




Psychological attachment in the new normal working context: Influence of career navigation and career well-being attributes



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Background: The new normal working context, characterised by fast changes, rapid upskilling, adoption of technology, and remote working, requires employees to remain psychologically attached to their organisations. More insight is needed regarding how career navigation (as an attribute of career agility) and career well-being attributes explain the psychological attachment of employees in order to invest in their career development amidst the chaos and demands driven by the new normal working context.

Objective: The study explored career navigation and career well-being attributes (i.e. positive career effect, career networking/social support, and career meaningfulness) as potential explanatory mechanisms of individuals' psychological attachment.

Method: The study used a cross-sectional research design, which involved a convenience sample ($n = 177$) of national and international employees (mean age = 34 years; standard deviation [SD] = 10.14), represented by 39% managerial employees, 38% staff, and 23% professional consultants. Most of the participants (72%) were employed by South African organisations.

Results: Multiple regression analysis revealed that career navigation explains higher levels of psychological attachment (including affective, normative, and continuous attachment). Positive career effects significantly predicted continuous attachment, whereas social support/career networking positively predicted overall psychological attachment and affective and normative attachment. Career meaningfulness was found to explain higher levels of overall and affective psychological attachment.

Conclusion: The findings contribute new insights into the construct of career navigation and career well-being attributes and extend research on the antecedents of psychological attachment in the new normal working space, characterised by remote working and technology.

Keywords: post Covid-19 career space; new normal working context; remote working; career well-being; career agility; career navigation; psychological attachment; organisational commitment.

Introduction

In the new normal career context, uncertainties, complexities, and drastic changes have been a disturbing shock for many employees; these changes have presented complex social and economic challenges, prompting the employees to seek specific career-life counselling and career development guidance (Coetzee, 2021). Hooley (2020) noted that people are doing intense reflections about their values and their approach towards their lives, careers, and work. Editorial (2020) suggested that anxiety and fear about jobs, career opportunities, remote working, and the new normal working context were some of the predominant challenges of career development.

Fear and anxiety resulting from the challenges posed by the new normal working context may be restored through career development interventions (Coetzee, Ferreira, & Potgieter, 2021a). Career development interventions involve conscious guidance towards perceived self-efficacy and competency in coping with and adapting to the new normal working context (Radel, Pelletier, & Sarrazin, 2013).

Organisations face substantial challenges in retaining valuable employees within the exceedingly unstable and competitive global market (Ruvimbo & Hlanganipai, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic and the new normal working context have significantly increased global competitiveness. As a

result, employees' psychological attachment to their organisations remains an important topic of enquiry for organisations that strive to retain their valuable employees and improve their talent management practices (Coetzee, Ferreira, & Potgieter, 2019; Kontoghiorghes, 2016). Several research studies found that psychological attachment to the organisation results in job satisfaction, decreased turnover, and career well-being (Ferreira, 2019; Qureshi, Frank, Lambert, Klahm, & Smith, 2017). Ferreira (2019) also found that psychological attachment significantly correlated with career adaptability.

For decades, flexible working arrangements and working from home were only possible for a few and elite employees (Hill et al., 2008). The global COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns forced many employees to adapt and work from home. As employees settled into the new normal working context of working remotely, what was once considered a benefit (i.e. the flexibility to work from home) now imposed new challenges for both employees and organisations. Anderson and Kelliher (2020) emphasised that the positive outcomes of working remotely were carried out amongst those employees who chose to work from home. Working from home because of the new normal working context or lockdown regulations offered no choice to employees. Consequently, many employees did not feel a sense of gratitude or optimism for being required to work remotely. Therefore, remote working negatively influenced their well-being and attachment to the organisations.

Although many studies focused on the positive effect of remote working, such as enhanced productivity and better work-life balance (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012), other studies found remote working to have negative outcomes, such as stress (Moore, 2006), anxiety (Allen et al., 2015), reduction in employee interactions, social connectedness, and creativity (Thorgeirsdottir & Kelliher, 2017). Anderson and Kelliher (2020) found that remote working in the new normal post-COVID-19 career space resulted in lower levels of psychological attachment. They found work-family conflict as the most significant contributor to lower levels of psychological attachment to the organisation.

Popovici and Popovici (2020) suggested that technology-enabled employees work from anywhere in the world. Employees around the globe have been connected for many years. With the accelerated adoption of technology as a result of enforced working from home practices and the emergence of the right tools to support telework, employees were provided with boundaryless opportunities to work for any company abroad or at satellite offices. Although this is a positive outcome for many employees, employees became less attached and committed to their current organisations because of attractive opportunities to work for international organisations (Porter, 2020). Keeping valuable employees attached and committed to the organisation thus became an essential human resource practice within the new normal working context.

Whilst numerous studies report the importance of psychological attachment, no study was found on the mechanisms accounting for individuals' psychological attachment in the new normal working context. To address this research gap, the present study focuses on career navigation (as an externally driven psychological state) and career well-being (as an intrinsic driven state) as explanatory mechanisms of employees' psychological attachment to the organisation in the new normal working context.

Psychological attachment

Using the organisational attachment theory (St. Clair, 2000), this study explores organisational commitment as an aspect of individual's psychological attachment (an individual's psychological and emotional bond between the individual and the organisation). Organisational commitment relates to the emotional attachment of an employee to an organisation (affective commitment), feeling obligated to remain with the organisation (normative commitment), and concerns about the perceived loss or cost of leaving an organisation (continuance) (Coetzee et al., 2019; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Qureshi et al., 2017).

Employees' organisational commitment reflects the attitudes and behaviour of an employee towards the organisation and the foundation of the psychological attachment that a person has towards a specific course of action, such as intention to stay within an organisation (St. Clair, 2000). Meyer and Allen (1991) distinguished between attitudinal and behavioural commitments. Attitudinal commitment involves the process that individuals follow in establishing relationships and connections with their organisations. Conversely, behavioural commitment involves the inability to leave the current employment because of several reasons and how individuals deal with the situation or reasons. According to Potgieter and Ferreira (2018), affective commitment originates from emotions and feelings in the workplace (such as loyalty, belongingness, pleasure and affection). Affective commitment can be enhanced by fulfilling basic psychological needs for feeling competent, feeling that one belongs and has close connections with and support from others (Meyer & Allen, 1991, 1997). Continuance commitment is a psychological state or mindset about the perceived threat of leaving an organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Perceived threats may include the perceived costs of leaving (such as loss of salary, seniority, pension, loss of social connections, and job-specific competencies).

Employees may not want to lose some of the advantages or benefits offered by the organisation; therefore, they may choose to stay attached to the organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). However, employees may feel obligated to remain attached to an organisation (normative commitment). According to Meyer and Allen (1997), normative commitment is associated with the perceived responsibility to remain with the organisation, internalised through socialisation

processes (familial and cultural) that occur both before and after the start of employment.

Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) found that affective commitment generates emotional attachments that can result in employees developing a sense of obligation (normative commitment) to remain with the organisation. Employees may, however, display normative commitment but have very low levels of affective commitment towards the organisation. Exploring organisational commitment through the lens of attachment theory (St. Clair, 2000), the psychological states of affective, continuance, and normative commitment, are temporary mindsets influenced by conditions and experiences in the organisational attachment system, which either support employees' sense of employment security or give rise to perceived threats to their employment security. The constructs of career navigation and career well-being represent psychological needs that associate with an employee's sense of psychological security within the organisation.

Career navigation

Career agility (as an attribute of career adaptability) is an attribute needed by individuals to display proactive career planning, make career decisions, explore career opportunities, and display career self-efficacy beliefs (Coetzee, Ferreira, & Potgieter, 2021b; Nilforooshan, 2020). Alisic and Wiese (2020) suggested that career agility is an important externally driven psychological attribute needed to effectively adapt to career insecurity and engage in career self-management behaviours.

Coetzee et al. (2021b) described career navigation as a facet of career agility where individuals can efficiently and positively display problem-solving behaviour, scan the environment for new career opportunities, and are aware of opportunities and challenges within the job market. Individuals with a high career navigation ability are open-minded career adapters and actively seek new jobs or career opportunities within the changing labour market context (Coetzee et al., 2021b).

Chamanifard, Nikpour, Chamanifard and Nobarieidish (2015) found that career agility significantly influenced organisational commitment. Research by Coetzee, Bester, Ferreira and Potgieter (2020) showed that career navigation is an important career coping behaviour that influences an individual's ability to display career self-management and career development behaviour.

Career well-being

Career well-being (as an intrinsic driven and positive psychological condition) reflects an individuals' long-term contentment with their career outcomes, achievements, success, and changes, and commitment amidst the complexities of the new normal working context (Bester, Coetzee, Ferreira, & Potgieter, 2019). Coetzee et al. (2021a)

differentiated between three facets of career well-being, including positive career affect (which involves feelings of career growth and satisfaction), career networking/social support (positive feelings about career and social support), and career meaningfulness (positive feelings about the value and worth of one's career).

Positive career affect refers to positive emotions resulting from psychological states. Individuals with high positive career affect mostly feel satisfied with the given conditions to achieve their career goals. Typical positive affective career states of well-being include feeling satisfied with one's chosen career and the achievement of career goals, feelings supported within one's career, and feeling that necessary resources are available to support achieving career goals (Engelbrecht, 2019). Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) found that positive emotions decrease stress. Reich, Zautra and Hall (2010) found that positive emotions are coping mechanisms that can effectively suppress negative emotions and increase innovative thinking and problem-solving behaviour.

Career networking/social support refers to the perceptions of an individual that they have a network of people that supports their career goals and that this support network can easily be approached to assist in achieving career goals. Potgieter (2019) noted that individuals with a high career network/social support psychological state believe that feedback from the social support network may enhance their strengths. Several authors found social support to be an essential coping mechanism to deal with stressful conditions and situations (Ferreira, 2021; Potgieter, 2021; Reich et al., 2010).

Career meaningfulness alludes to the belief that one's career has meaning, and being involved in this career is a matter of personal choice. According to Coetzee et al. (2021a), individuals with high career meaningfulness experience their career as worthwhile and valuable, and believe that their careers contribute to the bigger picture and enhance lives (Allan, Rolniak, & Bouchard, 2020; Coetzee et al., 2021a). Li (2018) found that a sense of purpose (which is related to career meaningfulness) is an essential coping mechanism in stressful working conditions. Reich et al. (2010) suggested that career meaningfulness significantly predicted career resilience, job satisfaction, and career well-being. Believing that one's career has meaning, creates optimism about the future and denotes motivation to cope with stressful working conditions (Masten & Wright, 2010).

Whilst numerous studies report the importance of psychological attachment, no study was found on the mechanisms accounting for individuals' psychological attachment in the new normal working context. To address this research gap, the present study focuses on career navigation (i.e. externally driven psychological states) and career well-being (i.e. intrinsic driven states) as explanatory mechanisms of psychological attachment.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of employed adults ($n = 177$, average age: 34 years, standard deviation [SD]: 10.14) participated in this research study. The majority of the participants were employed within South Africa (72%), although the sample was represented by adults across the world (Western Europe: 12%; Eastern Europe: 6%; Africa: 6%; the USA: 2%; New Zealand: 2%). Participants on the managerial level (39%) and staff level (38%) were almost equally represented. The sample consisted of predominantly white people (67%) which were mostly women (54%).

Measuring instrument

Career navigation

Participants' career navigation as a facet of career agility was measured by the career agility scale (Coetzee et al., 2021b). The facet of career navigation consisted of six items (e.g. 'I regularly scan the environment for new career opportunities'). The items are rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Preliminary research (Coetzee et al. 2012b) indicated construct validity and high internal consistency reliability for career navigation (0.81).

Career well-being

The three facets of career well-being were measured by the career well-being scale (Coetzee et al., 2021a). The scale measures three states of career well-being: *affective career state* (6 items; e.g. 'I regularly feel I am making progress towards accomplishing my career goals'); *career networking/social support state* (4 items; e.g. 'I have a network of people that support me in my career'); and *state of career meaningfulness* (4 items; e.g. 'My job and career contribute to a bigger life purpose'). The 14 items are rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Preliminary research indicated construct validity and high internal consistency reliability of the career well-being scale (Coetzee et al., 2021a). The internal composite consistency reliability coefficients for the subscales were as follows: affective career state (0.86), career networking/social support state (0.85), and state of career meaningfulness (0.87).

Psychological attachment

Participants' psychological attachment was measured by the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (Meyer & Allen, 1997). The scale measures three components of organisational commitment: *affective commitment* (8 items; for example, 'I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organisation'), *continuance commitment* (8 items; for example, 'Right now, staying with my organisation is a matter of necessity as much as a desire'), and *normative commitment*

(8 items; e.g. 'One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organisation is that I believe that loyalty is important and therefore feel a sense of moral obligation to remain'). The 24 items are rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Preliminary research indicated construct validity and high internal consistency reliability of the organisational commitment scale (Coetzee et al., 2019). The internal composite consistency reliability coefficients for the subscales ranged between 0.75 and 0.86.

Procedure

Data were collected via the professional LinkedIn online platform. An electronic link to the questionnaire was sent to all participants. Responses were captured on an Excel spreadsheet and converted into an Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) file for data analysis purposes.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa CEMS/IOP (ERC Ref#: 2020_CEMS/IOP_014). Research Ethics Review committee (No. 2019_CEMS/IOP_010).

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and multiple regression analysis were performed using SAS/STAT® software version 9.4M5© (2017). Tolerance (less than 0.20) and the variance inflation factor (VIF exceeding 4.0) were utilised to assess any concerns about multicollinearity. Results were interpreted at the 95% confidence interval (CI) level.

Results

Descriptive results

Table 1 shows that the internal composite consistency reliability coefficients for all the constructs were high (≥ 0.64 to ≤ 0.91). The well-being facet of affective state significantly and positively correlated with career navigation ($r \geq 0.18$; $p = 0.01$; small practical effect), affective commitment ($r \geq 0.36$; $p = 0.001$; medium practical effect), and normative commitment ($r \geq 0.28$; $p = 0.01$; small practical effect). Affective state was also found to significantly and negatively correlate with continuance commitment ($r \geq -0.33$; $p = 0.001$; medium practical effect).

Social support/career networking as a facet of career well-being significantly and positively correlated with career navigation ($r \geq 0.34$; $p = 0.001$; medium practical effect), affective commitment ($r \geq 0.30$; $p = 0.001$; medium practical effect), and normative commitment ($r \geq 0.23$; $p = 0.01$; small practical effect). Social support/career networking was also found to significantly and negatively

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations ($n = 177$).

Number	Variable	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Affective career state	4.82	1.34	0.87	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	Career networking/social support state	4.89	1.38	0.84	0.55***	-	-	-	-	-	-
3	State of career meaningfulness	5.67	1.30	0.89	0.65***	0.52***	-	-	-	-	-
4	Navigation	5.38	1.10	0.75	0.18 **	0.34 **	0.29***	-	-	-	-
5	Affective commitment	4.46	1.42	0.78	0.36 **	0.30***	0.38***	-0.06	-	-	-
6	Continuance commitment	3.92	1.33	0.64	-0.33***	-0.16*	-0.16*	-0.17*	-0.04	-	-
7	Normative commitment	3.76	1.62	0.88	0.28**	0.23**	0.22**	-0.19*	0.58***	0.08	-

SD, standard deviation; α , significance level.

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

$r \leq 0.30$ (small practical effect size); $r \geq 0.30 \leq 0.49$ (medium practical effect size); $r \geq 0.50$ (large practical effect size).

TABLE 2: Results of multiple regression analysis ($n = 177$).

Variable	β		s.e.	t	p	Model info	
	Unstandardised	Standardised				Fp	Adjusted R^2
Affective commitment	-	-	-	-	-	9.10***	0.19
Navigation	-0.28	-0.21	0.10	-2.90	0.004	-	-
Affective career state	0.16	0.15	0.10	1.56	0.12	-	-
Career networking/social support state	0.16	0.16	0.09	1.82	0.07	-	-
Career meaningfulness state	0.28	0.26	0.10	2.71	0.008	-	-
Normative commitment	-	-	-	-	-	7.23***	0.15
Navigation	-0.44	-0.30	0.11	-4.01	< 0.0001	-	-
Affective career state	0.19	0.15	0.12	1.57	0.12	-	-
Career networking/social support state	0.23	0.20	0.11	2.20	0.03	-	-
Career meaningfulness state	0.14	0.11	0.12	1.13	0.26	-	-
Continuance commitment	-	-	-	-	-	6.08 ***	0.13
Navigation	-0.20	-0.17	0.09	-2.18	0.03	-	-
Affective career state	-0.41	-0.41	0.10	-4.14	< 0.0001	-	-
Career networking/social support state	0.07	0.71	0.09	0.78	0.44	-	-
Career meaningfulness state	0.11	0.11	0.10	1.10	0.27	-	-

β , standardised estimate; s.e., standard error.

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.0001$.

correlate with continuance commitment ($r \geq -0.16$; $p = 0.05$; small practical effect).

Career meaningfulness significantly and positively correlated with career navigation ($r \geq 0.29$; $p = 0.001$; small practical effect), affective commitment ($r \geq 0.38$; $p = 0.001$; medium practical effect), and normative commitment ($r \geq 0.22$; $p = 0.01$; small practical effect). Career meaningfulness was also found to significantly and negatively correlate with continuance commitment ($r \geq -0.16$; $p = 0.05$; small practical effect). Career navigation significantly and negatively correlated with continuance commitment ($r \geq -0.17$; $p = 0.05$; small practical effect) and normative commitment ($r \geq -0.19$; $p = 0.05$; small practical effect).

Table 2 shows that all the three organisational commitment models were practically significant: *Model 1 (affective commitment)*: $F = 9.10$; $p = 0.0001$; $R^2 = 0.19$ (small practical effect); *Model 2 (normative commitment)*: $F = 7.23$; $p = 0.0001$; $R^2 = 0.15$ (small practical effect) and *Model 3 (continuance commitment)*: $F = 6.08$; $p = 0.0001$; $R^2 = 0.13$ (small practical effect). The tolerance values for all the models were greater than 0.30 and the VIF values were lower than 0.26 which showed that multicollinearity was not a threat to the findings.

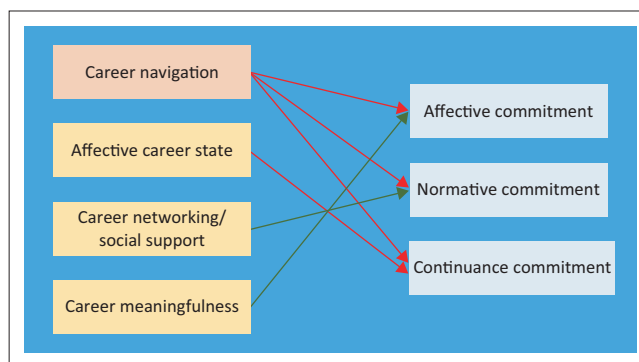


FIGURE 1: Career navigation and facets of career well-being as positive predictors of the organisational commitment attributes.

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 2, affective organisational commitment was positively and significantly predicted by career meaningfulness ($\beta = 0.26$; $p = 0.008$). Career navigation was a statistically and negative predictor or affective commitment ($\beta = -0.21$; $p = 0.004$).

Normative commitment was positively and significantly predicted by career networking/social support ($\beta = 0.20$; $p = 0.03$). Career navigation was a statistically and negative predictor or affective commitment ($\beta = -0.30$; $p = 0.001$). Continuance commitment was negatively and significantly predicted by career navigation ($\beta = -0.217$; $p = 0.03$) and affective career state ($\beta = -0.41$; $p = 0.001$).

Discussion

The empirical study provides insight into the externally driven state of career navigation and intrinsic career well-being states associated with the facets of psychological attachment. Building on the basic premises of organisational attachment theory (Coetzee, 2021; St. Clair, 2000), job independence, respect, and career development opportunities seem to enhance employees' sense of employment security and create the desire to remain committed and attached to the organisation.

Further, the study provides evidence that individuals' career well-being states of positive career affect, career meaningfulness, and career networking/social support matter in facilitating their adaptive readiness mindsets of career navigation. For people to develop agile coping capabilities in actively solving problems and searching for career opportunities within the new normal working context, and to perform within a remote working environment effectively, they need a sense of career well-being (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Pagan-Castano, Maseda-Moreno, & Santos-Rojo, 2020; Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019). The results suggest that the three states of career well-being function as important psychological conditions that activate the problem-solving and coping mindsets of career navigation (Coetzee, 2021).

The empirical study provides evidence that career navigation and all facets of career well-being (affective career state, career networking/social support, and state of career meaningfulness) positively correlated with affective commitment and normative commitment. This conforms with the study by Pagan-Castano et al. (2020), who also found a positive association between organisational commitment and well-being. It is thus evident that individuals who can actively search for new job opportunities within the new normal working context and who display high career well-being feel a sense of emotional attachment to the organisation, a moral commitment, and sense of loyalty towards their organisation.

Career navigation and all facets of career well-being (affective career state, career networking/social support, and state of career meaningfulness) are significantly and negatively correlated with continuance commitment. Individuals with the external psychological drive to navigate their careers and who display problem-solving behaviours, and those who display intrinsic healthy career well-being state that they are not likely to leave their current organisation. This might be that they are confident that they can gain the same or better benefits elsewhere and do not have much to lose if they choose to leave their organisation. However, Nandi, Khan, Qureshi and Ghias (2020) found contradictory results; they did not find any significant association between searching for new opportunities and organisational commitment.

Participants' career navigation (as an externally driven psychological facet of career agility) significantly but negatively predicted affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment. The problem-solving mindset of the agentic career adapter is demonstrated in the willingness to embrace and adapt to changes and search for new job/career opportunities (i.e. career navigation). Such individuals may feel confident that their adaptive problem-solving mindset will guarantee other career opportunities and they do not need to be committed or psychologically attached to one organisation. This result is in line with Edosomwan, Nwanzu and Oguegbe (2020), who found that problem-solving mindsets (as an attribute of employability) significantly influence organisational commitment.

The results further suggested that affective career state significantly and negatively predicted continuance commitment. Individuals with an emotional attachment to the organisation and who are satisfied with their career growth do not perceive the risk and cost of leaving their organisation as too high. Social support/career networking was found to significantly and positively predict normative commitment. Individuals who are satisfied and positive with the social support network present within their current career context feel a moral obligation to remain within the organisation and further invest in the social connections and support networks that they established within the current organisation.

Lastly, the results suggested that career meaningfulness facilitated affective commitment. This result is in line with findings by Kaur and Mittal (2020), who also found that meaningfulness at work is influenced by affective commitment. Individuals who feel that their careers are worthwhile, valuable, and enhance lives and people around them may feel an emotional attachment to their organisation.

Conclusion

Implications for organisational career development practices

The empirical study findings may have practical implications for enhancing employees' psychological attachment within the new normal working context. The results suggest that organisational career development practices should be designed to cultivate the positive states of career well-being and career navigation attributes to enhance employees' psychological attachment to the organisation. Psychological attachment to the organisation is generally considered instrumental to meaningful career goal achievement (Xie, Zhou, Huang, & Xia, 2017). Organisations should engage in interventions to enhance their employee's psychological attachment to the organisation. Career development interventions can include career discussions with employees regarding the support they receive from the organisation to achieve career goals and expectations to enhance career meaningfulness. Organisations should facilitate social

opportunities to form and develop social connections to enhance career networks and social support structures. Employees should be guided and provided with resources to navigate their careers and identify opportunities within the new normal working context. Such guidance may assist employees with the cognitive restructuring of change into a sense of competence rather than weakness in coping.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All authors collected the data. I.L.P. wrote the article, M.C. assisted with data analysis and N.F. assisted with editing and literature.

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Data availability

Data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Disclaimer

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