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Family Functioning, Basic Needs and Psychological Well-Being

Nocito M.^{1*}, Malaponte E.², Malara E.², Mancuso R.², Mandica G. M.², Mangone A.², Marafioti M.², Mento M.², Mezzopane A.², Mondì A.², Morganti A.², Musarra D.², Muschio C.², Musumeci E.², Niosi A.², Occhipinti B.², Pacino G.², Pandolfino L.², Pantò E.², Parafioriti G.², Passalacqua G.², Patera I. C.², Patti E.², Pavone G.¹, Perri A.², Petruzzello S.², Pirrello I.², Ponsù M.², Ponzio M.², Praticò V.², Pruiti M.², Raineri G.², Repaci F. S.², Restuccia G.²

¹ Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Messina, Italy

² Student of Psychological Sciences and Techniques, Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Messina, Italy

ABSTRACT

Background: The influence of parenting strategies and family functioning was extensively analysed in the study of the healthy development of adolescents. Self-determination theory expands this study by suggesting that at the basis of an optimal development there is the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. The aim of this study was to investigate the relation between family functioning and some related variables, such as intrinsic motivation, basic psychological needs, well-being and parental educational practices.

Methods: 140 parents with their 70 teenagers took part to this research. For each of the variables to be investigated, specific self-reports were administered.

Results: Results found that adolescent self-perceived well-being was related to supportive parental practices and to a better family functioning. Furthermore, basic psychological needs have been found fundamental for the well-being both in parents than in adolescents.

Conclusions: The strength of this study lies in having considered family units, investigating the same variables in both parents and children, and finding satisfaction of basic psychological needs to be related to positive well-being outcomes across generations. The practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: *Family Functioning, Motivation; Well-being; Psychological control; Autonomy support*

* Corresponding author: Marzia Nocito, Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, University of Messina, Italy
E-mail address: marzia.nocito@gmail.com

Introduction

The family is an organization that binds and holds together the different generations that are part of it. Psychology studies were interested in family in order to understand how it works and how it affects children. Family functioning refers to the relationship between family members, indicating the degree of cohesion, personal satisfaction, communication and flexibility (Olson et al., 1979). Cohesion is defined as the emotional bond that unites family members and includes the representation that each member carries with them of the bonds of family members. Flexibility is defined as the quality and expression of leadership and organization, role relations, rules and the ability to negotiate. Communication is considered a facilitating dimension with respect to the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility. Personal satisfaction is understood as the degree to which family members feel satisfied and fulfilled for their cohesion, their flexibility and communication. Literature has highlighted how family functioning plays an important role in the health and psychological well-being of adolescents (Balistreri & Alvira-Hammond, 2016). Furthermore, the influence of parenting strategies was extensively analysed in the study of the optimal development of adolescents, alongside family functioning. Research suggests that two specific parental practices, such as psychologically controlling and autonomy-supportive parenting, can be described within the Self-Determination Theory's (SDT) framework. Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation, personality, and social development. SDT identify three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Need for competence concerns people's possibility to express their skills in environmental contexts and interacting with them. Need for relatedness concerns people's feelings to belong and be integrated into a community or group. Lastly, need for autonomy concerns being able to make life choices and perceiving their own behavior as self-endorsed. In accordance with SDT, the satisfaction of all these three basic psychological needs is highly correlated with well-being and behavioral adjustment; social contexts, as parenting, could have a relevant role to support or thwart these psychological basic needs (Ryan, et al, 2017). Autonomy supportive parenting aims to encourage children and adolescents to reflect upon and act in ways consistent with their personally endorsed goals and values. On the contrary, parental psychological control aims to intrude on the psychological world of the children in order to control it, and can be considered a misfit form of parenting that involves shame and guilt induction, as well as coercion of verbal interactions and withdrawal of love (Liga, Lo Coco, Musso et al, 2020). The research based on SDT has consistently demonstrated that parental need-support and behaviour control promote growth, intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being, through the experience of basic need-satisfaction

(Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013), whereas parental psychological control relates to maladjustment, ill-being and psychopathology, through the experience of basic need-frustration (Barber, 1996). A large body of research has underlined how autonomy has been constantly linked to various aspects of psychosocial development, allowing children to achieve independence and self-fulfillment, maintaining positive relationships with family and authority (Liga et al, 2020). It has been shown that autonomy-supportive parenting is a strong predictor of well-being in offspring (Inguglia, Inguglia, Liga, Coco, & Cricchio, 2015). Ryan and Deci (2017) confirmed the positive association between parents and children's psychological needs, stressing that a significant level of intergenerational transmission of needs passes through educational practices. On the basis of these considerations, this paper presents a collection of five research contributions conducted by young psychology students on 70 family units, composed of cohabiting parents and at least one adolescent child. The first contribution aimed to investigate the possible association between the motivation to have a child and the parenting practices adopted, as psychological control and support for autonomy. The second Contribution focused on the possible association between family functioning and psychological well-being of adolescents. The third Contribution aimed to verify a possible association between psychological control perceived and self-perceived well-being of adolescents. In addition, the research hypothesis of the fourth contribution concerns the possible association between the perceptions of satisfaction of needs and the support of autonomy by adolescents. Finally, the fifth contribution investigated the possible association between the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and family functioning among parents.

Method

Participants

70 families, made up of married and cohabiting parents and at least one adolescent child took part in the research. The age of the fathers was between 38 and 67 years old ($M=48.8$; $SD=5.05$) while the age of mothers was between 36 and 60 ($M=44.9$; $SD=5.01$). All the parents were Italian and have at least one child adolescent: specifically, 12 families had only one child, 38 families had two children, 18 families had three children, and 2 families had four children. Regarding parents' education, 31% of fathers had the middle school certification, 54% had a high school diploma, and 15% had a first level degree. Furthermore, 21% of mothers had the middle school certification, 60% had a high school diploma, and 19% had a first level degree.

The age of adolescents was between 11 and 18 years ($M= 15.10$; $SD= 1.7$): 35 were males and 35 females and attended middle and high school.

Procedure

The subjects were recruited among friends and acquaintances of psychology students. The questionnaires were administered to fathers, mothers and adolescents individually. Before filling out the questionnaires, both parents signed the informed consent for them and for their offspring and were reassured of the anonymity of their responses. The protocol took about 30 minutes to be completed. Once the entire sample of data was collected, each group of psychology students worked on specific objectives, giving rise to the five contributions set out below. The data were then analysed using IBM SPSS.

Measures

Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (PBNSF; Chen, et al., 2015). This scale is made up of 24 items on a 5-point Likert response scale (1 = Not at all agree; 5 = Strongly agree) and is used in order to assess the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs: autonomy ("I feel that my choices express who I really am"), competence ("I feel capable in what I do") and relatedness ("I feel that people I care about, really care about me "). In the present study Cronbach's alphas is good for all the subscales (Autonomy: .74 for fathers, .78 for mothers, and .69 for adolescents; Relatedness: .70 for fathers, .67 for mothers, and .72 for adolescents; Competence: .73 for fathers, .74 for mothers, and .71 for adolescents).

Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale (P-PASS; Mageau et al., 2015) was used in order to assess parental autonomy support (e.g. parent form: " I give my child plenty of opportunities to make their own decisions about the things they do"; adolescent form: " My parents give me many opportunities to make my own decisions about the things I do") and parental psychological control (e.g. parent form: " When I want my child to do something differently than he does, I make him / her feel guilty"; adolescent form: "When my parents want me to do something differently than I do, they make me feel guilty"). It consists of 24 items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all agree) to 7 (very much agree). In this study, the internal consistency is satisfactory both for autonomy support (fathers: $\alpha = .83$; mothers: $\alpha = .76$; adolescents: $\alpha = .81$) and for psychological control (fathers: $\alpha = .80$; mothers: $\alpha = .78$; adolescents: $\alpha = .80$)

Motivation to Have a Child Scale (AMHCS; Brenning, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2015); it's a 20 items scale (e.g. "An important reason for me to have a child was the pleasure of watching my child grow up") on a five-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (not at all agree) to 5 (very agree). In the present study, the internal consistency is satisfactory for both intrinsic (fathers: $\alpha = .81$; mothers: $\alpha = .84$) and external motivation (fathers: $\alpha = .63$; mothers: $\alpha = .68$).

Ryff's Well-being Scale (RWBS; Ryff, 1995) is an eighteen-item scale on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (completely disagreement) to 4 (completely agreement) and is used to evaluate the

perception of psychological well-being (e.g. “I am satisfied with how things have turned out in my life”). In this study alpha value is satisfactory for fathers ($\alpha = .81$), mothers ($\alpha = .83$) and adolescents ($\alpha = .80$).

Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evolution Scale (FACES-IV; Olson, 2011) was used to investigate family functioning. In this study only the Communication subscale was used: it consisted of ten items (“In my family, members discuss their ideas and beliefs with each other”) on a five-point Likert scale (1=Completely disagreement; 5= Completely agreement). In this study alpha value is satisfactory for fathers ($\alpha = .78$), mothers ($\alpha = .80$) and adolescents ($\alpha = .79$).

Contribution 1: Being a Parents - What does it mean?

Parental psychological control was defined by Barber (1996) as the use of technical criticisms that indicate feelings of guilt and threats to push teenagers to satisfy their parent’s wishes. Parental autonomy support was defined as the interpersonal sentiment and behavior that a person provides to identify, feed and develop the internal motivational resources of the other as a need for autonomy (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). According to Self-Determination theory, different natures of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation could be described: specifically, intrinsic motivation is comprised in autonomous motivation, that refers to experience volition and self-endorsement of their own actions. External motivation is a form of controlled motivation, in which one’s behavior is a function of external contingencies of reward or punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Starting from these premises, it could be hypothesized that forms of intrinsic motivation linked to parenting are correlated with the use of parenting strategies that support the autonomy and development of the intrinsic motivation of children, while forms of external motivation are correlated with the use of more controlling parental strategies. However, there are still no studies that have analyzed these relationships. The present study aims to investigate the relation between motivation to have a child and parental practices and whether there are differences between fathers and mothers.

140 parents (70 fathers and 70 mothers) were recruited to participate to this study. All parents compiled: *Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale* (P-PASS; Mageau et al., 2015) in order to assess their parental practices, and *Motivation to Have a Child Scale* (AMHCS; Brenning, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2015) in order to assess their intrinsic and external motivation to become parents. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations of parental practices and motivation for fathers and mothers. Differential analyses revealed that there was a significant difference in autonomy support with mothers higher than fathers [$t(138) = -2.780$; $p = .006$]. No other difference between fathers and mothers was found.

Role		Autonomy Support	Psychological Control	Intrinsic Motivation	External Motivation
Father	M	5.74	2.65	4.75	1.41
	SD	.74	1.27	.43	.75
Mother	M	6.06	2.64	4.85	1.32
	SD	.63	1.15	.30	.61

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Furthermore, external motivation to have a child correlates negatively with autonomy support [$\chi^2(140) = -.192$; $p = .023$] and positively with psychological control [$\chi^2(140) = .356$; $p < .001$]. No other significant relation was found (Table 2).

	Autonomy Support	Psychological control
Intrinsic Motivation	.11	-.13
External Motivation	-.19*	.36**

Table 2. Correlational Analyses. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

The results confirmed our hypotheses: external motivation to have a child was related to a decrease of the use of autonomy support practices and with an increase of psychology control. Probably parents who already in the choice to have a child perceived strong external pressures, are more likely to choose controlling parenting practices and with more difficulty are able to be supportive towards their children or to encourage them to develop an internal motivation. These results are really interesting, because if the literature has amply demonstrated how supportive or controlling educational practices respectively favour or hinder the intrinsic motivation of adolescents (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2015), no study so far has investigated the motivation of parents as an antecedent of the educational practices adopted. Subsequent studies will have to further investigate these results, overcoming the limitations of the present study.

Contribution 2: Family Functioning and Psychological Well-Being: Gender Differences in Adolescence

According to many studies, for an adequate adolescent development are necessary both an adequate family functioning and a personal psychological well-being (Cattelino, Calandri, Bonino, 2001). Specifically, psychological wellbeing takes account of positive perception of himself, confidence in the coping abilities and positive expectations of success (Cattelino et al., 2001). The objective of this study is to verify if a good family communication is related to psychological wellbeing of adolescents and if there are gender differences in these variables.

Seventy adolescents between 11 and 18 years ($M= 15.10$ $SD= 1.7$) participated in the research (35 males and 35 females). All participants were given: *Ryff's Well-being Scale* (RWBS; Ryff,1995) to evaluate the perception of psychological well-being, and *Family Adaptability and cohesion Evolution Scale* (FACES-IV; Olson, 2011) in order to investigate family functioning and communication.

Table 3 shows means and standard deviations for all variables considered in the male and female adolescents. From the differential analysis regarding the Psychological Wellbeing no significant differences between females and males emerged [$t(68) = -0.65$; $p = 0.52$].

Gender		Family Functioning	Wellbeing
Male	M	4.03	2.97
	SD	.60	.33
Female	M	3.91	3.02
	SD	.80	.36

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

Similarly, concerning Family Functioning, there are no significant differences between males and females [$t(68) = 0.68$; $p = 0.50$]. The correlational analysis revealed that psychological well-being correlates positively with family functioning [$X^2(70) = .49$; $p < .001$].

In line with the reference literature, a good family functioning, especially in the component of a healthy communication between members, correlates with more positive psychological well-being outcomes in children (Cattellino et al., 2001). These results once again underline the very important role of the family context in promoting the healthy development of adolescent children. Subsequent studies will have to confirm this relationship through longitudinal studies and investigate the possible intergenerational relationship between the well-being of the parents and the well-being of the children.

Contribution 3. Psychological Wellbeing in Relation to Gender Differences

The psychological control of parents can be considered a misfit form of parenting that involves shame and guilt induction, as well as coercion of verbal interactions and withdrawal of love (Liga, Lo Coco, Musso et al, 2020). The research based on SDT has consistently demonstrated that parental psychological control relates to maladjustment, ill-being and psychopathology (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). This study aims to examine if perceptions of maternal and paternal psychological control relate to psychological wellbeing of adolescents and if there are gender differences.

70 teenagers between 11 and 18 years old ($M=15.10$, $SD=1.7$) compiled: *Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale* (P-PASS; Mageau et al., 2015) to investigate the psychological control; *Ryff's Well-being Scale* (RWBS; Ryff, 1995) to evaluate the psychological wellness.

Table 4 shows means and standard deviations for all variables considered. No significant differences between males and females were found in the paternal psychological control [$t(68)=.50$; $p=.62$], in maternal psychological control [$t(68)=.98$; $p=.33$] and in wellbeing [$t(68)=.64$; $p=.52$].

Gender		Wellbeing	Paternal Psychological Control	Maternal Psychological Control
Male	M	2.97	3	3.18
	SD	.33	1.44	1.43
Female	M	3.02	2.84	2.87
	SD	.36	1.20	1.21

Table 4. Descriptive statistics

Correlational analyses (table 5) showed that wellbeing was negatively related both to maternal [$\chi^2(70) = -.32$; $p < .01$] and to paternal psychological control [$\chi^2(70) = .35$; $p < .01$].

	Maternal Psychological Control	Paternal Psychological Control
Wellbeing	-.32**	-.35**
Maternal Psychological Control		.93**

Table 5. Correlational analyses. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

These results highlighted how psychological control perceived by both mothers and fathers correlates negatively with the psychological well-being of adolescents. These findings are in line with the reference literature which underlines how parental psychologically controlling practices predict internalizing outcomes in adolescent children (Costa, Cuzzocrea, Gugliandolo, & Larcana, 2016). Starting from these results, which will have to be further investigated in future longitudinal research, the need to support parents in their educational task emerges, through parent training that helps them to train in supportive practices and to decrease controlling ones.

Contribution 4. Parental Autonomy Support and Satisfaction of Basic Psychological Needs

Deci & Ryan (2000) claim that at the basis of positive development of human being there is the satisfaction of some innate needs: the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness. The three needs relate to three types of self-perception: the perception of being the protagonist of your choices (autonomy), of being able to achieve your goals (competence), and the perception that one's

interpersonal relationships are characterized by respect and trust (relatedness). The self-determination of human action depends on meeting these needs. Recent research (Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, Larcan, 2019), has shown that there are significant differences between fathers and mothers regarding style and parental practices and has highlighted that mothers tend to use more forms of psychological control, but also to support the autonomy of children. Fathers, on the other hand, are less controlling but do not support the autonomy or democratic participation of children in the family. This study aims to investigate whether there are differences between male and female adolescents in perceived maternal and paternal autonomy support and in the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and whether such satisfaction is related to parental autonomy support. Seventy adolescents (35 males and 35 females) between 11 and 18 years ($M = 15.10$ $DS = 1.7$) participated in the research. All participants were given: *Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale* (PBNSF; Chen et al. 2015) to evaluate the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs, and the *Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale* (P-PASS; Mageau et al., 2015) to investigate supportive behaviours perceived by mothers and fathers.

Table 6 shows descriptive statistics for all variables considered. There are no significant differences between males and females both in autonomy support perceived by the mother [$t(68) = .44$; $p = .66$] and in the one perceived by the father [$t(68) = .80$; $p = .43$].

Gender	Autonomy Support			Adolescents' Satisfaction		
		Maternal	Paternal	Autonomy	Relatedness	Competence
Males	M	5.57	5.51	4.04	4.46	3.86
	SD	.81	.91	.64	.54	.81
Females	M	5.46	5.31	4.16	4.24	3.81
	SD	1.19	1.19	.69	.70	.91

Table 6. Descriptive statistics

Our analysis (Table 7) also showed that there is a positive correlation between paternal autonomy support [$\chi^2(70) = .41$; $p < .01$], and maternal autonomy support [$\chi^2(70) = .37$; $p < .01$] with the need for relatedness. A positive correlation was also found between paternal autonomy support [$\chi^2(70) = .36$; $p < .01$], and maternal autonomy support [$\chi^2(70) = .47$; $p < .01$] with the need for autonomy. Finally, a positive correlation was found between paternal autonomy support [$\chi^2(70) = .27$; $p < .01$], and maternal autonomy support [$\chi^2(70) = .38$; $p < .01$] with the need for competence.

	Maternal Autonomy Support	Paternal Autonomy Support
Autonomy	.47**	.36**
Relatedness	.37**	.41**
Competence	.38**	.27*

Table 7. Correlational analyses. **p < .01; *p < .05.

In line with the reference literature (Costa et al., 2016), autonomy supportive practices on both the paternal and maternal side are fundamental in guaranteeing the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of the children, both in terms of autonomy, relatedness and competence. Although longitudinal studies are needed to verify the direction of such found relationships, the results of this study suggest how important it is to help parents engage in supportive parenting practices in order to ensure more functional development in their children.

Contribution 5. Family Functioning and Satisfaction of Basic Psychological Needs

The following study mainly focuses on the perception of family functioning and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci et al, 2000). The satisfaction of these needs in the life cycle is important to face evolutionary tasks since they are relevant for the self-determination of the individual (Deci et al, 2000). While parenting strategies have been shown to correlate with the satisfaction and frustration of children's needs (Costa et al., 2016), no studies have so far investigated the role of family functioning in the satisfaction of basic needs of parents. The objectives of the present study are to investigate if there are differences between fathers and mothers in the perception of family functioning and in the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and if family functioning is correlated with the satisfaction of these needs.

70 fathers and 70 mothers took part in this research and compiled: *Psychological Basic Needs Satisfaction and Frustration Scale* (PBNSF; Chen et al., 2015) to evaluate the satisfaction of basic psychological needs; and *Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evolution Scale* (FACES-IV; Olson, 2011) to evaluate family functioning.

Role		Autonomy Satisfaction	Relatedness Satisfaction	Competence Satisfaction	Family Functioning
Father	M	4.15	4.50	4.34	4.03
	SD	.60	.52	.54	.63
Mather	M	4.07	4.63	4.26	4.11
	SD	.76	.47	.62	.61

Table 8. Descriptive statistics

No significant differences between fathers and mothers in family functioning, autonomy, relatedness and competence needs satisfaction were found (Table 8). Furthermore, positive correlations were found between family functioning and the satisfaction of the need for autonomy [$\chi^2(140) = .18; p < .05$], competence [$\chi^2(140) = .27; p < .01$], and relatedness [$\chi^2(140) = .31; p < .01$].

The results of this study highlight important aspects: the perception of family functioning in both mothers and fathers also correlates with a greater satisfaction of basic psychological needs. This is not only in line with what is theorized by Self-determination theory (Ryan et al, 2017), but suggests that in the study of family functioning, both at the level of children and in the parental couple, it is also necessary to investigate the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, fundamental for the well-being of the individual and of the whole family.

Conclusion

In this paper, psychology students in the first year ventured into their first experience of scientific research, investigating the psychological construct of family functioning in relation to a series of variables, and using Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2017) as a theoretical framework. According to SDT, life contexts can contribute to support individuals' psycho-physical well-being, satisfying basic psychological needs (need for autonomy, competence and relatedness), or - on the contrary - they can increase the probability of malaise and psychopathologies, actively frustrating psychological needs (Vansteenkiste, et al., 2007). Much research has shown that basic psychological needs can be frustrated or otherwise met in various areas, including family. The present research has shown how the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness, competence) of all the family members, such as family functioning perceived and parental practices are positively correlated with the self-perceived well-being both of adolescents and parents. Specifically, the strength of this study lies precisely in having considered family units, investigating the same variables in both parents and children: this has allowed us to demonstrate how the satisfaction of basic psychological needs correlates with positive wellbeing outcomes across generations and that family and parenting practices are contexts that can support or frustrate these needs in both children and parents.

Moreover, we found that external motivation to have a child has been found related to more use of psychological controlling parenting practices. This is a very interesting finding that need to be further investigated in future studies, since it highlights as the more parents are subject to internally and externally controlling motivational drives, the more they will be inclined to use psychologically

controlling practices with their children, undermining the development of internal motivational resources and, therefore, suggesting the possibility of an intergenerational transmission of motivational aspects.

This research presents some limits: it is in fact a correlational cross-sectional study. It would be necessary to extend the reference sample, carry out longitudinal research and provide for a study including a nationwide sample. Despite these limits, our findings have important application implications: parent-training and psycho-education projects could be carried out to make parents aware of parental practices as antecedents of malaise and dissatisfaction of their children.

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Authors' contribution: Maria Nocito assisted with generation of the initial draft of the manuscript, data analyses, concept and manuscript editing and study supervision. Students contribute to the collection, analysis and interpretation of data and more specifically: Contribution 1: Mondì., Occhipinti, Pandolfino, Pavone, Pirrello, Pruiti; Contribution 2: Malaponte, Mandica, Mento, Musumeci, Passalacqua, Petruzzello, Repaci; Contribution 3: Malara, Mangone, Marafioti, Pantò, Perri, Ponsù, Ponzio; Contribution 4: Mezzopane, Muschio, Niosi, Patera, Praticò, Restuccia; Contribution 5: Morganti, Musarra, Parafioriti, Patti, Pacino, Mancuso, Raineri.

All authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. All authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Interest statement: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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