolution (ADR) to online dispute resolution (ODR). ODR provides a method for ADR to remain effective and efficient for individuals who cannot participate in person.

Professionals in the ADR field have had to adapt to this shift to continue facilitating conflict resolution. According to Abbot and Elliot, the integration of ADR and technology has led to the development of AI-powered ADR tools designed to assist—or even automate—alternative dispute resolution processes (Abbot and Elliot, 2023).

The reliability of these tools depends on ADR professionals using them appropriately, while ensuring adherence to ADR guidelines and codes of conduct. As a result, the ODR process must still comply with ADR standards. According to Abbot and Elliot, these include fairness, transparency, due process, and accountability, as well as existing ADR rules governing confidentiality, independence, neutrality, and impartiality, all of which equally apply to ODR (Abbot and Elliot, 2023). ODR systems can be effectively measured and regulated through technological advancements used by all parties involved.

The National Center for State Courts and the American Bar Association identify several key functions of ODR systems:

● Employs data security technologies and practices that meet industry standards for information technology.

● Discloses whether it complies with relevant governmental and non-governmental guidelines regarding AI transparency and fairness.

● Includes metrics for assessing system performance, including the accuracy of those metrics.

● Undergoes regular audits to ensure compliance and evaluate whether the system is meeting its intended goals.

● Provides confidentiality and privacy protections equivalent to those of offline dispute resolution.

● Does not create a systemic advantage for any user (Abbot and Elliot, 2023).

Regulation of ODR systems would fall under the guidelines of the Older Americans Act while incorporating ODR standards. Similarly, according to Abbot and Elliot, the European Commission enforces system classification and product liability laws to regulate digital AI technologies. The European Artificial Intelligence Act ensures the fairness of AI-driven systems used in the public sphere by establishing government oversight. Specifically, ethical standards help ensure that these AI tools function appropriately for those engaging with them. According to Wing, ethical principles must be upheld in ODR to preserve ADR's core values while striking a fair balance between efficiency and problem-solving. These principles—accessibility, accountability, competence, confidentiality, fairness, and transparency, among others—form the ethical foundation for ODR systems (Wing, 2016).

Federal regulations would enhance accountability by ensuring that these systems function as tools that support the conflict resolution process rather than replace it entirely. These regulations would align with ensuring fair and balanced use of these digital systems.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study addresses the main premise of how the implementation of digital systems, such as artificial intelligence, virtual assistants, and databases, can enhance efficiency and communication in delivering results. Specifically, when applied to the ombudsman process, these technologies will improve dispute resolution efficiency and provide measurable outcomes. Various digital systems developed worldwide aim to increase the effectiveness of information exchange and communication between the public and social institutions.

Using technology as a tool should not replace but rather enhance interpersonal conflict resolution. This shift has been demonstrated through ADR transitioning into ODR, integrating digital solutions into the dispute resolution process. Additionally, other digital

systems allow direct communication between the public and local governments, enabling the submission of local concerns.

However, the ethical and legislative challenges of these evolving technologies remain an issue as advancements continue. One concern is the over-reliance on AI-driven systems, which may reduce direct, interpersonal communication in dispute resolution. To ensure a balanced approach to efficiency and accessibility, there should be a mixture of traditional interpersonal communication and digital systems, allowing for a smooth transition in ombudsman conflict resolution practices.

## Recommendations

There have been times when navigating a website, the sheer volume of information becomes overwhelming. It may be more convenient to contact someone directly. Sometimes, some websites include digital systems, but these systems are often limited to the databases they are linked to. If the process is time-consuming and requires significant effort, it would be even more challenging for someone who lacks prior knowledge of it. Many seniors lack that knowledge or the patience to navigate these systems. The lack of accountability becomes an issue when there are no tangible results despite the effort put into seeking solutions through social institutions.

Therefore, the digital systems discussed have established a method of information and communication between the public and government, including faster solutions for direct contact. However, accountability in ensuring follow-through remains a concern for individuals using these systems to communicate their issues to institutions about their concerns.

## Practical Applications and Policy Implications

Additionally, there should be a method to ensure these systems remain balanced in terms of their power and ability to establish stable communication. This applies to every stage, from filing complaints and navigating the referral process to completing resolutions. The factors that influence these principles would be determined by the availability of these systems to the public.

The best practice of follow-ups should be integrated into these systems to allow the public to track the progress of their complaints. Ombudsman Long-Term Care programs should provide digital access to reports, data, rights, practices, mission, goals, and other relevant information for public viewing. These programs should operate in accordance with the Older Americans Act, ensuring they serve the elderly in their representation within Long-Term Care.

California Long-Term Care Ombudsman programs require ombudsmen to undergo regular training to become familiar with the rights of the older population. Under the Older Americans Act and the Ombudsman programs, this training remains consistent and is regularly updated to provide seniors with accessible information. Any implementation of new systems designed to manage complaints or grievances should be made known to the public to uphold ethical principles of transparency and accountability.

## Future Research and Directions

Ethical principles and the practical application of allowing these systems to be used by a target population would serve as a measure of accessibility and the ability to utilize

them effectively. Similarly, the guidelines of Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) should provide a template for the practices of Long-Term Care Ombudsmen. Since these ODR guidelines facilitate the use of technology in conflict resolution, the main concern lies in ensuring individuals can effectively use these systems once they are implemented.

The adoption of ODR guidelines would serve as a model for this transition, as it aligns with the broader scope of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) shifting into the online space. With the implementation of these technologies, there would be a need to revise regulations under federal protection. If there is federal backing for such regulations, ongoing training and adaptation by the ombudsman would be crucial in ensuring the system provides the public with confidence that it is designed to deliver faster results.

Finally, a comparison would need to be made between the resolution rates of complaints from individuals who used these digital systems versus those who did not, along with an analysis of the previous year's data compared to the current year.

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**Acknowledgment**

**Beyond the Nile's Banks:**
**A Conflict That Runs Deeper Than Water**

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## Introduction

This essay explores resource scarcity, regional power struggles, and historical grievances fueling the Nile Basin Dispute.

The Nile — the world's longest river — is an indispensable water source for several African nations, including Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. It has also been a source of their conflicts and interstate (and intrastate) wars for over a century (Palios, 2019). The struggle for water between these countries is recognized internationally as a significant cause of recent armed conflicts. Exacerbating the situation are the ancient religious and mythological beliefs attached to the river (Milicich, 2019).

The conflict intensified in 1821, rooted in competing claims to the Nile's waters. Power struggles stemmed from each country's entitlement to the river's water. Each country's need to control the river's flow and resources led to an invasion of Sudan and, in 1875, to Egypt's occupation of Ethiopia. Thereafter, the Anglo-Egyptian War broke out, which instigated the British colonization of Egypt (Acquafredda, 2021). British rule persisted until 1952.

## The Treaties and Attempts to Delineate Equitable Rights

Although treaties were drawn, such as the Nile Treaty of 1902 (developed by the British, who considered themselves guardians of the Nile) and the Nile Waters Agreements of 1929 (Crabitès, 1929) and 1959, history tells us that they favored Egypt, giving Cairo "almost total control over the Nile" (Palios, 2019). The treaties discussed the building of dams and water restrictions, and were insufficient at settling the disputes. Again, the parties' interests hinged on their belief about who deserved more shares. Egypt considered itself more deserving, having a more extensive history with the River. Ethiopia claimed geographical rights because 95% of the river's water flows through its territory, specifically its wetlands. Sudan argued that its geographical location between the other two countries made it a key player in negotiations.

After years of mediation, fair and equitable terms were left unmet. Instead of coming together to understand the need for water availability for all, their competitive conflict style and self-interests, combined with European influence and interests, blocked any viable options that would have allowed all three countries to access the Nile more advantageously. In 1999, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was created, stating it sought "to develop the river cooperatively, share substantial socioeconomic benefits, and promote regional peace and security" (Nile Basin Initiative, n.d.; Abawari, 2011; Wendl, 2016).

## The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and Rising Tensions

The initiative was eventually considered a failure because each actor, still maintaining a state-centric attitude, was unable to delineate clear goals and timeframes. In 2010, Ethiopia announced its plans to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This was perceived as a threat to Sudan and Egypt, potentially shutting down their water

supply. Egyptian statesmen claimed they would have no options other than force to stop the dam, which has remained an ongoing threat.

The dam was finally completed in the summer of 2024, and Egypt maintains that filling its reservoir and inducting its power turbines will constantly threaten 98% of Egypt's water supply. Egypt considers the dam a "violation of international law," claiming that Ethiopia should prevent substantial harm to those relying on the Nile's resources (United Nations Press Release, 2020, June 29). That same year, the United States, under President Trump's orders, cut aid to Ethiopia over the dam (Zengerle, 2020). Egypt's attempts to employ international diplomatic pressure were partially successful. Nevertheless, to further ensure their domestic water usage, Egypt instituted country-wide measures to provide and save water more efficiently (El Bedawy, 2014).

## Economic Cooperation and Incentive Compatibility

In a peer-reviewed case study of the Nile Basin, Wu and Whittington discussed "incentive compatibility" and the prospective gains through riparian cooperation (2006). They purported two conditions necessary for an allocation of water to be acceptable. First, individual rationality, requiring that "benefits of cooperation allocated to any participating country must at least equal what that country would obtain by acting unilaterally (Wu & Whittington, 2006, para. 6). They went on to claim a distinction between acting unilaterally and maintaining the status quo, which they consider a reference point that insinuates a favored distribution to the countries already benefiting heavily. At that time, Egypt and Sudan were taking more water. The second condition that must be reached for international cooperation is explained by the scholars: "…that the aggregate benefits allocated to any subgroup of riparian counties be at least the same as what that partial coalition could achieve on its own (Wu & Whittington, 2006, para. 7).

Incentive compatibility, according to the authors, is the only way the ten countries they cite (Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Eritrea) will be able to achieve their goals (get what they need from the Nile) since there is such a gap between the "Quantity of water available in the basin and the amount of water sought by individual riparian countries for water resource development projects" (Wu & Whittington, 2006, para. 11).

Did incentive compatibility work? Some scholars argue that benefit-sharing has not yielded satisfactory large-scale solutions for the region. In April of 2024, in the abstract of their article titled "Energy trade tempers Nile water conflict," authors Etichia et al. state, "Although benefit-sharing of water resources in the Nile Basin has been promoted to counteract water volume disputes, it has not yielded actionable solutions to the toughest negotiations over the past two decades" (Etichia et al., 2024, para. 1). There is a lack of quantifiable data to support benefit-sharing proposals. However, through a spatial multisector simulation, they showed quantifiable results for reallocation (Etichia et al., 2024, para. 1).

## From Benefit-Sharing to Energy Trade

Rather than dividing the Niles flow into percentages, researchers Etichia et al. (2024) focused on how each country relies on the water to grow food, generate energy, and trade power. By looking at utilization rather than division, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt could all benefit. Etichia et al. argued that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has the

potential to alleviate agricultural water shortages in Egypt, increase hydropower production in Ethiopia and Sudan, mitigate energy restrictions in Sudan, generate revenue for Ethiopia through power trade, and contribute to overall reductions in $CO_2$ emissions. Since the region's population is expected to reach one billion by 2050 (Etichia et al., 2024), the authors warn that the Nile's resources will come under even greater pressure. Without resolution, the consequences could threaten the very health and survival of the countries that depend on it (Etichia et al., 2024).

Then, on October 13, 2024, a significant shift occurred. The Nile Basin States (2024) announced that the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) had officially gone into effect, after more than a decade of negotiation (Nile Basin States, 2024). The CFA was ratified by six Nile Basin states—Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan—which replaced the Nile Basin Initiative with a permanent body: the Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC). The Commission's goal was to promote the fair and sustainable use of the river, foster cooperation, and establish a peaceful process for resolving disputes (Nile Basin States, 2024).

Egypt and Sudan agreed to nearly all the terms, leaving one article to be reopened within six months. During that time, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali tried to secure access to the Red Sea through Somalia, reigniting conflict as it was widely viewed as an attempt to destabilize the Horn of Africa (Karr, 2024). In response, Egypt had deployed military forces in an attempt to help Somalia (Sheikh & Paravicini, 2024), while Somalia looked to Turkey, signing two new deals. To secure his influence and form new alliances, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed seemed willing to risk war.

Abiy Ahmed Ali's strategies eventually paid off. In January 2024, Ethiopia and the independent government of Somalia signed a controversial "Memorandum of Understanding" to create an access route through the port of Berbera from Addis Ababa. After a year of heightened tensions, Turkey mediated the final maritime agreement, the Ethiopia-Somalia Ankara Declaration, signed on December 11, 2024 (United Nations Press Release, 2024, December 12). Although the countries declared they had resolved their differences through "friendship and mutual trust," it became clear that after years of treaties and pacts urging international diplomacy, the conflict had evolved into a far-reaching, multi-continent dominance play while still framed as a water dispute.

## Conflict Theories and Power Dynamics

When applying conflict theory to this multifaceted human predicament, one could look to Bartos and Wehr (2002): "A situation in which actors use conflict behavior against each other to obtain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility" (Swarbrick, 2024). Resource conflict arises from competition for limited resources (Gallo, 2013), which becomes exacerbated by naturally occurring events and environmental issues (Wils et al., 1998; Stanton, 2010). Those in conflict will often resort to extreme measures to retain or acquire scarce resources, including repressing those who are less powerful and financially less capable of accessing the resources themselves (Swarbrick, 2024). Environmental security and increased resource scarcity cause social effects, unequal access, deprivation, and ethnic conflict (Stanton, 2010). Scarcity in a country can weaken its government, making it easier for other countries to take advantage (Stanton, 2010). Additionally, where there is a history of different types of conflict (religious, geopolitical, territorial, etc.),

resource availability can instigate more hostility and power plays among actors (Stanton, 2010).

To fully comprehend any conflict, then, it is essential to understand the key actors involved. Oberschall (1978), in his thesis "Theories of Social Conflict," states the difference between autonomous goal formulation and the mobilization of resources. The first postulates that outside forces are not manipulating the controlling leader, and the latter suggests that this leader has control over their organization. Control as an underlying factor implies that a resource conflict could be vertical, not horizontal, meaning that the actor with the most power has the most control, resulting in a more power-based conflict than a resource-based one. In this case, he suggests that initially, Egypt instigated more conflict between its neighbors by having the upper hand. Eventually, Ethiopia began its vertical climb by building the dam, thus restricting Egypt and tying its hands.

**Relative Deprivation and Historical Animosities**

This posturing to harness more power and control seems like a gorilla move, whereby puffing and rapidly punching one's chest shows the enemy who is in control. The question is, was it long coming? Building a dam might be symbolic, showing how Ethiopia's frustration has been "damming up" for a century. Since their bold act threatens their neighbors by hindering goal attainment and survival, a new insight emerges: the potential for relative deprivation and moral disengagement among the actors. Relative deprivation theory (Mamasani et al., 2024) posits that the perception of disadvantages and an inability to achieve one's goals leads to anger and frustration (Galtung, 1953, 2009). It causes deep resentment toward the actor in power responsible for their deficit, and in this case, the suffering of these nations and their people. Within social cognitive theory, Bandura (2018) suggests that moral disengagement arises from the regulation of self-sanctions. When actors rationalize harmful behavior and overlook its negative consequences, they disengage from moral reasoning. This leads to dehumanizing the object of their criticism and disdain (2018). Human predispositions and innate tendencies lead nations to commit egregious acts against one another, often stemming from a sense of self-righteousness and entitlement.

Gurr (1970, 2015) suggested that there is a potential discrepancy in an actor's value expectations, which lies between what they have and what they believe they are entitled to. In this case, as previously discussed, the actors are disputing the justness of their claim to the water, based on their religious, geographical, and longstanding historical claims (Gurr, 1970, 2015; Wendl, 2016). Some actors feel more and more deprived since the installation of the GERD. To gain more power and balance between actors, they are seeking alignment with more commanding and sympathetic nations to stabilize and enhance their economic and political stability.

In July 2025, Ethiopia declared the official completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Associated Press, 2025). The nation considered it a leap toward energy independence. This was met with obvious disapproval from Egypt and Sudan, and both countries continue to claim that Ethiopia violated widely held international standards. Egypt claims to rely on the Nile for 98% of its water and has intensified its international appeals for support. Most recently, state officials welcomed U.S. President Trump's re-involvement and his urging of the global community to support a legally binding agreement (Associated Press, 2025; Elkabany & Yilmaz, 2025).

Meanwhile, the region's tensions continue to ripple. Clashes in South Sudan—another Nile-dependent nation—caused critical humanitarian aid to be blocked from tens of thousands of children. Their decision to bring harm to innocents underscores the extent to which the need for water has instigated broader regional instability, anger, and resentment (Reuters, 2025a). Recently, Egypt announced plans for a new desert city that will divert part of its Nile allocation (Reuters, 2025b), which is another indication that infrastructure and water policy are at the center of national survival strategies (Reuters, 2025b). These developments further cement each nation's adamant foothold, not only hindering symbiotic resolution but potentially instigating more intense conflict.

## Conclusion

**Toward Resolution or Prolonged Stalemate?**

There is no doubt that this conflict is about resources, but for the Egyptians, how politically and religiously driven were they initially (Milicich, 2019)? The colliding forces between Ethiopia and Egypt can be seen as a robust and long-standing hatred and animosity stemming from their war in the late 1870s. Is Ethiopia trying to cripple its neighbors, especially Egypt? Ethiopia's actions forged an allegiance between Somalia and Egypt, which, some pundits believe, could perpetuate "more than a war of words (Wafula, 2024). It seems there is no end to this battle because there is no clear beginning. Azar (1990) believed that conflict was protracted when the "genesis of the conflict" is not brought to the surface. Lederach (1996) advises against pushing past historic events. To move forward productively, actors need a better understanding of shared events, which will reshape their perception and influence how they negotiate. Mitchell (1989) takes the concept further, positing that understanding the origins of a conflict is essential to "charting" its resolution. Without bringing meaning to the onset, efforts made to resolve the conflict may misfire, backfire, or fail to address the underlying grievances that perpetuate it.

Frey (1993) offers a valuable lens through which the complexities of conflict and cooperation can be understood. He explained that the political and social factors—power struggles, threat perception, and imbalances—underlie resource conflicts and will significantly influence the level of cooperation. In the Nile dispute, where layers of psychological trauma, political competition, religious dogma, and existential interests intersect, no single conflict theory can fully account for the depth of tension. Moreover, if a conclusive conflict theory does not hold, what negotiation theory should be applied? Can any strategy beyond praying for rain resolve this conflict and promote long-lasting cooperation and peace? Kurt Lewin said, "If you want to truly understand something, try to change it" (Swarbrick, 2024). In this case, perhaps it is not just understanding that leads to change, but change itself that deepens our understanding.

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# The AI-Powered Ombudsman: A Boon or a Curse?

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## Abstract

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping workplace conflict resolution and raising important questions about the future of the ombudsman role in both public and private domains. This theoretical paper examines whether AI integration represents a boon—enhancing efficiency, accessibility, and fairness—or a curse—undermining empathy, confidentiality, and ethical standards. Drawing on frameworks such as interest-based negotiation, structural conflict theory, the dual concern model, and ombudsman principles, the study evaluates the capabilities and limitations of AI-powered tools in triaging cases, analyzing conflict patterns, and facilitating resolutions. It explores real-world examples, including AI-driven mediation platforms, chatbots, and other AI-based tools, while highlighting risks such as algorithmic bias, lack of emotional intelligence, and data privacy concerns. The paper ultimately proposes a hybrid AI–human ombudsman model, where AI manages routine or high-volume tasks while human ombuds professionals provide oversight, judgment, and emotional nuance. Recommendations include integrating transparency, regulatory clarity, and training in AI ethics. By offering a conceptual framework for responsibly embedding AI in ombuds services, this paper contributes to the emerging field of AI in conflict resolution while underscoring the need to preserve the core human values of neutrality, confidentiality, and accessibility.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, ombudsman, conflict resolution, ethical standards, AI–human hybrid model, AI-assisted mediation

## Introduction

### Background and Context

Conflict resolution is essential in workplaces to enable fairness, psychological safety, and organizational health. Unresolved workplace disputes lead to poor morale, reduced productivity, high turnover, and even legal exposure (Johnson, 2023). To prevent escalation and support early resolution, many organizations have implemented internal systems—among the most trusted of which is the office of the ombudsman.

The term "ombudsman" originates from the Swedish language, meaning "representative" or "proxy." First established in Sweden in 1809 as a government accountability role, the ombudsman was tasked with investigating complaints against public officials and ensuring administrative justice. Over time, the role evolved to encompass organizational and corporate ombudsman functions, particularly in educational, governmental, and workplace settings (National Ombudsman Association, 2021). While the terms "ombuds" or "ombudsperson" are increasingly used to reflect the gender-neutral language, this paper will use the original term "ombudsman," both out of respect for its historical roots and for consistency with professional association usage.

The ombudsman operates under four core principles: independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality (National Ombudsman Association, 2021). These principles form the foundation for all ombudsman work, though their application varies by context—government oversight roles, corporate organizations, or educational institutions. In each

setting, the ombudsman serves as a trustworthy, off-the-record resource for conflict resolution. Usually, the ombudsman services are provided as an independent resource outside of the traditional management structures. This alternative structure creates a safe, impartial space for individuals to raise issues, explore options, and seek resolution pathways while eliminating the reporting structure bias.

Traditional ombudsman services, however, face significant limitations. Many offices are under-resourced and responsible for large, distributed populations, which can result in delayed case handling, limited accessibility, or uneven service delivery. Additionally, although ombudsmen are trained to be impartial, unconscious biases and institutional constraints may still affect consistency and fairness (Ahmad, 2025).

In contrast, artificial intelligence (AI) offers powerful tools that could augment dispute resolution efforts. AI is increasingly used in legal technology, online dispute resolution (ODR), and human resources to triage complaints, analyze trends, and suggest fair settlements (Johnson, 2023; Lee, 2022). Technologies such as chatbots, machine learning classifiers, and predictive analytics promise efficiency, objectivity, scalability, and around-the-clock availability.  Even beyond formal conflict resolution, AI-driven assistants like Grammarly (n.d.) showcase the technology's ability to enhance human work by improving writing, ensuring communication clarity, and maintaining consistency.

Therefore, this paper explores whether the ombudsman's human-centric, trust-based role is fundamentally compatible with AI's data-driven logic or is inherently at odds. While the ombudsman's relational work seems challenging to replicate algorithmically, AI may be well-suited for handling data-heavy tasks such as case intake, trend detection, or drafting options for resolution. A potential outcome is a hybrid model in which AI augments—but does not replace—the human ombudsman, preserving the office's core values while addressing resource and scale challenges.

**Problem Narrative and Significance**

Although AI is being rapidly integrated into legal and HR conflict management systems, there is little academic or practical research examining its use in ombudsman work, particularly in corporate and institutional contexts. Existing studies focus on fully automated ODR systems or AI applications in formal mediation and arbitration rather than on the ombudsman's nuanced, informal, and trust-based processes (Losey, 2024). There is also a notable absence of research on hybrid models where AI works in tandem with human ombudsmen. Questions remain about how such systems would uphold core ethical principles like neutrality, confidentiality, and independence. Moreover, the regulatory and legal landscape surrounding AI in informal workplace dispute resolution is still developing, raising concerns about liability, due process, and employee trust (Ahmad, 2025). These lapses are especially significant given what is at stake ethically and organizationally: if AI is introduced into ombudsman work without appropriate safeguards, it could compromise the integrity of the very office it aims to enhance.

**Theoretical Foundations**

This study draws upon several foundational theories to explore the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into corporate ombudsman services. These theories offer a perspective to evaluate AI's potential benefits and challenges in workplace conflict resolution:

a. Interest-based Negotiation (Fisher & Ury, 1981) emphasizes collaborative problem-solving by focusing on underlying interests rather than positions. Understanding the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, including employees, management, and the ombudsman, will be critical when implementing AI tools. Considering the needs of all involved rather than positions would allow the technology to facilitate, rather than hinder, mutual understanding and agreement.

b. Structural Conflict Theory (Burton, 1990) examines how systemic issues such as power imbalances and organizational structures contribute to conflict. Introducing AI into ombudsman services could either mitigate or exacerbate these structural issues. For instance, AI could help identify patterns of systemic conflict through data analysis. Still, it could also reinforce existing power dynamics if not implemented with careful consideration of organizational hierarchies and employee autonomy.

c. The Dual Concern Model (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986) examines how people manage conflict based on their concern for themselves versus others. When considering bringing AI into ombudsman work, it will be important that these tools help strike a balance between assertiveness and empathy. The technology would need to support the relational aspects of conflict resolution at the heart of what the ombudsman does.

Ethical frameworks for artificial intelligence, such as UNESCO's 2021 Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, highlight the importance of transparency, accountability, and human oversight. These principles are fundamental to ombudsman services, where trust and ethical integrity are paramount. For AI tools to be practical in this context, they must operate transparently, be accountable for their outcomes, and remain under human supervision to ensure alignment with ethical standards.

A hybrid model would leverage the strengths of artificial intelligence while preserving the human qualities essential to the ombudsman's role, including empathy, ethical judgment, and contextual understanding. By combining technological capabilities with human insight, this approach would enhance the effectiveness of ombudsman services without compromising their core values.

**Core Question**

To what extent does implementing AI-powered systems enhance or hinder the effectiveness and ethical integrity of the ombudsman's role in organizational or governmental dispute resolution?

To address the above inquiry question, this paper will explore three key areas in which AI could augment, replace, or improve ombudsman services:

1. Improving Ombudsman Efficiency and Consistency

AI can significantly increase the efficiency of ombudsman offices by automating routine functions such as case intake, issue classification, and pattern analysis (Johnson, 2023). Automation may allow an ombudsman's office to handle a greater volume of cases without sacrificing response time or procedural fairness. Additionally, AI can support conflict resolution consistency by identifying past case trends and generating standardized recommendations, especially for high-frequency, low-complexity matters (Lee, 2022). These enhancements could be particularly valuable in large, decentralized organizations where scalability and consistency are persistent challenges.

2. Ethical and Practical Risks of AI in Ombudsman Work

Despite its promise, AI raises critical ethical concerns when applied to informal conflict resolution. Systems trained on biased data may unintentionally perpetuate inequities or produce outcomes that undermine fairness and neutrality—principles central to the ombudsman role (Ahmad, 2025). Moreover, AI has a low emotional quotient (EQ) or lacks emotional intelligence, limiting its ability to interpret complex interpersonal dynamics or respond appropriately to sensitive, emotionally charged disclosures. Practical issues such as transparency, explainability of AI decisions, and data privacy further complicate trust in AI-driven processes, particularly in settings where confidentiality is paramount.

3. Potential for Hybrid AI–Human Ombudsman Models

Rather than framing AI as a replacement for the ombudsman, a hybrid model envisions AI as a support tool that enhances—but does not supplant—human judgment and empathy. In this model, AI systems would handle data-intensive and procedural aspects of the role (for example, information gathering or initial case triage), while human ombudsmen would provide oversight, make final decisions, facilitate dialogue, and manage the human nuances of conflicts. Such integration could relieve ombudsmen of certain administrative burdens, allowing them to focus on high-impact cases that require human insight and emotional intelligence. Any hybrid framework must be thoughtfully designed to align with established ombudsman standards and build stakeholder trust (National Ombudsman Association, 2021).

**Thesis Statement**

This paper explores the integration of artificial intelligence in ombudsman services, weighing its potential to enhance efficiency, scalability, and consistency against the risks of undermining essential human factors such as empathy, trust, and ethical standards in workplace conflict resolution. By evaluating AI's capabilities and limitations through established conflict resolution frameworks, the study emphasizes a balanced, hybrid model that preserves the core values of ombuds services while leveraging AI for improved accessibility and operational effectiveness.

**Overview of the Paper**

The paper begins by outlining the background and context of AI integration into workplace conflict resolution, followed by a detailed literature review of existing research on AI in alternative dispute resolution. The theoretical framework section connects relevant theories to the research question, setting the stage for an analysis of the potential benefits and challenges of AI in ombudsman services. The discussion then explores the implications of a hybrid human-AI model, considering ethical, legal, and practical considerations. The paper concludes with recommendations for implementing AI that uphold the core values of the ombudsman profession.

## Literature Review
**Summary of AI Integration in Ombudsman and Dispute Resolution Services**

The growing field of online dispute resolution (ODR) has the potential to use the capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) in managing high-volume, low-complexity disputes. Platforms such as SmartSettle, Modria, and ResolveAI leverage algorithms to facilitate resolution processes by evaluating data, generating settlement options, and assisting

parties in reaching agreements without direct human intervention (Johnson, 2023; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). While initially developed for consumer disputes, insurance claims, and family mediation, these platforms are increasingly applied as potential models for resolving organizational conflicts across industries.

Research has increasingly explored the deployment of AI-driven tools both in mediation contexts and within human resources departments, particularly for complaint triage, early intervention, and sentiment analysis. Studies highlight how systems such as chatbots, predictive analytics platforms, and automated dashboards are being used to detect emotional tone, escalate concerns, and manage conflicts more proactively across organizational settings (Lee, 2022; Losey, 2024; Berendt, 2022).

However, the integration of AI into ombudsman services raises important ethical and legal questions. Researchers note that AI's decision-making processes must be transparent and accountable to avoid undermining procedural fairness (Ahmad, 2025; Barfield & Pagallo, 2018). Concerns such as a lack of explainability, the potential for algorithmic bias, and the absence of culturally competent programming could damage the trust essential to ombudsman processes. This is particularly important because of the ombudsman's core values of neutrality, confidentiality, and informality.

While the literature acknowledges AI's efficiency and consistency benefits, it also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a human-centered approach, particularly in contexts that require empathy, discretion, and cultural sensitivity (UNESCO, 2021; Fisher & Ury, 1981). As such, scholars advocate for hybrid frameworks that blend AI's analytical power with the emotional intelligence and ethical judgment of trained ombuds professionals.

**Algorithmic Bias & Fairness**

Despite growing interest in AI-driven tools for conflict resolution, concerns about algorithmic bias and fairness remain. AI systems are only as unbiased as the data used to train them, and numerous studies have demonstrated that machine learning models can inadvertently reproduce and amplify existing social biases (Ahmad, 2025; Barocas, Hardt, & Narayanan, 2019). In the context of ombudsman services, where neutrality and fairness are foundational values, these risks are particularly problematic.

Bias in AI systems can come from multiple sources, including historical discrimination in the datasets, the selection of training features, or the designers' unconscious assumptions (Binns, 2018). For example, suppose AI tools are trained on past HR complaint resolutions or legal outcomes reflecting systemic biases, such as underreporting of workplace harassment or racial disparities in discipline. In that case, they may reinforce those patterns rather than correct them.

In addition to bias, issues of explainability can be a challenge. Many AI algorithms, particularly those based on deep learning, operate as "black boxes" and have limited transparency into how decisions are made (Doshi-Velez & Kim, 2017). This lack of clarity can undermine due process in the context of ombudsman services. If individuals cannot understand why their complaint was classified in a certain way or why a particular resolution was recommended, they may perceive the process as arbitrary or unjust, even if the outcome is reasonable.

To safeguard fairness in AI-assisted ombuds services, researchers recommend embedding ethical review practices, bias audits, and transparent feedback loops into the

design and deployment of these tools (Raji et al., 2020). Aligning AI processes with the ombudsman's values requires a deliberate effort to mitigate bias and ensure that decisions are explainable and appealable.

## Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

One of the most persistent critiques of AI in conflict resolution is its lack of human-like emotional intelligence. Empathy, the capacity to recognize, understand, and respond to the emotions of others, is a cornerstone of effective ombudsman work. It fosters trust, de-escalates tension, and enables a psychologically safe space for individuals to voice concerns. Unlike human practitioners, AI lacks the intuitive capacity to read emotional cues, interpret nonverbal communication, or adapt responses based on contextual and cultural sensitivity (Ahmad, 2025; Lee, 2022).

Chatbot-based mediation systems and AI-powered intake tools have already been deployed in various contexts, with mixed results. While users may appreciate these systems' speed and anonymity, studies have shown that parties often express dissatisfaction when the interaction feels impersonal or does not consider the emotional context (Losey, 2024). In emotionally charged cases, such as those involving workplace bullying, discrimination, or trauma, the absence of a human listener can worsen the feelings of isolation or invalidate the individual's experience.

This limitation is not merely cosmetic; it undermines the core of what the ombudsman role provides. As Fisher and Ury (1981) emphasize in their interest-based negotiation framework, the ability to deeply understand a party's needs and emotions is critical for uncovering creative, durable solutions to the conflict. No matter how advanced, AI cannot yet fully grasp the nuances of grief, fear, or moral injury—responses that often emerge in workplace conflicts. AI interactions are programmed, not felt, and this can compromise the therapeutic and restorative potential of the ombudsman process.

Researchers caution that while AI may enhance ombudsman efficiency in procedural tasks, its current limitations in emotional intelligence present significant challenges for its use as a standalone tool (Ahmad, 2025; Lee, 2022)

## Hybrid Models

Rather than replacing the ombudsman role, the most promising approach to AI integration envisions a hybrid model, where AI augments human judgment and emotional intelligence. In this design, AI technologies would be responsible for data-heavy, administrative tasks—such as case intake, pattern detection, and triage—while human ombudsman professionals would continue to lead relationship-centered work: facilitating dialogues, interpreting context, building trust, and helping parties reach resolution (Leung, 2022; International Ombuds Association, 2022).

Early pilots of AI-assisted mediation suggest that AI can enhance access and consistency for routine matters, but falls short when human empathy, moral reasoning, or complex negotiations are needed (Losey, 2024; Lee, 2022). Research emphasizes that user satisfaction with AI-mediated processes is closely tied to transparency, fairness, and the ability to escalate to a human when necessary (Williams & Young, 2021).

The International Ombuds Association (2022) has proposed preliminary guidelines for hybrid models, recommending that AI systems:
- Respect confidentiality through secure data handling.

- Enable human override and appeal at any stage.
- Clearly disclose the role of AI to users.
- Undergo regular audits for fairness and bias.

In proposed hybrid ombudsman models, AI acts as a silent partner, managing information and analytics, while human ombudsmen retain ethical responsibility for final actions and decisions. Emerging research suggests that hybrid models address limitations identified in both purely human- and AI-driven systems (Leung, 2022; Susskind, 2019).

**Trust and Satisfaction**

Trust is a critical component of any conflict resolution process, and it becomes even more crucial when artificial intelligence is involved. Research into user experiences with AI-driven online dispute resolution (AI-ODR) platforms consistently shows that participants desire not only efficient outcomes but also a sense of fairness, empathy, and procedural transparency (Williams & Young, 2021). Despite AI's ability to streamline processes and deliver consistent results, users often report discomfort or dissatisfaction when interactions feel impersonal or when decision-making processes are opaque.

Williams and Young (2021) found that while users appreciate the convenience of AI-assisted platforms, trust erodes quickly when there is a lack of clarity about how decisions are made or when users feel that their unique circumstances have not been fully considered. Transparency and explainability—users' ability to understand how and why particular outcomes were reached—emerged as key factors in predicting trust in AI-mediated systems. Without sufficient transparency, even fair outcomes may be perceived as arbitrary or unjust, undermining both user satisfaction and the legitimacy of the dispute resolution process.

In ombudsman work, where confidentiality, neutrality, and trust are foundational, these concerns become even more pronounced. Researchers emphasize that AI-assisted ombudsman systems should prioritize intentional transparency to maintain user trust (Williams & Young, 2021).

Research suggests that building and maintaining trust in AI-augmented ombudsman services requires attention not only to technological sophistication but also to preserving the relational, human-centered aspects of conflict resolution that foster psychological safety and confidence (Williams & Young, 2021; Leung, 2022).

**Methods of Literature Review**

This study employed a theoretical research design, focusing on the collection, synthesis, and critical analysis of existing scholarship at the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and ombudsman services. Given the emerging nature of this field, the research process emphasized breadth, depth, and critical evaluation rather than primary data collection.

**Literature Identification and Selection**

A combination of traditional academic databases, such as Google Scholar and the CSUDH Library, and advanced AI-assisted research tools was used to gather literature. Search strategies included combinations of keywords such as "artificial intelligence and conflict resolution," "AI in workplace dispute resolution," "online dispute resolution (ODR)," "algorithmic bias," "AI ethics," and "ombudsman services." Searches were refined using

Boolean operators and filters for peer-reviewed publications, white papers, and reports from reputable professional organizations.

Special attention was given to sourcing scholarship published within the last five years (2020–2025) to ensure relevance, with seminal older works included where they were foundational (e.g., Fisher & Ury, 1981; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). In addition to scholarly articles, industry guidelines from bodies such as the International Ombuds Association (2022) were reviewed to incorporate practical insights into the evolving standards of professional practice.

## Analytical Approach

The selected literature was critically analyzed through thematic coding. Articles and reports were evaluated for recurring themes, including potential advantages of AI, risks related to trust and ethics, gaps in current research, and proposed hybrid models. Rather than merely summarizing sources, the analysis synthesized findings across multiple perspectives, identifying points of convergence, debate, and omission.
Particular emphasis was placed on evaluating not just the technical claims made about AI's capacities, but also the ethical, relational, and procedural implications for ombudsman practice. Where possible, contrasting viewpoints were highlighted to present a balanced and nuanced discussion.

## Writing Process

The writing process proceeded iteratively, beginning with an outline shaped by the major themes that emerged from the literature. Each section of the paper was drafted to progress logically from context setting to critical analysis, culminating in a set of strategies and recommendations for the responsible integration of AI into ombudsman services. Throughout the writing process, AI-assisted tools were used selectively to support citation management, grammar refinement (e.g., Grammarly), and the organization of initial ideas. However, critical evaluation, conceptual synthesis, argument development, and final drafting were conducted manually to ensure intellectual rigor and maintain an authentic scholarly voice.

## Discussion

### Core Question

The integration of artificial intelligence into ombudsman services raises a fundamental question:

To what extent can AI enhance or hinder the effectiveness and ethical integrity of the ombudsman's role in organizational or governmental dispute resolution?

As outlined earlier, this question can be examined through three interrelated lenses: whether AI can meaningfully improve the efficiency and consistency of ombudsman operations; what ethical and practical risks it introduces when applied to informal conflict resolution; and how a hybrid model might strike the right balance between automation and human-centered judgment.

This discussion section draws together the findings and frameworks introduced earlier to evaluate those dimensions critically and cohesively. Rather than revisiting each topic in isolation, the following analysis explores the broader themes that emerge from the literature, such as gaps in research, risks and opportunities, legal and regulatory

frameworks, and strategic integration models. Together, these themes inform a nuanced answer to the core question: AI has the potential to augment ombudsman practice, but only when carefully designed to align with the profession's relational, ethical, and procedural foundations.

**Gaps in the Literature**

Despite the growing body of research, several notable gaps remain in the existing literature on AI integration into ombudsman services:

1.  Few studies have specifically examined the application of AI in corporate ombuds functions, where informal, confidential, and trust-based conflict resolution differs significantly from formal legal processes or traditional HR models. Much of the current research focuses broadly on AI applications in legal technology, online dispute resolution (ODR), or HR case management systems, leaving the unique relational and ethical dynamics of organizational ombuds work largely underexplored (Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017; Johnson, 2023).

2.  There is a lack of empirical research on hybrid AI-human ombudsman models. While scholars such as Leung (2022) and Williams and Young (2021) emphasize the importance of maintaining empathy, transparency, and human oversight, few studies have tested how hybrid approaches function operationally or impact user trust and satisfaction over time. This leaves practitioners without clear evidence-based guidance for structuring effective hybrid systems.

3.  The legal and regulatory frameworks necessary to support AI-powered ombudsman services remain underdeveloped. As Susskind (2019) observes, technological innovation often outpaces regulatory adaptation, creating uncertainty around as confidentiality protections, due process rights, explainability of decisions, and organizational liability for AI-driven outcomes. These unresolved legal questions are particularly acute in the ombudsman context, where confidentiality and neutrality are both legal and ethical imperatives.

4.  There is limited exploration of AI's integration across diverse organizational settings. Most available studies focus either on public-sector applications or generalized commercial Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) models, with little attention to specific sectors such as academia, healthcare, or global corporations, where cultural variation, legal obligations, and organizational hierarchies may shape conflict dynamics differently (Losey, 2024; Berendt, 2022).

Addressing these gaps will be critical for the future potential of AI integration into ombudsman services and would strengthen, rather than undermine, core ethical and relational foundations. Yet even with additional research, serious risks remain inherent in the technological augmentation of human-centered conflict resolution systems.

**Risks of AI**

Understanding the gaps is essential, but so too is confronting the inherent risks posed by AI integration. The following analysis examines the emotional, ethical, and procedural vulnerabilities that AI introduces into ombudsman practice, highlighting tensions that must be carefully navigated to maintain trust and legitimacy.

The literature identifies several significant risks associated with the use of AI in conflict resolution settings, particularly within the context of ombudsman services. These

risks are not merely technical challenges but reflect deeper tensions between the operational logic of automation and the relational imperatives of conflict engagement.

One major concern is the empathy gap. AI systems, even those enhanced with sentiment analysis capabilities, fundamentally lack the capacity for genuine emotional intelligence. As Ahmad (2025) and Leung (2022) highlight, AI tools cannot interpret nuanced emotional states, cultural sensitivities, or nonverbal communication, which are often crucial in resolving workplace conflicts involving trauma, discrimination, or interpersonal grievances. Overreliance on AI in emotionally charged cases could produce interactions that feel impersonal or invalidating, thus undermining the psychological safety and trust that ombudsmen are tasked with cultivating.

Closely related to these concerns are data privacy and ethical design considerations. Effective AI tools often require the collection and analysis of large volumes of sensitive data, which raises critical questions about confidentiality. Without rigorous data protection protocols and transparent ethical frameworks, there is an elevated risk of breaches, misuse, or unauthorized disclosure of confidential information (Berendt, 2022; Barfield & Pagallo, 2018). Such breaches would not only harm individuals but could irreparably damage the credibility of ombudsman services.

Another persistent danger is algorithmic bias and cultural insensitivity. AI systems trained on historical datasets may inadvertently reproduce or even exacerbate systemic inequalities embedded in the data (Barocas, Hardt, & Narayanan, 2019). In multicultural workplaces, where perceptions of fairness are highly sensitive, algorithmically generated outcomes that reflect unconscious bias may exacerbate tensions and reinforce marginalization, rather than promoting resolution.

Finally, concerns about confidentiality breaches—whether technical (through cybersecurity flaws) or perceptual (if users distrust the AI process)—pose a direct threat to the ombudsman model. Trust in the confidentiality of the process is foundational to encouraging candid disclosures. Researchers note that even a small perceived risk of data leakage could discourage individuals from seeking assistance, compromising the ombudsman's accessibility and effectiveness (Losey, 2024; National Ombudsman Association, 2021).

Collectively, these risks suggest that successful integration of AI into ombudsman work will require more than technological sophistication. It requires a sustained ethical commitment to protecting the relational and trust-based foundations of the role, accompanied by robust oversight mechanisms, user education, and clear human accountability structures.

**Potential Advantages of AI**

While the risks associated with AI integration into ombudsman work are substantial, the potential advantages also warrant serious consideration. Thoughtfully implemented, AI technologies could augment human capacity, address longstanding structural challenges, and expand access to conflict resolution services in ways that align with principles of organizational justice.

One of the most often-cited advantages of AI in dispute resolution settings is operational efficiency. AI systems can offer significant improvements in speed, scalability, and accessibility, enabling ombudsman offices to process a higher volume of cases with greater consistency and faster response times (Johnson, 2023; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy,

2017). By automating routine tasks such as case intake, initial triage, and trend analysis, AI could free human ombudsmen to focus on more complex, relational aspects of conflict resolution. Moreover, AI's capacity for 24/7 accessibility holds promise for global organizations with distributed workforces across multiple time zones, improving responsiveness and reach.

Another significant potential benefit is the enhancement of objectivity and consistency. Human decision-making is inherently subject to unconscious bias, mood variability, and cognitive limitations. When properly designed, AI systems —particularly those incorporating transparent algorithms and regular bias audits —can help mitigate these inconsistencies by standardizing case handling at the early stages (Raji et al., 2020; Berendt, 2022). While AI alone cannot ensure fairness, structured data analysis may support ombudsman offices in identifying systemic patterns of conflict, surfacing hidden inequities, and offering more equitable service delivery across diverse populations.

Cost savings and resource efficiency are also frequently noted advantages. Implementing AI solutions has the potential to reduce administrative burdens, allowing organizations to expand conflict resolution offerings without proportionally increasing personnel costs (Berendt, 2022; Lee, 2022). Particularly for organizations where ombuds offices are underfunded or under-resourced, AI-supported systems could offer a means to sustain or enhance services without undermining quality, provided that human oversight remains integral to the model.

The evolving legal and regulatory landscape offers both challenges and opportunities for AI-powered ombudsman models. As Susskind (2019) argues, new policies and standards will be essential to ensure that AI-enhanced dispute resolution processes meet standards of due process, confidentiality, and accountability. Emerging ethical guidelines from professional associations, such as the International Ombuds Association (2022), suggest that the use of AI must align with the foundational values of independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality. Organizations that proactively integrate these ethical considerations into their AI governance frameworks may not only reduce legal risk but also position themselves as leaders in responsible innovation within the workplace justice ecosystem.

However, realizing these advantages will depend critically on how AI is implemented, monitored, and integrated with human judgment and decision-making. Efficiency gains must not come at the cost of ethical erosion; instead, they must support and amplify the relational and trust-based foundations that define effective ombudsman services.

**Moral, Legal, and Regulatory Frameworks**

The introduction of AI into ombudsman services challenges traditional legal assumptions about confidentiality, due process, liability, and informed consent. As Susskind (2019) notes, technological innovation often outpaces regulatory frameworks, leaving early adopters vulnerable to unforeseen legal consequences. In the context of ombudsman work, where confidentiality and neutrality are legally protected and ethically paramount, this gap creates a high-stakes environment that demands careful navigation.

Confidentiality protections must be explicitly addressed in any AI-augmented ombudsman model. AI systems that collect, store, or analyze sensitive information must comply not only with internal confidentiality agreements but also with broader data

protection laws, such as the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States or the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union. Any ambiguity regarding who has access to case data, how it is secured, and under what circumstances it could be disclosed could erode trust in ombuds services (Berendt, 2022; Barfield & Pagallo, 2018).

In addition to confidentiality, due process rights must be safeguarded. Ombudsman services are designed to be informal; however, the integration of AI raises concerns about transparency and appealability, particularly in the triaging or recommending of actions. Individuals engaging with an AI-assisted ombudsman must understand how algorithmic processes influence decisions and must have clear, accessible pathways to request human review or intervention when necessary (Raji et al., 2020; Williams & Young, 2021). Failure to provide such mechanisms risks not only fairness but also potential legal challenges related to procedural justice.

Liability structures must also be clarified. If an AI system mishandles a case—through misclassification, biased pattern detection, or data breach—it is critical to determine who holds responsibility: the ombuds office, the organization, the AI vendor, or a combination thereof. Current legal scholarship suggests that ombuds offices must retain final accountability for all AI-assisted actions, even if tasks are partially automated (Susskind, 2019; International Ombuds Association, 2022).

Finally, informed consent practices must evolve. Individuals engaging with AI-supported ombudsman services must be advised that AI is involved, what its role is, what data it accesses, and their rights regarding opt-out or escalation to a human ombudsman. Transparency at the outset is crucial for maintaining ethical integrity and ensuring legal defensibility.

Emerging ethical guidelines, such as those proposed by the International Ombuds Association (2022), call for AI deployments that align with the foundational values of independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality. To operationalize these principles, organizations must embed legal compliance into the design, deployment, and governance of AI-assisted ombuds services from the outset, not as an afterthought.

The legal viability of AI-powered ombudsman models depends on proactively designing systems that protect confidentiality, ensure procedural fairness, establish clear accountability, and secure meaningful informed consent—all while preserving the trust-based character that defines ombudsman work.

**Strategies for Integrating AI-Powered Ombudsman Services**

Given the ethical, legal, and relational complexities surrounding the integration of AI into ombudsman services, any implementation strategy must be guided by clear principles and designed to preserve the foundational values of the profession. Without such intentional design, efforts to incorporate AI risk undermine the very qualities that make ombuds services effective: trust, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality.

**Guiding Principles**

Emerging recommendations from the International Ombuds Association (2022) emphasize that AI tools must explicitly align with the core values defining ombudsman practice. Chief among these is the principle of neutrality: AI systems must be designed to avoid bias not only in their algorithms and in their operational deployment. Regular

fairness audits, diverse training datasets, and the availability of human override mechanisms are essential safeguards to uphold this value (Raji et al., 2020; Barocas, Hardt, & Narayanan, 2019).

Confidentiality must also be non-negotiable. AI systems involved in ombuds work should minimize data retention wherever possible, limit access to sensitive information, and implement encryption and privacy-by-design architectures to ensure confidentiality is not compromised (Berendt, 2022; Barfield & Pagallo, 2018). Human oversight must be embedded at every critical decision point, ensuring that ethical judgments, contextual understanding, and discretionary flexibility remain central to the process.

Finally, accountability must be delineated. Human ombuds professionals must retain ultimate responsibility for all AI-supported actions, reinforcing trust in the institution and ensuring that individuals have recourse to human judgment at every stage (International Ombuds Association, 2022).

## Conceptualizing AI in Ombudsman Services

A thoughtful hybrid model could leverage AI's strengths while preserving human-centered relational work. This model could include four key components:

● AI-assisted case intake and triage: AI systems could manage the initial intake of concerns, guiding individuals through structured questionnaires and flagging high-risk or complex cases for immediate human review. Pattern recognition algorithms could help identify systemic issues early, enhancing organizational responsiveness (Johnson, 2023; Lee, 2022).

● AI-powered dispute resolution recommendations: For low-complexity cases, such as procedural misunderstandings or simple workplace disputes, AI can suggest resolution pathways based on prior similar cases, providing parties with a menu of options. These recommendations would remain non-binding and serve only as preliminary resources, with clear communication that final decisions rest with human ombuds oversight (Losey, 2024; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017).

● Human ombudsman feedback, contextualization, and approval: The critical role of the human ombudsman in interpreting AI-generated outputs is essential to the model. Human professionals must assess the recommendations within the specific relational, emotional, and organizational context, ensuring that solutions are both procedurally sound and psychologically and culturally appropriate (Leung, 2022).

● Feedback loops for fairness, transparency, and appeal: Ongoing monitoring systems must be built into the process, allowing the stakeholders to provide feedback on their experiences and perceptions of fairness. Internal reviews should track patterns in AI-supported resolutions to ensure no systemic biases emerge. Users must also retain the right to request full human handling of their concerns at any point in the process.

By anchoring AI augmentation within a framework of human oversight, ethical vigilance, and relational care, organizations can harness the technology efficiencies without compromising the integrity of ombudsman work. Ultimately, AI should be viewed not as a substitute for human judgment, but as a tool that, when carefully governed, can expand access to justice, surface systemic patterns of harm, and allow human ombuds professionals to focus their energies where they are most needed: in the relational heart of conflict resolution.

<center>**Conclusion**</center>

This paper has examined the potential of an AI-powered ombudsman, weighing its promise and its perils. While AI offers tools for efficiency and accessibility, it simultaneously raises serious concerns about neutrality, confidentiality, and independence. The literature suggests that without robust ethical safeguards, AI integration may undermine the very legitimacy of the ombudsman.

The integration of artificial intelligence into ombudsman services presents both significant opportunities and substantial risks. This paper has examined whether AI-powered tools can enhance the effectiveness of organizational ombuds functions without undermining their core values of neutrality, confidentiality, independence, and informality. While AI holds promise for improving efficiency, accessibility, and the identification of systemic patterns, it also raises critical concerns about emotional intelligence, data privacy, algorithmic fairness, and procedural justice. Meeting these challenges requires more than technical sophistication—it demands principled leadership, strong ethical guardrails, and a commitment to preserving the relational trust that defines ombudsman practice.

The paper concludes that AI should not be viewed as a replacement but as a complement to human judgment. The challenge ahead is to balance innovation with ethical integrity, ensuring that the ombudsman remains both relevant and trusted in the digital age. Without robust ethical safeguards, AI integration may undermine the very legitimacy of the ombudsman.

## Limitations of the Study

This paper is subject to several important limitations. First, the research is theoretical in scope and lacks empirical testing or primary data collection. As a result, while the analysis offers conceptual insights and proposes strategic frameworks, it cannot validate the practical effectiveness of hybrid AI-human models through direct observation or user feedback.

Second, there is limited data on the current use of AI within ombuds offices. Much of the existing literature focuses on adjacent fields such as online dispute resolution (ODR) and human resources case management. Consequently, recommendations are based on related domains rather than on direct evidence from ombudsman-specific implementations.

Finally, the rapid pace of AI development may render parts of this study outdated. Technologies, ethical standards, and regulatory frameworks in AI-assisted conflict resolution are evolving quickly, which may lead to shifts in best practices over time. As such, some of the strategic recommendations outlined here may require revision as technological capabilities, societal expectations, and legal standards continue to develop. The study aims to provide a foundation for future research, practical experimentation, and policy development. These efforts can help refine and validate responsible models for integrating AI into ombudsman services—while fully acknowledging the limitations noted above.

## Main Key Ethical and Policy Considerations

The successful integration of artificial intelligence into ombudsman services depends not only on technical capabilities but also on alignment with the ethical principles that define ombudsman practice. Three ethical and policy considerations are especially

critical: maintaining confidentiality and data security, ensuring transparency and accountability, and addressing bias and fairness.

1. Confidentiality and Data Security

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of the ombudsman role. However, AI systems often rely on collecting and analyzing large amounts of sensitive data, raising concerns about how securely information is stored, processed, and shared. Data breaches, unauthorized access, or unclear data ownership policies could seriously undermine trust in AI-assisted systems. As Berendt (2022) and Barfield and Pagallo (2018) note, maintaining compliance with data protection laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) is necessary but not sufficient. Ombudsman offices must go further by ensuring privacy-by-design architecture, implementing role-based access restrictions, and minimizing unnecessary data retention.

2. Transparency and Accountability

Transparency in AI-assisted decision-making is vital for maintaining user trust and procedural fairness. In traditional ombuds processes, individuals have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions or challenge perceived misunderstandings. When AI tools are involved in intake, classification, or even in recommending resolution pathways, the logic behind those decisions must be explainable. Otherwise, parties may view the process as opaque or arbitrary. Researchers such as Raji et al. (2020) and Williams and Young (2021) emphasize the need for explainable AI (XAI) models and the importance of offering users an accessible pathway for appeal or human review. Moreover, legal liability must be clearly defined. In cases of misclassification, algorithmic bias, or confidentiality failures, organizations must determine whether responsibility lies with the ombuds office, the AI vendor, or another stakeholder. (Susskind, 2019).

3. Bias and Fairness

AI systems are only as fair as the data used to train them. Numerous studies have shown that machine learning models can inadvertently reinforce historical discrimination and structural inequality if not properly audited (Barocas, Hardt, & Narayanan, 2019). This risk is especially problematic in ombudsman contexts, where perceived neutrality and cultural competence are essential. As Binns (2018) and Leung (2022) argue, fairness in automated systems is not simply a technical challenge but a philosophical and organizational one. Tools must be audited regularly for algorithmic bias, and training data should reflect the diversity of the populations served. Organizations should also implement mechanisms for human override, cultural review, and stakeholder feedback to ensure that AI-driven processes uphold equity and respect for all participants.

Taken together, these three considerations, confidentiality, transparency, and fairness, form the ethical backbone of any responsible AI deployment in ombudsman services. Ignoring them risks not only technical failure but also the erosion of trust, legitimacy, and the very purpose of the ombuds office.

**Practical Applications and Policy Implications**

The integration of AI into ombudsman services holds promise in workplace contexts where traditional models may fall short due to scale, complexity, or geographic dispersion. While the ethical risks of AI remain pressing, certain industries and organizational environments are especially well-positioned to benefit from hybrid AI-human ombudsman systems. This is true provided they are implemented with strong safeguards.

1. Industries and Workplace Environments Best Suited for AI-Enhanced Ombuds Services.

Highly regulated, data-rich, or fast-moving industries often face internal conflict dynamics that require scalable and efficient resolution mechanisms. Sectors such as healthcare, higher education, finance, and technology frequently manage complex interpersonal and systemic issues that could benefit from AI-supported trend detection, intake triage, and early resolution tools (Lee, 2022; Johnson, 2023). Additionally, organizations that already use digital infrastructure for HR or compliance are more likely to have the technological maturity needed to support secure AI implementation. However, success in these contexts still hinges on organizational culture and commitment to human oversight and ethical standards.

2. Global Companies with Distributed Teams.

Multinational organizations operating across multiple time zones and cultural contexts face inherent challenges. These include delivering timely, accessible, and culturally responsive ombuds services. AI tools can help bridge these gaps by offering 24/7 intake availability, multilingual interfaces, and initial case categorization to support equitable service delivery across locations (Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). By standardizing intake procedures and helping surface patterns across regions, AI systems may also assist global ombuds teams in detecting systemic issues more effectively. However, policy implications include ensuring that local data privacy laws (e.g., GDPR) are respected and that AI tools are adapted for cultural nuance and equity.

3. Organizations Managing High Dispute Volume.

Large institutions—such as universities, hospital networks, and government agencies—often face a high volume of complaints, many of which involve recurring or low-complexity issues. In such settings, AI can serve as a first-line support system, handling intake, classifying concerns, and recommending interventions based on historical patterns (Berendt, 2022; Losey, 2024). This enables human ombuds practitioners to focus their efforts on complex, emotionally charged, or high-impact cases. Policy considerations for high-volume organizations should include developing clear escalation protocols, maintaining transparency about AI's role in the process, and ensuring user trust through informed consent and opt-out mechanisms (Susskind, 2019; International Ombuds Association, 2022).

In these contexts, policy frameworks must be tailored to define when and how AI is used, establish accountability, and ensure that the core values of confidentiality, neutrality, and informality remain intact. With proper guardrails, AI-enhanced ombudsman systems can serve as a valuable resource, not to replace human expertise but to extend its reach and impact in today's complex workplace environments.

**Future Directions**

As AI continues to evolve, conflict resolution—and ombudsman practice in particular—stands at a critical juncture. While this paper outlines the theoretical benefits and risks of AI integration, further research, policy development, and field experimentation will be essential to validate and refine the proposed hybrid model.

Several future directions warrant particular attention:

First, pilot studies of AI-enhanced ombudsman programs in real organizational settings are needed to test the functionality, user trust, and ethical safeguards of hybrid

models. These pilots should evaluate case volume and resolution speed, user satisfaction, perceived fairness, and the impact on the ombudsman's credibility. Ideally, such studies would include a variety of sectors, such as higher education, healthcare, and multinational corporations, to assess adaptability across contexts.

Second, interviews and surveys focused on trust, cultural sensitivity, and fairness in AI-supported ombuds interactions would offer important qualitative insights. These tools could help illuminate how different populations perceive AI involvement in informal dispute processes, shed light on how different populations perceive AI involvement, particularly among underrepresented or historically marginalized groups who may already be skeptical of automated systems (Leung, 2022; Williams & Young, 2021).

Third, professional training and capacity-building initiatives should be developed to equip ombudsman professionals with foundational knowledge in AI ethical standards, data governance, and algorithmic bias. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into workplace systems, ombudsman practitioners must be prepared to participate meaningfully in the design, deployment, and oversight of AI tools (Raji et al., 2020).

Finally, collaboration with policy-makers and professional associations will be vital in shaping standards, safeguards, and shared best practices. Organizations such as the International Ombuds Association (2022) and the United States Ombudsman Association can play a central role in convening cross-sector dialogue and guidelines that ensure AI is used in a manner consistent with the core values of independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality.

By investing in these steps, the field can move from conceptual exploration toward responsible innovation, ensuring that technology enhances, rather than erodes, the trust-based, human-centered foundations of ombudsman services.

This paper demonstrated that while AI offers promising enhancements to ombudsman services, such as improved efficiency, scalability, and pattern recognition, it presents ethical and relational challenges that cannot be overlooked. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, theoretical frameworks, and proposed implementation strategies, the study concludes that a carefully designed hybrid model is the most viable path forward. Future research and pilot programs will be essential to refine this model, ensure regulatory compliance, and protect the core values that make ombudsman work effective, human-centered, and trusted.

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## Acknowledgment

## Appendix

Ombudsman Intake Process Using AI

Purpose:

This process is designed to provide a confidential, transparent, and ethical way for students to report concerns, complaints, or feedback regarding the AI Teaching Assistant (AI-TA) interactions in the course. This system ensures that any issues are handled with integrity, empathy, and professionalism while maintaining student privacy.

1. Intake Process Overview

The AI-powered intake process allows students to submit concerns related to their interactions with the AI-TA, including but not limited to AI bias, feedback quality, perceived miscommunications, or any other academic-related complaints. The process is structured

to ensure that complaints are received, reviewed, and addressed in a timely and ethical manner.

2. AI-Powered Complaint Intake Tool

Platform: Students will access a secure online intake tool integrated within the course's learning management system (LMS), such as Canvas, or through a dedicated form platform.

Guided Process: The AI system will prompt students through a series of questions, providing an empathetic tone and ensuring the student's experience is captured accurately. These prompts are designed to allow students to detail their concerns, with questions such as:

<div align="center">AI Questions</div>

"Please describe the issue or concern you are experiencing."
"Was the AI-TA involved? If yes, how?"
"How did this issue affect your academic progress or experience?"
"Would you prefer to remain anonymous in this process?"
"Have you shared this concern with a faculty member or T?"

3. Categorization and Escalation

The AI system will analyze the responses and categorize the issue (e.g., bias, inaccuracy, communication error, etc.).

Escalation Process: Once categorized, the complaint will be automatically directed to a human ombudsman (designated faculty member or ethics officer) for review.

For sensitive or complex issues, human oversight will be immediately initiated, ensuring that ethical and legal considerations are met.

4. Confidentiality and Data Protection

Confidentiality: All submissions are kept confidential, ensuring no identification of the student unless explicitly requested. The intake form is designed to allow for anonymous submissions.

Data Protection: The AI tool will comply with institutional privacy standards (e.g., FERPA in the U.S.) and ensure that all data handling aligns with ethical and legal requirements.

Outcome Tracking: Students will have the option to receive updates on the progress of their complaint resolution, with clear timelines and explanations.

5. AI System's Role in Feedback and Resolution

The AI system will provide students with a confirmation of their complaint submission. AI will provide an acknowledgment that their concern is being reviewed and outline the next steps. AI may offer follow-up prompts for further clarification if needed.

6. Feedback and Continuous Improvement

After a resolution has been achieved, students will be invited to complete a brief, confidential survey evaluating the intake process, feedback clarity, and the fairness of the resolution. This feedback will be used to enhance both the AI-TA system and the complaint resolution process.

<div align="center">Confidentiality Commitment</div>

This intake process is designed to uphold the highest standards of confidentiality, ethical integrity, and academic fairness. The information submitted through this system will only be used to address student concerns and improve the overall learning experience with the AI-TA.

# Minority Police Officers in Law Enforcement:
## The Intersection of Identity and Experience

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between the identities of minority police officers and their professional experiences, focusing on the interplay between identity, societal interactions, and individual life experiences. The study builds upon the premise that identity significantly influences both personal and professional dynamics, shaping how individuals navigate their roles within society. Historical events, including the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the Rodney King Riots of 1992, and the killing of George Floyd in 2020, serve as pivotal moments that have profoundly affected the relationship between law enforcement and minority communities. These events contextualize the broader societal tensions and the complexities that minority officers face within their roles. As a police officer with four years of experience, the author reflects on how race and sexuality have both positively and negatively influenced their career. The study examines whether these effects lean more toward the positive or the negative and to what extent. Furthermore, this study aims to shed light on the decreased retention rates of minority police officers and their direct correlation to community-police relations. Given the underrepresentation of certain identities in our sample, the findings may not be generalizable to all minority groups in law enforcement. By exploring these dynamics, this research contributes valuable insights into enhancing understanding and improving connections between law enforcement and marginalized communities.

*Keywords:* identity bias, the interplay of societal interactions and individual experiences, contextualize broader societal tensions, decreased retention rates

## Introduction

### Purpose and Background

As stated in the abstract, America's recent history is marked by numerous incidents of police brutality and misuse of power, which have severely damaged trust between law enforcement and marginalized communities. Ethnic groups and sexual minorities (LGBTQ individuals) have been among the most vocal in expressing concerns about bias, discrimination, and injustice. These grievances have contributed to the rise of movements such as Defund the Police and an increased push for police accountability in the media.

In 2010, a 21-year report commissioned by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that women, Hispanics, and African Americans were less likely to remain in law enforcement than Caucasians. Taking this into account, it is reasonable to question whether identity plays a role in shaping the experiences of police officers. Given the current tensions between law enforcement and the communities they serve, many citizens have called for greater diversity in police departments, arguing that local law enforcement should reflect the identities of the communities they police. Recognizing that current recruitment and retention trends are unsustainable, police organizations must adapt to provide their communities with effective, 21st-century policing.

The writer has served as a law enforcement officer in California for four years, representing a diverse intersection of identities, including Black, First Generation, Child of African Immigrants, North Carolinian, Queer, Rugby Player, and Spanish speaker. Before

returning to California and being sworn in as a peace officer, he spent his early years as a queer Black teen in the suburban South, a region shaped by traditional conservatism and a history of racial tensions. He confidently asserts that these aspects of his identity have influenced his experiences in law enforcement.

Coincidentally, while undergoing police academy training in 2020, the writer witnessed firsthand the nationwide protests following the death of George Floyd, as hundreds of civilians blocked highways and local city streets in response to police brutality. The same department where he trained later reached a $3 million settlement following claims of excessive force, highlighting the intensified scrutiny surrounding law enforcement practices.

As public demands for reform persist, communities increasingly call for police forces that better reflect the populations they serve. Multi-ethnic neighborhoods, particularly those with predominantly Hispanic or Black populations, are often policed by agencies composed mostly of Caucasian officers who are not from the area. However, a significant disparity remains in the recruitment and retention of qualified minority officers compared to their counterparts. Experts continue to debate the root causes of this discrepancy, yet the reality is that minority officers are not hired or retained at the same rate.

As a society committed to learning from the past, we must gain deeper insight into the unique experiences of minority officers. By doing so, meaningful progress can be made toward addressing the concerns voiced by communities. This study seeks to examine the experiences of these officers and determine whether disparities in recruitment and retention stem from systemic stigma or measurable realities.

**Scope and Significance**

Conflict resolution professionals are dedicated to bridging the gap between individuals, whether they are actively engaged in conflict or not. To do so effectively, it is essential to analyze how various aspects of identity shape people's experiences and perceptions. This study will contribute to the existing knowledge on the decreased retention of minority police officers, a factor that is directly connected to community relations and public trust in law enforcement.

While this research addresses an issue that is arguably global in nature, its scope is primarily limited to the recent history of the United States (1950–present). This focus is necessary because a police agency's relationship with its community is highly context-specific. For example, examining the relationship between German police and their communities post-World War II or analyzing South African police during apartheid would require entirely different lenses, given the distinct sociopolitical variables that shaped those societies. Additionally, due to the locality and professional experiences of the author, who served the same period as a law enforcement officer in Northern California during the 2020s, most study participants will likely be California-based officers who policed during the same period.

The significance of this study is clear. Communities want a diverse police force, yet America struggles to retain diverse officers at the same rate as its counterparts. Understanding the perspectives of minority officers will provide critical insight into the challenges they face, ultimately helping law enforcement agencies work toward building a police force that aligns with community needs. Additionally, this research will help identify the sources of negative experiences reported by diverse officers—whether these challenges stem from interactions with community members or from internal factors, such as supervisors and coworkers.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

1. **Social Identity Theory** – This framework examines how individuals' social identities (such as race, gender, or ethnicity) influence their experiences, behaviors, and interactions within institutions like law enforcement. It suggests that identity plays a role in officer retention and public trust in policing.
2. **Representative Bureaucracy Theory** – This theory argues that the demographic composition of government agencies (such as police forces) impacts policy outcomes and public trust. It supports the idea that communities benefit when their police departments reflect their diversity, which aligns with the public's call for more representative policing.
3. **Critical Race Theory** – This framework explores how systemic structures contribute to disparities in policing, including officer retention rates and the relationship between law enforcement and marginalized communities. It highlights how historical and institutional biases might shape these dynamics.
4. **Organizational Justice Theory** – This theory focuses on fairness within institutions, examining how perceived equity in opportunities and treatment (such as promotions, retention, and workplace culture) affects employee satisfaction and longevity. It may help explain differences in law enforcement retention rates among various demographic groups.
5. **Community-Oriented Policing Model** – Though more of a policy framework, this approach emphasizes collaborative relationships between law enforcement and communities to improve trust and effectiveness. The public's desire for police forces that reflect their communities aligns with this model's goals.

**Sources of Theoretical Frameworks:**

1. **Social Identity Theory**
Katherine P. Hazen & Eve M. Brank, Identifying and Unpacking the Role of Social Identity (January 14, 2023), Springer Nature Link
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11896-022-09559-x
Robert Leverone, Crowd Behavior & Elaborated Social Identity Modeling (May 25, 2022), Domestic Preparedness  https://domesticpreparedness.com/articles/crowd-behavior-elaborated-social-identity-modeling
2. **Representative Bureaucracy Theory**
Kenneth J. Meier and Jill Nicholson-Crotty, Gender, Representative Bureaucracy, and Law Enforcement, Public Administration Review (November-December 2006), JSTOR
https://www.jstor.org/stable/4096602
Norma M. Riccucci , Gregg G. Van Ryzin , Cecilia F. Lavena,
Representative Bureaucracy in Policing, Journal of Public Administration: Research and Theory (July 2014)  https://academic.oup.com/jpart/article-abstract/24/3/537/900329?redirectedFrom=fulltext
3. **Critical Race Theory**
Fanna Gamal, The Racial Politics of Protection, California Law Review (August 2016), JSTOR  https://www.jstor.org/stable/24758742
A Critical Race Theory of Racialised Policing?, Springer Nature Link, September 8, 2018
https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-98240-3_8
4. **Organizational Justice Theory**

Scott E. Wolfe, Jeff Rojek, Victor M. Manjarrez Jr., Allison Rojek, Why does organizational justice matter? (2017) Journal of Criminal Justice https://www.utep.edu/clhb/_files/docs/why-does-org-justice-matter_uncertainty.pdf

L.K. Gaines, Overview of Organizational Theory and Its Relation to Police Administration (1977), NCJRS Virtual Library https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/overview-organizational-theory-and-its-relation-police

## 5. Community-Oriented Policing Model

Community-Oriented Policing and Problem-Oriented Policing (Last Update: January 2023), OJJDP https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/community-oriented-problem-oriented-policing

Community Policing Defined chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/RIC/Publications/cops-p157-pub.pdf

## Core Questions

1. How does race influence the reported job satisfaction of minority police officers?
2. If a correlation exists, does race have a positive or negative impact on their satisfaction levels?
3. To what degree does race affect the reported satisfaction of minority police officers, and in what direction?

## Thesis Statement

This study explores how the identities and lived experiences of minority police officers influence their professional roles and interactions, both within law enforcement and marginalized communities. By examining historical context, personal reflections, and the relationship between retention rates and community engagement, this research aims to illuminate the broader implications of identity on police-community and intra-police dynamics.

## Literature Review

When examining minority gender identities, I focused my research on two groups: women and transgender people. My initial research revealed that a significant historical turning point for the employment of women and ethnic minorities in law enforcement came with the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Hassell & Brandl, 2009). This is especially important because, in my experience, law enforcement tends to highly value applicants with law enforcement family members or recommendations. This hiring method has been found to produce a more homogenous applicant pool (Benson, 2016).

Much of the research I found concerning the experiences of women, transgender officers, and ethnic minority officers did not focus on the identity makeup of the communities they policed. This confirmed the research gap I originally hypothesized. For example, this writer found an account of a transgender police officer who had filed a harassment complaint against her department. In her complaint, she reported that her experiences with the public [as a transgender patrol officer] led her to believe her gender identity "would not be a problem" (Beals, 2014). In this case, interactions with the community had a positive impact on the officer's experience, while her department presented negative internal challenges. Unfortunately, there is a lack of existing research on the experiences of transgender police officers in relation to the demographic makeup or views of the communities they serve.

Longstanding research has identified and confirmed that Black police officers experience racism similar to their Black civilian counterparts, suggesting that these officers face "double marginality". One study, conducted in 2017, examined 33 police officers from Las Vegas, NV (Suboch, Harrington, & House). The following table shows the demographic makeup of the officers interviewed:

**Table 1:** *Participants by Gender and Ethnicity*

|                  | Female | Male |
|------------------|--------|------|
| African American | 1      | 10   |
| Caucasian        | 11     | 0    |
| Hispanic         | 2      | 7    |
| Mixed Race       | 2      | 0    |

The results indicated that gender significantly impacted officers' reported experiences. Two female officers noted that at times, being seen as a mother or sister figure was beneficial, while in other cases, they felt dismissed or discredited by community members they interacted with. Interestingly, most Hispanic and Black participants reported that community members who shared their ethnicity viewed them as "traitors or sellouts". However, these officers also stated that their shared identity often helped them de-escalate situations with community members. This confirms the hypothesis that officers' identities influence their experiences, although it remains unclear whether these influences result in a net positive, negative, or neutral impact.

Similarly, another study reported the following firsthand accounts from two Black law enforcement officers: "Detective Martin recalled being told, 'You're a traitor. You're a turncoat. You're an Uncle Tom.'" Meanwhile, "Sergeant Scott described a more distressing reaction from Black community members after joining law enforcement, recalling, '[Some people in my neighborhood] threatened to kill my mom ... because I was a police officer.'" (Prengler, Chawla, Leigh & Rogers, 2023).

Regarding sexual identity, a peer-reviewed qualitative study published in 2013 examined 14 gay and lesbian-identified police officers (8 men and 6 women) (Charles). Notably, 13 of the participants were Caucasian, highlighting a research gap in exploring the intersectionality of race and sexual identity. The study emphasized the lack of existing research on this population. One participant described how they had interacted with many gay- and lesbian-identified citizens, explaining that these citizens felt more comfortable disclosing their sexual identity when reporting crimes. For example, victims expressed statements such as, "Yeah, I'm a gay man, and this guy raped me," or "I'm a lesbian, and I was beat up because of...". However, this study did not explore whether having a larger percentage of gay or lesbian-identified officers positively or negatively influenced their experience in law enforcement.

## Methodology
Since the question largely has to do with a person's subjective account of their experience, the qualitative component is essential to truly understand nuances that are not easily captured by a rating scale from 1-10 or a sliding scale ranging from disagree to agree. At the same time, due to the wealth of data that would come from a large number of participants,

quantitative research methods will be useful to quickly and efficiently get a picture of the trends in the data. Therefore, the writer plans to employ a mix of both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

This project will have current or retired American law enforcement officials as participants. As previously stated, a report commissioned by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that women and people of color were less likely to remain in law enforcement than Caucasians (Langton & OJPBJS, 2010). Consequently, law enforcement in America has been predominantly comprised of Caucasian males. This study regarding ethnic minorities will focus on those who would fall outside of the heterosexual Caucasian male label. The paper will primarily be conducted through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires/surveys.

Twenty participants were involved in the study, which was disseminated online. The instructions outlined that participation is voluntary and anonymous, but requested their honesty. The survey began by gathering participants' demographic data, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Next, participants were prompted to confirm law enforcement affiliation, as well as their current employment status and total time worked.

The body of the survey was broken into three sections based on race, gender, and sexuality. In each section, participants answered questions based on their perceptions of interactions with people they encounter during the course of their duties. For each demographic marker (race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality) and context (community members, coworkers, supervisors), participants were asked whether they believed their demographic marker played a role in interactions with a certain context. After specifying, they were also asked about the frequency and effect of the demographic marker on the interaction (whether positive or negative).

While the scale offered quantitative clarity, future studies should include open-ended questions to capture nuanced experiences more effectively.

## Results

Active law enforcement officers participated in the study and completed the questionnaire. Participants varied in experience, ranging from as little as five years in law enforcement to a total of 25 years. There was also a significant age difference among respondents, with the youngest being 27 and the oldest 50. Of the 20 participants, 20% self-identified as gay, 20% were female, and the race/ethnicity composition was as follows: 40% were Caucasian, 30% Hispanic, 15% Asian, 5% Black, and 10% Mixed.

The study yielded the following key findings:

● 100% of female respondents reported that their gender played a role in interactions with community members. Furthermore, all respondents stated that the effect was positive.

● 75% of female respondents reported that their gender influenced interactions with their coworkers. Among them, the majority stated that the effect was negative.

● One female respondent reported that her gender influenced interactions with coworkers weekly and rated the effect a 2out of 10.

● Among male respondents who reported that their gender influenced interactions with community members, more described the effect as positive rather than negative.

● 75% of gay respondents reported that their sexuality did not influence interactions with community members. In comparison, 87.5% of heterosexual respondents reported no influence on interactions with community members due to their sexuality.

● 75% of gay respondents reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with coworkers, but no clear pattern emerged regarding its effect. Conversely, only 6.3% of heterosexual respondents reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with coworkers.

● 75% of gay respondents reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with supervisors, with 100% rating the effect as negative. One gay respondent reported a single instance where their sexuality influenced an interaction with a supervisor and rated the effect as one out of ten. Conversely, none of the heterosexual respondents reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with supervisors.

● 100% of White respondents reported that their race/ethnicity influenced interactions with community members. Among them, 28.6% described the effect as neutral, while 71.4% reported a negative impact.

● 57.1% of White respondents reported that their race/ethnicity influenced interactions with coworkers; however, the effect was minimal, with the largest rating offset being -1.

● Only one White respondent reported that their race/ethnicity influenced interactions with a supervisor.

● Among non-White respondents, only one reported that their race/ethnicity never influenced interactions with community members. Of the remaining participants, 70% described the effect as either neutral or positive.

● None of the non-White respondents reported that their race/ethnicity influenced an interaction with a supervisor.

## Discussion

**Key Questions**

**1. How does race influence the reported job satisfaction of minority police officers?**

Out of the BIPOC participants, 83.3% reported that their race/ethnicity influenced interactions with community members, 41.7% reported that their race/ethnicity influenced interactions with coworkers, and 8.3% reported that it influenced an interaction with a supervisor.

Among female participants, 100% reported that their gender had influenced interactions with community members, 75% reported that it influenced interactions with coworkers, and 25% reported that it influenced an interaction with a supervisor.

Among homosexual participants, 25% reported that their sexuality influenced an interaction with community members, 75% reported that it influenced an interaction with coworkers, and 75% reported that it had influenced an interaction with a supervisor.

**2. If a correlation exists, does race have a positive or negative impact on their satisfaction levels?**

Among the BIPOC participants who reported that their race/ethnicity influenced interactions with community members (83.3%), 30% stated the effect was negative, 10% described it as neutral, and 50% reported a positive impact. Among the BIPOC participants who reported that their race/ethnicity influenced interactions with coworkers (41.7%), 50% stated the effect was negative, while 41.6% described it as positive.

Among female participants who reported that their gender influenced interactions with community members (100%), all indicated that the effect was positive. Among female participants who reported that their gender influenced interactions with coworkers (75%), 66.6% stated the effect was negative, while 33.3% described it as positive.

The homosexual participant who reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with community members stated that the effect was negative. Among the three homosexual participants who reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with coworkers, one described the effect as negative, one as neutral, and one as positive. Among the three homosexual participants who reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with a supervisor, all stated that the effect was negative.

3. **To what degree does race affect the reported satisfaction of minority police officers, and in what direction?**

No, each change in data for an identity marker had drastically different effects on the results, both in polarity and in the extent of the effect. For example, 100% of female police officers reported that their gender influenced interactions with community members, while only 25% of homosexual police officers reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with community members. Furthermore, 100% of female officers stated that their gender had a positive influence on interactions with community members, whereas the reported effect of homosexuality on interactions with community members was either negative (25%) or had no impact (75%).

However, despite gender and sexuality having opposite reported effects on interactions with community members, interactions with a supervisor revealed a different pattern. 100% of female officers reported that their gender had no effect on interactions with supervisors, while 75% of homosexual respondents not only reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with supervisors but also stated that the effect was negative.

## Gaps in Literature

The initial literature review for this study revealed that most research on the relationship between law enforcement and the community since the turn of the millennium has primarily focused on the African American community. This, along with the documented homogeneity of law enforcement on a larger scale, contributed to an emphasis on the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community during the conceptualization of this research. The literature review also highlighted a lack of research on transgender law enforcement officers. These findings influenced the researcher's goals for the participant pool, ensuring that it reflected the demographics most in need of representation and that had historically been overlooked.

Further research will assist professionals and theorists in advancing law enforcement agencies toward a more community-conscious and action-oriented future.

## Limitations of the Study

One major limitation of the study was the diversity of the participant pool. This issue stemmed from the recruitment stage of the study and the lack of emphasis on the demographic composition of participants. Although an adequate number of law enforcement officers (20) participated, only one of the participants was Black, none were transgender, and 100% of the homosexual participants were male. Additionally, because research participation was voluntary, there was no way to ensure a more diverse sample.

Another limitation was that the study required participants to provide an averaged response for their experiences with different groups (e.g., community members, coworkers) without the opportunity for elaboration or explanation. For instance, a participant may have had one experience rated as a 1 out of 10 and another rated as a 10 out of 10. However, when averaging these, they would report a neutral effect of 5 out of 10—the same response a

participant would provide if no effect were present. When analyzing results on a broader scale, such nuances could become effectively lost.

This limitation also extends to perspectives on identity. No specific information regarding participants' job titles was collected. Consider the following scenario: It is well known that the vast majority of sexual assault victims are women. In such cases, a sexual assault detective who is female may find that her gender positively influences interactions with female victims, whereas a female patrol officer, who may frequently experience physical confrontations with suspects, could report the effect of gender as negative. However, because demographic questions in the study did not account for occupational context, there was no way to discern how specific roles may have shaped participants' reported experiences.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore whether—and to what extent—a minority law enforcement officer's identity (race, gender, sexuality) influenced their perception of their experiences with coworkers, supervisors, and community members. The survey revealed a significant difference in reported results from cisgender Caucasian males compared to their counterparts.

One particularly notable finding was that 75% of gay respondents reported that their sexuality influenced interactions with coworkers, compared to 6.3% of heterosexual respondents. Additionally, 75% of gay respondents stated that their sexuality affected interactions with supervisors, with 100% rating the impact as negative.

The only respondents who provided a rating lower than 3/10—when assessing the extent to which a specific identity trait influenced an interaction—were officers who identified as minorities. Specifically, a female respondent noted that her gender influenced interactions with coworkers weekly, at a magnitude of 2/10. In contrast, a gay respondent reported that their sexuality affected an interaction with a supervisor at a magnitude of 1/10.

Based on these findings, there appears to be a significant difference between the responses provided by heterosexual Caucasian males and those of other groups. This suggests a plausible relationship between a police officer's identity and their experiences within the department and the broader community. Even with a small sample size of twenty officers, two minority-identified officers reported intradepartmental negative experiences based on their protected class status. Further, when compared to their whole, 20% of women and homosexual participants reported either habitual or acute conduct, indicating that the identity-based difference in career experience did not impact all minority-identified individuals equally.

**Recommendations**

It should be noted that the research participant pool largely consisted of law enforcement officers from California. As such, the results of this research should not be taken as entirely reflective or generalizable to the experiences of officers across all law enforcement agencies. One can imagine a contrasting effect—for example, being a woman in a female-dominated community (like the Amazonians of Greek mythology) or an amplified effect of being a homosexual male police officer in a more conservative state, such as Florida.

Another concerning aspect of the participant pool is the lack of respondents from several identities: no transgender or lesbian participants, no White, Black, or queer women, and only one Black participant overall. Furthermore, 75% of the homosexual respondents were self-identified

cisgender Caucasian men. This indicates both a significant lack of representation and the potential for competing intersectional identities to be overlooked.

Further research should be conducted in communities with more diverse ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds."

## Practical Applications and Policy Implications

The results of this research present a compelling opportunity for advancing community policing reform. Although the study was conducted in Northern California, its concentrated participant pool allows for a more nuanced understanding of the region's cultural landscape. Arguably, this focused approach is more effective than mixing too many diverse factors, which can obscure meaningful trends and dilute the findings.

With this in mind, several conclusions can be drawn regarding ways to decrease identity-based job dissatisfaction among minority police officers:
- Provide supervisors with management-specific training to enhance sensitivity toward protected classes.
- Offer the general workforce more impactful Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programming.
- Acknowledge the existence of increased dissatisfaction and supply culturally relevant resources to help close these gaps.
- Deliver community-specific support to address incidents and experiences that uniquely impact those identities.

If it's recognized that recruitment and retention of female, LGBTQ+, ethnic, and other minority-identified individuals in law enforcement remain disproportionately low, departments must provide additional support to current minority officers. Doing so would help retain these officers at higher rates, improving both job satisfaction and departmental diversity. Ultimately, this helps meet the broader public demand for a police force that genuinely reflects the communities it serves.

## Future Directions

Though the primary purpose of this research was simply to explore the connection between law enforcement officers' identities and their on-duty experiences, the results revealed the possibility of a silent phenomenon: the homogenization of modern policing. If job satisfaction among minority-identified officers continues to decline at a faster rate than their counterparts—and in a field already grappling with widespread recruitment challenges, it is plausible that we may witness a regression in both the evolution of modern policing and the quality of community-police relations.

For the well-being of both the law enforcement field and the communities it serves, greater attention must be given to this disparity so that meaningful progress can begin. As of June 2025, with law enforcement agencies being employed to assist in the detention and mass deportation of immigrants led by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the phenomenon outlined in this study appears to be worsening. Without targeted intervention, the already-strained relationship between communities and law enforcement is likely to deteriorate even more rapidly.

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**Acknowledgment**

# Identity Study

**Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey! Participation is completely voluntary and anonymous, so thank you. The survey should take approximately 5-10 minutes. Please be truthful in all responses and read each question in its entirety prior to responding. Feel free to take a break at any time during completion & feel free to reach out to the Research Coordinator with any questions.**

**\* Indicates required question**

**1.      Email \***

**2.      Gender \***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

**Cau                          Caused it to be more positive**
**Male Female**
**Prefer not to say**
**Other:**

**3.      Age (in years) \***

**4.      Race/Ethnicity \***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

**Cau                          Caused it to be more positive**
**American Indian or Alaska Native Asian**
**Black or African American**
**Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander White**
**Hispanic or Latino**
**Other:**

**5.      Sexual Orientation \***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

Cau                                        Caused it to be more positive
Straight (Heterosexual) Gay (Homosexual) Bisexual
Questioning
Other:

**Career**

**6.    Are you law enforcement affiliated? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯
**1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10**
Cau                                        Caused it to be more positive
  Yes   No

**7.    Are you a current law enforcement or retired? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯
**1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10**
Cau                                        Caused it to be more positive
  Current   Retired
  Not applicable

**8.    How many years have/had you been a police officer? ***

**Identity**

**Race**

**9.    Thinking about your interactions with community members while on duty, do you       * believe your race/ethnicity has ever played a role in how those interactions proceeded?**
**Mark only one oval.**

◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯
**1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10**
Cau                                        Caused it to be more positive
  Yes   No
  Prefer not to say
**10.    If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

**Cau**                                    **Caused it to be more positive**

  Once
  A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily
  Has not occurred

**11.     Of those times your race/ethnicity played a role, what was the general influence     * on the interaction? 5 being neutral or has not occurred**

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

**Cau**                                    **Caused it to be more positive**


**12.     Thinking about your interactions with coworkers while on duty, do you believe        *
your race/ethnicity ever played a role in how those interactions proceeded?**

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

**Cau**                                    **Caused it to be more positive**

  Yes   No
  Prefer not to say

**13.     If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

**Cau**                                    **Caused it to be more positive**

  Once
  A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily
  Has not occurred

**14.     Of those times your race/ethnicity played a role, what was the general influence     *
on the interaction? 5 being neutral or has not occurred**

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

**Cau**                                    **Caused it to be more positive**

**15.  Thinking about your interactions with your supervisor while on duty, do you    * believe your race/ethnicity has ever played a role in how those interactions proceeded?**
**Mark only one oval.**

| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** |

**Cau**                                    **Caused it to be more positive**

  Yes   No
  Prefer not to say

**16.  If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** |

**Cau**                                    **Caused it to be more positive**

  Once
  A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily
  Has not occurred

**17.  Of those times your race/ethnicity played a role, what was the general influence    ***
**on the interaction? 5 being neutral or has not occurred**

**Mark only one oval.**

| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** |

**Cau**                                    **Caused it to be more positive**

**Identity**

**Gender**

**18.  Thinking about your interactions with community members while on duty, do you ***
**believe your gender has ever played a role in how those interactions proceeded?**

**Mark only one oval.**

  Yes   No
  Prefer not to say
**19.  If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

Cau                                    Caused it to be more positive

Once
A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily
Has not occurred

20.     Of those times your gender played a role, what was the general influence on the*
interaction? 5 being neutral or has not occurred

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

Cau                                    Caused it to be more positive

21.     Thinking about your interactions with coworkers while on duty, do you believe        *
your gender has ever played a role in how those interactions proceeded?

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

Cau                                    Caused it to be more positive

Yes   No
Prefer not to say

22.     If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? *

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

Cau                                    Caused it to be more positive

Once
A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily
Has not occurred

23.     Of those times your gender played a role, what was the general influence on the*
interaction? 5 being neutral or has not occurred

**Mark only one oval.**

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Cau                                         Caused it to be more positive

24. **Thinking about your interactions with your supervisor while on duty, do you** *
**believe your gender has ever played a role in how those interactions proceeded?**

**Mark only one oval.**

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Cau                                         Caused it to be more positive

Yes   No
Prefer not to say

25. **If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred?** *

**Mark only one oval.**

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Cau                                         Caused it to be more positive

Once
A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily
Has not occurred

26. **Of those times your gender played a role, what was the general influence on the** *
**interaction? 5 being neutral or has not occurred**

**Mark only one oval.**

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Cau                                         Caused it to be more positive

**Identity**

**Sexuality**

27. **Thinking about your interactions with community members while on duty, do you** *

**believe your sexuality has played a role in how those interactions proceeded? Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

1
Cau                           Caused it to be more positive

Yes   No
Prefer not to say

28. **If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

1
Cau                           Caused it to be more positive
Once
A few times  Monthly  Weekly  Daily
Has not occurred

29. **Of those times your sexuality played a role, what was the general influence on *** **the interaction?**
   **5 being neutral or has not occurred**

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

1
Cau                           Caused it to be more positive

30. **Thinking about your interactions with coworkers while on duty, do you believe *** **your sexuality has ever played a role in how those interactions proceeded?**
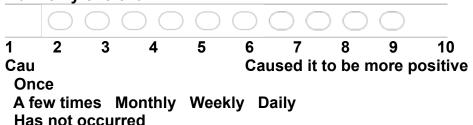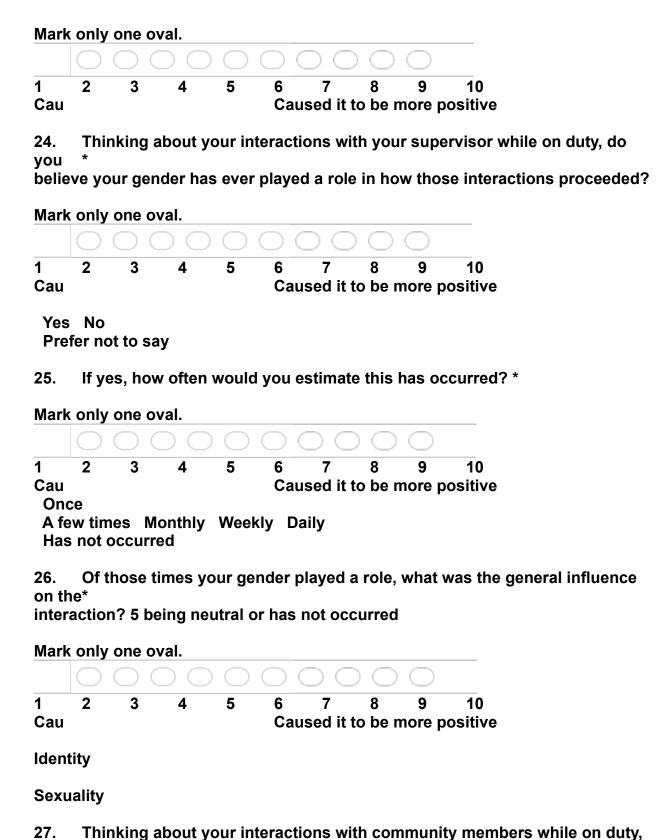
**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

1
Cau                           Caused it to be more positive
Yes   No
Prefer not to say

31. **If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**
**Cau**                            **Caused it to be more positive**
  Once
  A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily
  Has not occurred

**32.** **Of those times your sexuality played a role, what was the general influence on * the interaction? 5 being neutral or has not occurred**

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**
**Cau**                            **Caused it to be more positive**

**33.** **Thinking about your interactions with your supervisor while on duty, do you * believe your sexuality has ever played a role in how those interactions proceeded?**

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**
**Cau**                            **Caused it to be more positive**
  Yes   No
  Prefer not to say

**34.** **If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**
**Cau**                            **Caused it to be more positive**
  Once
  A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily
  Has not occurred

**34.** **If yes, how often would you estimate this has occurred? ***

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**

**Cau**                                                   **Caused it to be more positive**
   **Once**
   **A few times   Monthly   Weekly   Daily**
   **Has not occurred**

**35.     Of those times your sexuality played a role, what was the general influence on      *  the interaction?  5 being neutral or has not occurred**

**Mark only one oval.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**1     2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10**
**Cau**                                           **Caused it to be more positive**

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# APPLIED DISPUTE RESOLUTION JOURNAL

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## Meet the Contributors

### Alice Dean

**Alice** graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Professional Studies and a minor in Family History Research from BYU-Idaho on April 7, 2022. She is pursuing genealogist certification and operates a research business at [www.sisterfamilyhistory.com](www.sisterfamilyhistory.com), offering seminars, client research, and archival services for family photos and documents. She supports families in navigating unexpected DNA surprises with empathy and discretion. A licensed HAM Radio operator (KF6YQF), Alice has maintained a longstanding interest in radio communications since 1989. She assists low-income students at a community college in achieving their educational goals. She is currently enrolled in a master's program in Negotiation, Conflict Resolution, and Peacebuilding, with a continued commitment to lifelong learning.

### Nicholas Gonzalez

**Nicholas** is a recent MA-NCRP graduate with a current career focus in senior services. He brings a strong background in programs designed to help older adults avoid skilled nursing placement, including California's Home and Community-Based Alternatives Waiver Program, Enhanced Care Management, Multi-Purpose Senior Services, and the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly. Nicholas has contributed to expanding access for underserved communities in Los Angeles County, helping increase enrollment in these vital safety-net services through improved outreach and quality of care.

### Brian Jarrett

**Brian** is a Professor and NCRP Department Chair. He is a lawyer and professional mediator and arbitrator in both the United States and Canada. He also holds a Ph.D. in Sociology. His interests include mediation, arbitration, dispute systems design (DSD), restorative practices, and therapeutic jurisprudence (TJ). In recent years, he has originated work in Integral Mediation, which promotes interdisciplinary practices in mediation. His practice ranges from work with local communities to international organizations.

## Donna Matini

**Donna** is a thought leader and conflict resolution specialist dedicated to bringing healing mechanisms to personal, familial, organizational, and societal conflict contexts. She graduated summa cum laude with both a BA in Psychology from Empire University and a Master's in Negotiation, Conflict Resolution, and Peacebuilding from CSUDH. Using her background in business management, positive and media psychology, and conflict theory, Donna develops innovative approaches and teaching opportunities to ADR facilitation and organizational culture. She is a three-time author and edits scholarly books and articles, as well as designing and launching public wellness initiatives as a pro bono activist, advocating for the rights of humans to flourish.

## Gerald R. Papica

**Gerald** began teaching at CSUDH in 2020 and joined the NCRP department, where he teaches online courses in ombudsman practices, independent study, and directed reading. He holds a Doctorate in Education from Nova Southeastern University and a Master's in Public Administration from Tennessee State University. After 35 years in the Tennessee state government, he served 20 years as Ombudsman Program Director with the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. A longtime member of the United States Ombudsman Association, Gerald served as vice president, trainer, and lecturer. He was recently appointed managing editor of the Applied Dispute Resolution Journal, helping shape the next generation of dispute resolution scholarship.

## Masha Rusanov

**Masha** is a graduate student in the Master of Arts program in Negotiation, Conflict Resolution, and Peacebuilding at California State University, Dominguez Hills. She holds certifications in divorce and custody conflict coaching and Wayfinder coaching, and she brings extensive professional experience in real estate, marketing, and conflict communication. Masha has contributed research on ombuds services, AI in dispute resolution, and workplace conflict communication. She volunteers as a divorce coach with WEIRA and is dedicated to helping families and organizations navigate conflict with clarity and compassion.

## Yanick Mendes Tavares Varela

**Yanick** is a first-generation child of West African immigrants. He is a driven service worker with a passion for connecting across cultures. His studies, travels, and career in law enforcement have brought him into contact with people from all walks of life, reinforcing his belief that we are more alike than different. Yanick has served with the City of San José for over five years, currently as a detective and certified child forensic interviewer. A Spanish speaker and recipient of the 2023 CHP 10851 Award, he remains committed to serving underserved communities with empathy, integrity, and cultural awareness.

# APPLIED DISPUTE RESOLUTION JOURNAL

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**Closing Note from the Managing Editor**

As Managing Editor of ADRJ, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to our contributors, reviewers, and readers. This issue reflects the collaborative spirit and intellectual rigor that define our field. May the insights within spark dialogue, deepen understanding, and inspire continued innovation in dispute resolution. We look forward to your engagement in future editions.

# *IN RECOGNITION*

**Marco Turk**

We recognize Marco Turk for his enduring contributions to the NCRP Program and the broader field of dispute resolution. His dedication to practice, mentorship, and ethical engagement has shaped generations of students and professionals. Marco's work reflects the spirit of collaboration and compassion that defines the NCRP community.

**David Churchman**

We honor David Churchman as the original founder of the NCRP Program, whose vision and leadership laid the foundation for its lasting impact. His pioneering efforts in conflict resolution education created a legacy that continues to guide and inspire. Without David's foresight, the program—and this journal—would not exist.