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Resilience and Personality Dispositions of Social Workers in the Czech Republic

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The empirical study brings answers to the question: “What are the relationships between resilience and personality of social workers in the scope of their profession?” The problematics of personality dispositions is viewed from the perspective of the five-factor model of personality (the “Big Five”), as well as from the perspective of resilience, which allows the workers to achieve the desired level of well-being despite the challenges of their profession. The research was conducted among 729 social workers in the Czech Republic with the help of a standardised questionnaire. It has been found that the most prevalent personality types among social workers are the conscientious and agreeable types and most workers have a medium rate of resilience. The biggest potential for the application of resilience has been found in the emotionally stable personality type and the smallest among the conscientious and agreeable type. On the basis of empirical findings we recommend the support of resilience in social work practitioners and students through the development of self-awareness of their own personality and their personality growth, as well as development of resilience awareness and focusing on developing strategies for its growth.

Keywords: resilience; social worker; The Big Five

Introduction

With a certain amount of hyperbole, the topic of this article can be introduced by paraphrasing an old saying: “Tell me, who you are, and I’ll tell you how you tend to react in adversity.” Adverse life events can be regarded as the touchstone of resilience, as one can react to them either in an adaptive, resilient way, or succumb to them unable to cope with the situation. Resilience needs to be strengthened when interaction between subjects and their environments implies risks of adverse development or if adversity is already present (Collins 2017; Garmezy and Rutter 1985; Masten 2001; Punová 2014, 2020). Social workers, who are the subjects of this study, are faced with many challenges in their profession (Rose and Palattiyil 2020; Wendt, Tuckey,

and Prosser 2011) for example a high number of clients, labyrinthine legislation, low financial rewards, low social status of the profession, increasing paperwork, unavailability of supervision and other supportive measures etc. In the Czech context, a number of researchers have focused on the study of challenges related to the social work profession (Beníšková and Punová 2020; Glumbíková 2020; Gojová et al. 2020; Chytil 2007; Matoušek 2021; Matulayová and Musil 2013; Navrátil 2018; Navrátilová 2018; Navrátilová and Navrátil 2021; Punová, Navrátil, and Navrátilová 2020). As these authors point out, apart from the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic, which presents a new type of strain for social workers, they are faced with a series of other problems. These are largely due to the low prestige of the profession, a result, in part, of the absence of personalities representing the profession in the media and politics. Instead, the media point out the failures of individual social workers. The low prestige is revealed also in relations to other professions, most obviously in the framework of multidisciplinary teams, where they do not have an appropriately strong role. Social workers encounter a high level of red tape and financial insecurity, which is noticeable above all in non-governmental organisations, which employ workers only for the duration of projects. The poor financial situation for many organisations manifests itself also in the lack of care for the well-being of workers by employers (e.g. lack of supervision or training) and also in their low financial compensation. As a result, many eventually opt for a different profession.

Generally speaking, social work is very demanding and therefore social workers need a high amount of resilience (Adamson, Beddoe, and Davys 2014; Cleveland, Warhurst, and Legood 2019; Collins 2007, 2017; Duffy, Oyebode, and Allen 2009; Grant and Kinman 2014; Newell 2017; Palma-García and Hombrados-Mendieta 2014; Punová 2014, 2019, 2020). The beginnings of resilience research go back to the research mainly on children and young adults from deprived backgrounds (Garmezy and Rutter 1985; Masten, Best, and Garmezy 1990; Werner and Smith 1989). Later, research spread into other fields and the focus of researchers and practitioners has turned to the support of resilience in the helping professional. A key change of focus can be observed in the support of well-being from the client (“care for the client”) to workers (“care for care workers”) and this development can be characterised by the questions: “If a social worker strives for their client’s well-being by means of their interventions, who has the support of their professional well-being in mind?”; “How should they manage the demands of their profession?” Beddoe and Davys (2016) also draw attention to the care for the social worker and, as they add, a certain development can be observed over the last two decades in the shift of perspective on personal well-being of social workers, from the original focus on the impact of stressful professional experiences towards lifelong professional well-being.

This article presents the results of research conducted among social workers in the Czech Republic focused on answering the research question: “What are

the relationships between resilience and personality of social workers in the scope of their profession?” When investigating resilience, we focused on social workers’ inner dispositions, which play a key role in the process of coping with professional challenges (Grant and Kinman 2014; Kinman and Grant 2010; Punová 2020) and we investigated them using the Big Five typology. It concerns a model that describes personality by way of five personality types (see below). If we consider social workers’ socio-ecological field, the influence of environmental factors (e.g. on the side of the client, organisation, community, society etc.) cannot be marginalised. There are many research studies on their impact on social workers’ resilience (Cleveland, Warhurst, and Legood 2019; Collins 2017; Grant and Kinman 2014; Norman 2000). However, the aim of this article is to point out the importance of the individual social worker’s personality factors, because each worker enters the professional relationship with their personality, in addition to their knowledge and skills, which becomes a key tool of intervention. Although we focus on personality factors, we do not understand personality in a static sense but dynamically. We proceed from the fact that the original conception of resilience as a personality trait (Collins 2007) contributing to the management of difficulties, has shifted in the social work literature towards a dynamic conception (Collins 2017; Grant and Kinman 2014; Rutter 2003), which sees it as a process. Collins (2017, 87) characterises this process as *“movement towards acceptance of resilience as a changeable psychological state that can alter according to the setting a person is in and the surrounding circumstances impacting on the quality and quantity of stressors experienced.”* In other words, resilience is not a personal attribute, which would enable us to see somebody as essentially resilient, because every new adversity is a test of one’s resilience (Punová 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to study individual personality traits, because they play important roles in the dynamic conception of resilience. In connection to this, Grant and Kinman (2014, 17) note: *“In order to enhance resilience, it is essential to identify the underlying qualities of resilient people.”*

Background

This empirical research study is based on the Big Five conception of personality. This five-factor model of personality traits has become prevalent mainly since the 1990s and its empirical validisation is still ongoing in many countries (McCrae and John 1992; Wiggins and Trapnell 1997; John and Srivastava 1999), which applies also to the Czech context (Smékal 2002; Paulík 2010; Hřebíčková 2011). This typology consists of five personality types that can be characterised by various adjectives. The five types are: agreeableness, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness and neuroticism (in our research we replaced the last type by its opposite and we named it emotional stability). The Big Five model is now often used in human resources management.

Critics point out a possible stylisation of respondents when they are applying for jobs (Bartram 2004; Paunonen and Jackson 2000). These critical concerns were not applicable to our respondents, because their answers were anonymous and therefore could have no impact on their current job position. When choosing the Big Five model we also took into account that it has been well researched, and it is very popular thanks to the easy comprehensibility of the characteristics of the individual types. In relation to this, Hřebíčková (2011, 25) notes that *“research in the five-factor model has become mainstream in contemporary personality psychology.”* The objection to using any typology is that it can narrow down reality into present patterns, which is even truer when it concerns personality. However, keeping in mind the uniqueness of every individual, we believe that using a typology, in our case the Big Five typology, is suitable and purposeful for considering personality dispositions of a greater number of individuals.

Furthermore, in our research we focused on managing stress which we investigated through the lens of resilience. The definition of the term is not unanimous. Some authors conceive of resilience more generally in the sense of coping with life despite difficulties (Masten, Best, and Garmezy 1990; Fraser 2004), others see it more specifically in the sense of a process, ability and outcome of one’s successful adaptation in adversity (Collins 2017; Norman 2000; Werner and Smith 1989). Coping with life’s challenges can sometimes seem beyond the limits of human capabilities, nevertheless, research has shown that resilience is not something exceptional but part of human nature, or, as Masten put it, *“ordinary magic”* (Masten 2001). Resilience is not an extraordinary talent or a personality trait (a static conception of resilience as a personality trait appeared in the beginnings of resilience research, nowadays a dynamic conception is stressed), but it is an application of ordinary, available resources when faced with adversity. In the context of this article, we will define resilience as a concept consisting of dynamic developmental processes that allow the social worker to adapt and to achieve required well-being, despite significant adversity experienced in carrying out their profession (Punová 2014, 2020). These challenging situations can be caused by the worker’s environment (e.g. it can be a case of excessive workload) or also by the worker’s personality dispositions (e.g. a tendency to act neurotically when under stress). Applying resilience means not only overcoming these difficulties, but it also leads to personal well-being. It is an/this emphasis on positive aspects that is important for resilience (after all, one of the conceptual roots of resilience is Strength-based approach).

The fact that an individual acts in a resilient way depends on the joint influence of risk and protective factors, including personality traits. We have therefore considered personality dispositions as important determinants of a worker’s resilience. For example, the development of emotional stability can strengthen resilience potential, by contrast a high level of impulsiveness can weaken it. The research led by Bolger and Schilling (1991) among 339

respondents from Detroit, who each kept a journal for six weeks in which they recorded their moods and stressful events every day, demonstrated that improved emotional stability was accompanied by a increased ability to act with resilience. This empirical research showed, that reaction to a stressful situation is more important than its nature. In other words, no matter how challenging a situation was, those who approached it with a cool head were able to cope with it better.

As the research studies focused on the difficulties related to the profession of social work show (see Introduction), the helping nature of the social workers' profession puts great demands not only on their work performance but also on their physical and mental health, and personal life. Professional expectations of their clients, colleagues, line managers, professional bodies (e.g. ethical code), law makers (legislation), and society (media pressure) makes them ask how to fulfil these expectations. In other words, how to convert adversity into positive outcome - how to apply their resilience. As Grant et al. add (2014, 3), when managing professional difficulties, it is preferable to support the well-being and resilience of the worker *“rather than merely offer a range of tools to social workers to help them manage stress”*.

Research

Research was conducted using the deductive approach. Its main aim was to establish the presence of types from personality dispositions typology and also the measure of resilience of social workers. The main research question was: “What are the relationships between resilience and personality of social workers in the scope of their profession?” To answer it, two research sub-questions were selected: Sub-question 1: “What are the social workers' personality dispositions?” This sub-question was used to establish the presence of a specific personality type according to the Big Five. It was investigated using a question containing five items. Each item expressed typical characteristics of a given type and a respondent had to choose only one of them (thus expressing an inclination for one type). The formulation of this question was based on the revised variant of the Inventory of Adjectives Representing Five-factor Structure (Inventář přídavných jmen reprezentujících pětifaktorovou strukturu) (IPJ-V), which has been validated in the Czech context by Hřebíčková (2011).

Sub-question 2: “What is the level of resilience of the social workers?” The level of resilience was investigated by means of 15 questions derived from the Resilience Scale (Wagnild 2009). At each question, respondents selected one of the answers (Likert scale items “strongly agree”- “strongly disagree”). When interpreting, data were first categorised, thus providing final resilience index that contains the following categories: low (16-40 points); medium (41-59 points) and high (60-70 points) resilience.

Population and Sample

The basic sample of the questionnaire survey, which took place online in 2019, included all social workers active in the Czech Republic. With the help of publicly accessible information we obtained a list of all social workers at governmental and non-governmental organisations in all settings where social work is carried out (respondents were not from the academic sector). The final sample was selected by stratified random sampling. A total of 3135 social workers from all branches of social work were approached with the request to complete the questionnaire, 729 out of them completed the questionnaire, with the response rate of 23%. These social work settings included the Authority for Social and Legal Protection of Children, the Labour Office, and social services settings (homes with a special regime, home-care services, social counselling organisations and non-government organisations). Most of the respondents who completed the questionnaire either had long experience in the field of social work – 11+ years (37%) or, on the contrary, they had short experience of less than 5 years (35%). In respect to qualification level obtained as part of formal qualifying education, most respondents had university education (38% Master's degree and 35% Bachelor's degree) in one of the subjects qualifying for the social work profession. Regarding the subjects studied among the sample, social work graduates were predominant (43.8%), followed, by a wide margin, by social pedagogy graduates (22.4%).

Ethical Considerations

The Research Institute of Labour and Social Affairs is registered with the Czech Office for Personal Data Protection and researchers have followed the Code of Ethics for Researchers at the RILSA, v.v.i. The study participants were informed in advance that the research was anonymous and that they could terminate their participation at any time. At the same time, they had telephone and e-mail contacts for the researcher, with whom they could discuss research-related matters at any time.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire survey was performed with the use of PASW Statistics 17 software. As the main aim was to find out particular personality type of the respondents and a link the level of resilience, the nature of the data led to the use of factor analysis. For the purpose of analysis of the link between a personality type and resilience, an artificial variable was first created to determine their level of resilience.

Table 1. Personality typology of social workers in the Czech Republic.

Type	Number	Percentage
Open to experience	102	14.0
Conscientious	213	29.2
Extrovert	44	6.0
Emotionally stable	108	14.8
Agreeable	262	35.9
Total	729	100.0

Results

The next part shows the results of the empirical research. First personality typology of respondents is presented and then we focus on their level of resilience. A reflection on the relationship between personality type and a worker's resilience follows.

Big Five Type Distribution among Social Workers in the Czech Republic

Table 1 presents empirical results from a quantitative research that refer to the distribution of the specific types among social workers. As stated above, a given type was not assigned on the basis of a personality test, but rather it was the result of respondents' self-assessment.

The research has shown that the greatest number of respondents belong to the agreeable type while the conscientious type is also well represented. Other two types - emotionally stable and open to experience - were markedly less represented among the respondents. The smallest number of workers were categorised as the extrovert type.

Distribution of Measure of Resilience among Social Workers in the Czech Republic

As stated above, the obtained data were first categorised to obtain a resilience index, consisting of three items of the measure of resilience: low (16-40 points), medium (41-59 points) and high (60-70 points). The actual distribution of individual categories is presented in Table 2; validity was not tested. 53 respondents out of 729 did not answer the question related to resilience. We could thus establish the measure of resilience on 676 respondents. Only 1% of social workers appeared to have a low measure of resilience, which is encouraging from the point of view of the profession. The greatest number of workers stated that in terms of coping with challenging situations they had a medium measure of resilience (they scored maximum 59 points out of 70). More than 37% of workers display a high measure of resilience (in adversity).

Table 2. Resilience index of social workers in the Czech Republic.

Measure of resilience	Number	Percentage
Low	7	1.0
Medium	418	61.8
High	251	37.1
Total	676	100
No answer	53	7.3

The Relationship between Personality Type and Resilience of Social Workers in the Czech Republic

When measuring causality, it appeared that the correlation between personality type and level of resilience was medium. Correlation coefficient $\eta = 0.323$ and the significance level was 0.000. [Table 3](#) presents the percentage showing the correlation between resilience and personality type. It is important to point out that in the case of resilience index, respondents with a low level of resilience were not included in the analysis, as they made for only 1 percent of the sample. It is apparent that social workers of the emotionally stable and extrovert personality types had the greatest potential for applying resilience. By contrast, the conscientious and agreeable types had the lowest resilience potential. As will be shown in the discussion below, these findings are in agreement with the findings of other researchers.

Discussion

Analysis of personal disposition of social workers in the framework of the five-factor personality model has highlighted several interesting aspects. Within the questionnaire survey, social workers were asked to self-assess and chose those attributes they perceived as most characteristic for themselves. Each respondent thus came under one main type. Statistical analysis showed that among the social workers participating in the study, the “agreeable” type (36%) and “conscientious” type (29%) were more prevalent than any other types (see [Table 1](#)). The prevalence of the “agreeable” type of social worker is probably not surprising in consideration of the nature of the profession. After all, [Matějček \(2004\)](#) also notes that representatives of this type are found most often among social workers. It is understandable that characteristics attributed to this type ([Hřebíčková 2011](#); [McCrae and John 1992](#)), such as empathy, respect, desire to help others, humility, trust in the client’s potential and an emphasis on its application in intervention, an effort to look for the client’s point of view, these are all needed for the helping relationship. Nevertheless, what is important is their application in practice. It can be demonstrated by the example of kindness, also one of the attributes of this type. As kind people strive to have good relationships with others, they may be

Table 3. The relationship between personality type and measure of resilience.

Personality type	Measure of resilience	
	Medium	High
Open to experience	59.8	40.2
Conscientious	70.8	29.2
Extrovert	53.7	46.3
Emotionally stable	43.7	56.3
Agreeable	66.4	33.6

inclined to give only good news to their clients. These inclinations may contribute to the erosion of professional boundaries in the relationship with clients. Another pitfall of the agreeable type in respect to a social worker's resilience may be that they may be inclined to see their profession as a mission and service to such an extent that they would push their own needs to the background. This is aptly depicted by Honzák (2015):

Helping [professionals] often forget that they have the same biological organism with the same needs as those they attend to. In most cases it would suffice if they attended to their own needs (food, drinks, and rest) at least as well as they do attend to the needs of others. The idea that they “recharge their batteries” by doing good deeds is very common and very dangerous. (81)

Insufficient self-care and the absence of work-life balance compromise a worker's resilience and they are important predispositions of exhaustion at work, which may lead to occupational burnout. The results of our research (see Table 3) show that the agreeable type has the second lowest resilience potential (33.6%)

Table 3 further shows that the *conscientious type* has the lowest predisposition to resilience when under significant pressure (29.2%). If we consider attributes of this type (Hřebíčková 2011; McCrae and John 1992), we find that those leaning towards it put emphasis on order, organisation, system, continuity, reaching targets, and they need to see meaning in all that. At first sight, these are attributes that attest to an active approach to life, which is one of the defining traits of resilience. Why then do they show weak resilience potential? The issue lies in the fact that achieving such order and fulfilling set goals is not easy, indeed often impossible. In the case of the social worker, establishing quantifiable targets is often impossible. An effort to reach targets and accomplish tasks may lead to tension and exhaustion. After all, Moran and Shakespeare-Finch (2003) point out that this type has been shown to be associated with a risk of workoholism. Another pitfall of this type might consist in the fact that their conscientious work attitude may be abused by their superiors who may place high demands on them. We see that these aspects may have similarly negative impact on resilience as in the previous agreeable type.

By contrast, as follows from Table 3, greatest potential for resilience (more than 56%) was stated by workers of the emotionally stable personality type. As noted above, the original typology examines neuroticism, however, we have

substituted it with its opposite, because all other types were also positively oriented. Our empirical findings are in accordance with the findings of other authors (Masten and Powel, in Luthar, 2003; Rutter, in Luthar, 2003). The causes of the greatest resilience potential are stated by Friedman and Booth-Kewley (1987). According to them, the emotionally stable types are more stress-resistant and as part of their coping strategies they tend to use offensive strategies when dealing with problems. They also avoid defensive mechanisms of denial and disconnection, they do not become detached from the situation. Importantly, when dealing with problems they are goal-focused and they do not give up. As follows from Table 1, only less than 15% social workers ranked as emotionally stable type, which is not a great number. When considering ways of supporting social workers' resilience, it is desirable to support attributes pertaining to this type (such as for example emotional control, mental balance, perseverance, calmness and self-assurance).

Higher resilience potential (46.3%, see Table 3) was observed also in the extrovert type, least represented among social workers studied (only 6%, see Table 1). On the one hand, attributes of this type (Hřebíčková 2011; McCrae and John 1992) are connected to many pitfalls (professional intervention can be at risk due to e.g. considerable spontaneity of the worker, or if they prefer relationships above the content of interventions). On the other hand, based on the results of other researchers it can be presumed, that focus on interpersonal relationships, establishing social support and drawing on them are important protective personality factors. In this respect, Sabolová Fabianová and Žiaková (2018) state:

Social support directly decreases tension. That means that people who have access others and use their support in their environment are less prone to stress, which leads to a sense of tension, and at the same time they have a better sense of well-being. By the means of social support one can turn the perception of stress to one's advantage. (156)

The last type, openness to experience, was represented by 14% in our sample (Table 1) and as follows from Table 1, it also showed positive resilience potential (40.2%). It can be presumed that attributes of this type (Hřebíčková 2011; McCrae and John 1992), which include critical thinking, courage to reflect not only environment but also self-reflection and inclination to personal development are certainly assets from the point of view of resilience. Also Collins (2017) and Grant and Kinman (2013) regard reflective ability as one of the key tools in strengthening resilience. An active approach, striving for innovative solutions to problems that the worker perceives as challenges - these characteristics form the base of adaptive behaviour under stress. As stated by Moran and Shakespeare-Finch (2003), people who score high in this type also achieve better post-traumatic growth.

We are aware of several limitations to our research. First of them is related to the way the Big Five typology was used, when our respondents had to select an inclination to only one type (most characteristic for them). Drawing on the

Big Five typology we presumed that people can have dispositions towards several types at the same time. Therefore, ours was a case of typological, not categorical assessment. This “narrowing” of perspective was due to a search for causality with the measure of resilience. Another limitation of the research was using only one instrument when assessing the measure of resilience. We are aware that the validity of our research could be increased by using a greater range of empirical instruments including semi-structured interviews with workers. However, it was not possible owing to the large number of participants. Given the fact that only 729 out of 3135 approached workers completed the questionnaire, the response rate was 23%, which means that our results are not representative for the whole Czech Republic. Representative data have been achieved only in the social services category (where 63% workers completed the questionnaire) and in the category of social workers active in municipalities (51% respondents). Despite all these limitations, it was the only deductive research among social workers in the Czech Republic focused on the study of their resilience.

Conclusion

This article presents the results of a questionnaire survey focused on resilience and personality type based on the Big Five typology among 729 social workers in the Czech Republic. The results show that most of our respondents are of the agreeable and conscientious types. The prevalence of the agreeable type among social workers is not surprising in the context of a helping profession. Openness to experience, extroversion, and emotional stability types were much less represented among social workers. As has been pointed out in the discussion above, each type has its strengths, but it is also connected to some risk factors, which may negatively impact both the professionalism of the interventions and the social worker’s personal life and their resilience in the challenging profession. Another field of research was the measure of resilience in social workers. A positive finding was that a low level of resilience was found among only 1% of workers. Most social workers show a medium level of resilience in adversity and 37% workers in our sample were highly resilient. With respect to personality types, the greatest potential for applying resilience was found in the emotionally stable, extrovert and open to experience types. By contrast, the conscientious and agreeable types showed the lowest resilience potential. These findings are in line with theoretical findings of other researchers (see Discussion).

Based on these empirical findings we recommend resilience support among social workers, as well as among students of social work, by means of cultivation of personality self-awareness and personal growth (compare Musil et al. 2019; Punová 2019). Furthermore, we recommend knowledge development in

the field of resilience and focus on its cultivation (Havlíková 2020). Resilience awareness appears to be an important aspect of its development (Collins 2017; Grant and Kinman 2013, 2014; Punová 2019). Various strategies can be applied to support the cultivation of resilience. One of them can be risk management - focus on risk factors that might weaken one's resilience potential. There are many things that put a social worker's well-being at risk within their profession. Some of them are outside the scope of the individual's control (e.g. the professional legislative framework). Besides these, there are other risks whose existence and impact are within their control (risk factors associated with personality traits, e.g. setting boundaries with clients, striving for work-life balance etc.). A social worker should focus on their minimisation. Another strategy could be the support of the effects of safety factors connected to one's resilience in the scope of their work. Due to the demanding nature of their profession, social workers may find it challenging to focus on self-reflection to identify their resources and potential, or they may feel that these resources are not strong enough and cannot moderate and reduce a worker's higher vulnerability in certain areas. That is why it is desirable to cultivate workers' strength management, increase their perceptiveness of potential assessment, which help them cope with professional challenges. Similarly as with risk factors, here it is also desirable to take into consideration a broader socio-ecological field (e.g. the impact of personal and professional social support, use of organisation management resources - e.g. home office, continuous development, supervision, intervision. In this respect it is appropriate to apply principles of strength based approach, which is based on the same assumptions as the resilience approach - that a stress event contains resilience potential for coping with it and in doing so it is important to apply resources and potential found in oneself and one's environment. A worker can draw for example on the social support of their colleagues, family and friends. Other resources include supervision, active ways of spending free time, a sense of life purpose, and cultivating a spiritual dimension to their personality. The aim of this article was to point out that self-awareness can also be a great potential. The worker's resilience is linked to organisational resilience and therefore the organisation that employs the social worker has a significant impact on the implementation of the above-mentioned research suggestions. As Kinman and Grant (2014, 170) note, *"Employers have a legal and moral duty of care to safeguard the wellbeing of their employees. It is therefore essential that social worker's personal resilience-building skills are supported by evidence-based organisational policies and practices."* It would be interesting to discuss the impact of organisational resilience on workers' well-being in more depth, but this text had a different focus. The aim of this article was to point out that self-awareness can also be a great potential. A social worker's personality can present not only obstacles to but also contain necessary prerequisites for applying resilience in professional and personal life.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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