

Research Paper

Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home IT Employees During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has affected people's social and occupational lives. Working from home has become the new norm. Work is almost invariably accompanied with some level of stress. Individuals have almost always worked in a traditional office setting. As a result of a rapid change in their typical surroundings, humans can experience worry and stress. Combining a global epidemic that instils dread and worry with working from home may result in an increased level of stress. Individuals who worked from home during the covid-19 pandemic were surveyed. The study examined employees' positive and negative thoughts and discovered that their thoughts had a greater effect on their stress levels than their financial or social standing. The study surveyed individuals (N=91) in Chennai, India, who worked from home and had prior work experience with Information Technology (IT) during the country's first Covid-19 outbreak, Lockdown. Stress levels were shown to be highly related with employee attitudes regarding the epidemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, Stress, Work from Home, Thoughts, Lockdown, Mental Health

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) is a highly contagious infection transmitted by a newly found coronavirus. The current pandemic is particularly prone to contract the disease among humans when they come in direct contact with each other, causing major illness. Due to the high contamination rate of the disease, humans were asked to stay home, work from their respective locations, and not go out in public areas. Places that are more crowded like academic institutions, religious places, social events, industrial places of work, office places, and other such activities that are capable of gathering put many on a break for quite a while. Regardless of the day or week, those who can work from home have been performing their duties in the privacy of their living space. The blue-collar workers like the undocumented labour, routine wagers have lost their jobs and are dislocated from their place of sustenance. The COVID-19 has disrupted the norm of the day and made the people take a back seat and focus on their own well-being.

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Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak

India's government placed the country under complete lockdown to deal with the COVID-19 issue, which included restrictions on individual and group movement, temporary work restrictions in all industrial and service sectors, as well as other places of employment for a short period. On 24th March 2020, India's first lockdown was announced for a period of 21 days. As a precautionary step against the pandemic, this lockdown restricted the movement of billions of people in India (*Coronavirus in India: Modi Orders Total Lockdown of 21 Days - The New York Times*, n.d.). The government prolonged the lockdown until 3rd May 2020, with specific exceptions, and then again until 17th May 2020. Numerous zones were established following May 31st, and many regions remained in partial or complete lockdown, depending on the severity of the cases. Lockdown periods ensured that the people of India were confined to their houses and did not venture out. Purchasing only necessary home products was permitted. They were not authorized to move or communicate with another human being in the vicinity. Individuals were compelled to wear masks, wash and rigorously sanitize their hands, and keep a three-foot separation from others in public places. To summarize, India's entire population was placed on lockdown for more than 60 days, with no movement or community interaction and rigorous adherence to safety protocols. As a safeguard, the lockdown significantly restricted social contact and triggered psychological changes in individuals.

Stress

Stress is a term that relates to negative emotional experiences that an individual has (Sarason & Sarason, 2004); an individual's assessment of an event in his life reveals whether or not the event is stressful. Additionally, certain persons are more susceptible to stress than others due to their temperament, resilience, coping skills, and available social support (Sarason & Sarason, 2004). The covid epidemic has altered one's outlook on life; social isolation and working from home have become the new normal. Social support, a variable that is susceptible to either increasing or lowering stress, has been regarded as a critical component impacted by the epidemic.

Cognitive appraisal of stress

Selye gave the General Adaptation Syndrome theory (GAS) of stress, consisting of three stages (Hans Selye, 1976). The three stages included the alarm stage, where the body prepares itself for action, then arousal stage, where the body prepares the sympathetic nervous system for meeting the threat and dealing with it. The third and final stage is activated when the stress is prolonged and the body needs to tackle it for longer called the resistance stage (Baron, 2001). Selye's GAS model helps in understanding that how an individual reacts to a stressor physiologically. Not every individual undergoes stress for a same situation, some might experience more stress and some might experience less. Cognitive appraisal of a situation plays a role in such stress appraisal and its response. Lazarus and Folkman (1984), conveyed that an individual's primary and secondary appraisal of stress elicits different responses in different individuals. Their primary appraisal assess whether the stressor is a threat to them and deals with it, and the secondary appraisal assess whether they need to raise-up their guard for dealing / coping with the situation with the available resources. Tomaka and his colleagues (Tomaka et al., 1993) examined individuals stress response in two groups namely the 'threat group' and the 'challenge group'. Their studies inferred that the individual who perceived the situation as a threat experienced stress. Individuals belonging to the challenge group did not experience stress, but had a higher physiological arousal. The findings and evidences indicated that cognitive assessment and

Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak

social processes play a significant influence in influencing individuals' stress reactions (Baron, 2001).

Man and Stress

Aristotle has long ago said that "Man is by nature a social animal". The exchange of cultures, knowledge, commerce, language and best practices has led to years and years of colonization and communication between humans, as a species, we have evolved together. The culture plays a critical role in influencing one's mental health expectations and values. The Community has an important role in India. Social Interdependence pervades in Indian life. People have a deep sense of inseparability from family, clan, classes, religions and communities (*Indian Society and Ways of Living / Asia Society*, n.d.).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period, many individuals in various businesses in India were forced to work from home and have continued to do so even after the lockdown was lifted. Although IT organizations have allowed many employees to work from home even before the pandemic, but it was not for the entire team / office. This privilege has now been extended to academic, service, customer care, and, to a lesser extent, white-collar manufacturing unit personnel. Working from home is a relatively new trend in the other field for many now. Without many official facilities, employees at office sites were instructed to stay at home and perform their duties. All official obligations and operations were required to be performed using only a laptop and a phone, instilling fear of job instability and performance pressure to meet business objectives while being extremely productive with little resources (Basyouni & El Keshky, 2021). Along with job insecurity, financial planning has to be adjusted in light of the external environment's uncertainties. Unexpected events at home or in the neighborhood, such as becoming unwell, increasing rents, increasing energy expenses, increasing beverage and food costs, combined with a person's concern of job insecurity, surfaced as potential stressors that lead a person to feel stressed and anxious. There are no specified work hours when working from home; there are no weekdays or weekends. In such settings, people tend to overwork, adopting weariness, stress, insomnia, and worry as the new normal (*Work from Home Burnout: Stress, Insomnia, Anxiety Becoming the New Normal - The Economic Times*, n.d.).

COVID-19 and its significance for different segments of the working class

Primary Sector

While agriculture may appear to be the least afflicted industry by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, this sector is equally impacted due to its reliance on other sectors for proper operation. Transportation, intra- and inter-state services, markets, and shopping malls were all heavily regulated and monitored for their transportation movements, making it impossible for farmers and farm laborers to thrive in the absence of trade exchanges. Historically, India has seen a high number of farmer suicides owing to circumstances such as crop failure, financial difficulties, daughter marriage, debt pressure, and price declines. Globally, a 20% reduction in the price of agricultural commodities has exacerbated farmers' predicament (*Prices of Agricultural Commodities Drop 20% Post COVID-19 Outbreak - The Economic Times*, n.d.). Farmers are the economic backbone of the country, and it is critical to monitor their growth and requirements closely during this pandemic, without impeding their operations. Mental health care for them is critical in order to counteract the pandemic's long-term impacts.

Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak

Secondary sector

The secondary Sector consists of manufacturing and other production units such as textiles, handicrafts, raw material manufacture, finished product manufacturing, and automobile manufacturing, among others. This sector is expected to be the hardest damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the majority of enterprises are production units that need operation at the source site, making continuation of work impossible. Production schedules and supply chains have been disrupted, putting global demand and supply shortfalls under stress for enterprises across borders. For units granted permission to operate with a minimum workforce, a number of preventive procedures mandated by the government had to be observed, including the wearing of masks and gloves, keeping social distance, and applying sanitizers at frequent intervals. The implementation of the new work rules and standards was a time-consuming procedure that added to the already difficult working conditions in manufacturing units.

Tertiary Sector

Numerous tertiary sector industries, including hotels, restaurants, food chains, transportation, communication, financial firms, insurance, e-commerce websites, social and personal services, and education, are nearly closed or run remotely. The livelihoods of those employed in these areas have had a significant impact on their budgets and daily lives (Nicola et al., 2020). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, education at all levels was compromised; all schools, from primary to university, were shuttered indefinitely. Cambridge University has declared that the academic year 2020-21 will be the first to be conducted entirely online (*Cambridge University: All Lectures to Be Online-Only until Summer of 2021 - BBC News*, n.d.). As a developing country, it is still a challenge for many educational institutions to go online for the complete academic year; nonetheless, many schools and colleges offer an online style of education. Wherever possible, school teachers and professors are attempting to capture their students' attention via online method. Students' lack of motivation to attend online lectures, student feedback, and face-to-person talks are just a few of the key concerns educators experience when teaching online classes. Instructors in India are overworked and underpaid in comparison to the rest of the world (*India School Teachers Grapple Unruly Online Classes amid Lockdown — Quartz India*, n.d.).

Many industries have turned to short-term bank loans to see them through difficult times, leading to a decline in sales. The Indian government has announced significant economic assistance packages for various small and large-scale enterprises to assist them in surviving and overcoming this emergency. However, low-income persons with insecure jobs, temporary employees, and microbusiness owners reported greater levels of anxiety and depression, as well as anticipatory post-lockdown concern and paranoia, with the major stressor being wage loss (Alradhawi et al., 2020). In India, the social-economic impact of COVID-19 has necessitated developing a well-developed medium- and long-term strategic plan to stabilize the economy in light of the pandemic's economic impact (Kumar et al., n.d.).

METHODOLOGY

The present study is a quantitative analytical and exploratory study aimed to study the levels of stress during the lockdown period of Covid-19 Pandemic in Work from Home Information Technology employees in India. The study was conducted via an online questionnaire distribution method through social media apps. The data were collected from June 2020 till August 2020 for a period of three months. Totally 120 responses were

Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak

received, out of which some didn't qualify as they belonged to people working from offices. Finally, 91 individuals' data was used for the study, out of which 48 were women respondents and 43 were men. The average age of both the genders was equal, corresponding to 31.

Basic Details

The study questionnaire primarily collected details regarding age, gender, education, work experiences, marital status, children, and family type. The remaining questions were asked to the participants eliciting their response towards positive and negative thoughts incurred during the pandemic with a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Individuals' thoughts on feeling that their job is under stress, whether they felt any financial constraints because of the work from home option provided by the company, feelings of fear due to the pandemic, whether their normal was displaced, professional growth, self-improvement, and desire to work from home again was assessed.

ISMA Stress Questionnaire

Following the collection of preliminary information, respondents were asked to complete the ISMA Stress Questionnaire. The Stress questionnaire is a standardized inventory developed by ISMA – the United Kingdom's International Stress Management Association (*Home / ISMA Stress Management Association*, n.d.). It has 25 statements that can be answered with a 'Yes' or 'No' response. A 'Yes' response correlates to a score of One, while a 'No' response corresponds to a zero score; 25 is the greatest possible score. The scores are defined as follows: if a person has a score of four or less, they are at the lowest risk of developing a stress-related illness. A score of 5–13 interprets that the individual is more prone to develop stress-related mental and physical conditions, and a stress management programme or counselling session can assist them in overcoming their stress. Score 14 and above indicate that the individual is especially susceptible to stress; they may also demonstrate stress-related behavioural patterns, either mental or physical; professional assistance is strongly required in these instances.

Reliability & Validity

The stress questionnaire's validity and reliability were verified using the test-retest method in a prior study conducted in India (Archana, 2016), with an 'r' value of 0.98 indicating a positive correlation.

Data Analysis

The data is expressed as mean standard deviation. To ascertain the normality of the population, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied. Later, the T-test was used to determine any statistical differences.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Table 1. Profile of the respondents

Variable		N	Mean	SD
Age	Men	43	30.72	5.65
	Women	48	33.56	8.66
Stress Score	Men	43	13.02	5.45
	Women	48	12.71	4.54

**Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees
During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak**

The respondents' profile is shown in Table 1, 43 of the 91 responders were male, while 48 were female. Men's mean age was 30.72, while females' mean age was 33.56, with a standard deviation of 5.65 and 8.66, respectively. Males had a mean stress score of 13.02, while females had a mean stress score of 12.71, with a standard deviation of 5.45 and 4.54, respectively. The two-tailed t test revealed no significant difference in the individuals' stress scores. According to the above table, respondents' stress scores were high across all ages and genders, at 13, which is considered to be on the higher side, necessitating stress management and counselling services.

Table 2. Stress Score of the respondents in various aspects

Life Aspects	Yes	N	Mean	SD	P-Value
Marital Status	Yes	60	12.70	4.85	0.69
	No	31	13.16	5.25	
Children	Yes	44	12.84	4.87	0.98
	No	47	12.87	5.10	
Financial Constraints	Yes	16	13.69	5.24	0.19
	No	75	12.68	4.29	
Mental Aspects					
Feeling of job under stress	Yes	55	14.62	4.72	0.00
	No	36	10.17	4.07	
Feelings of Scare of the Pandemic	Yes	66	13.83	4.89	0.00
	No	25	10.28	4.26	
Feeling of Displacement of Normal Life	Yes	72	13.88	4.96	0.00
	No	19	9	2.47	
Feeling of quality family time	Yes	67	12.22	4.74	0.05
	No	24	14.63	5.23	
Feeling Personal Growth	Yes	46	11.67	5.16	0.02
	No	45	14.07	4.49	

Table 2 represents the stress score of the respondents across the various aspects measured in the study. As can be seen from the above table, respondents' stress levels had a range of effects on their thoughts. While the individual's marital status, having children at home, and the financial situation did not significantly affect the stress scores, the individual's feelings or thoughts about being in a fearful situation as a result of the pandemic, losing their normal life, feeling of personal and being able to spend quality family time significantly increased the stress scores. The p-value of the respondents' positive and negative thoughts of life greatly influenced the stress scores.

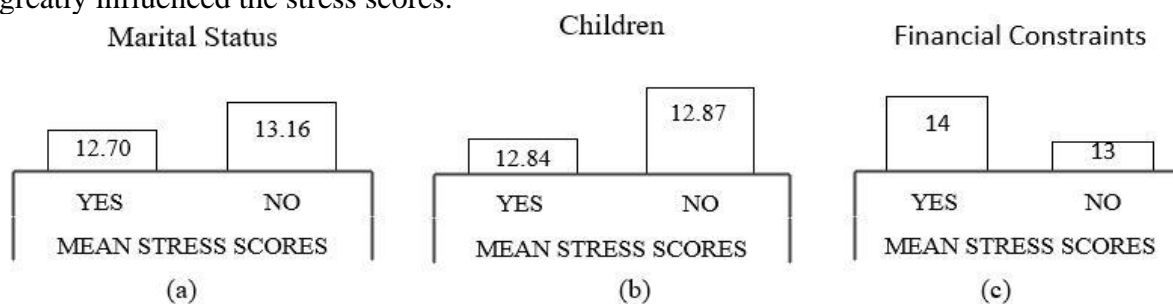
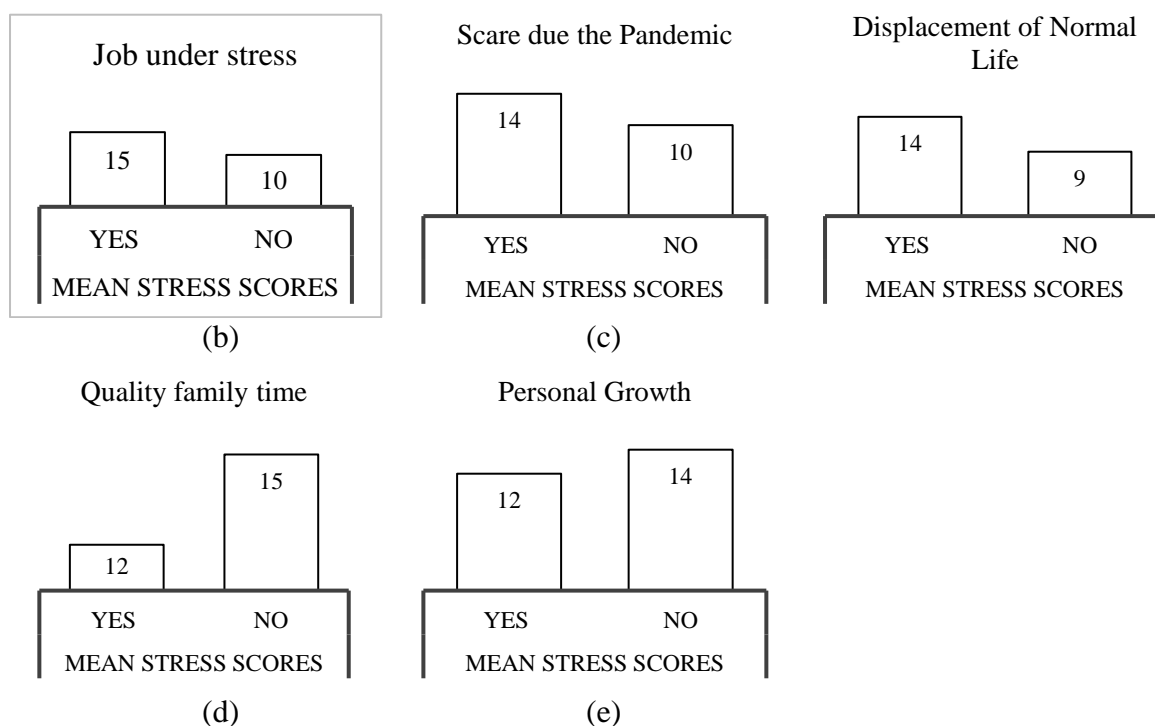


Figure 1. Life Aspects

**Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees
During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak**

The stress scores with respect to their life aspects of the respondents are depicted in Figure 1 namely marital status (a), having children (b), and financial constraints (c). As can be seen from the numbers, the stress scores for the various components were quite consistent and fell on a near-identical level with minor variances. When these scores were subjected to a significance t test, it was determined that the p-values (Table 2) for marital status, children, and financial constraints were negligible t 0.69, 0.98 and 0.19 levels of significance. While the participants' stress scores differed slightly, there was no difference in the impact of stress on the individuals with respect to their societal standing. The scores indicated that being married or single, having children at home or not, or facing financial restrictions due to lockdown did not affect the level of stress experienced by either side during the initial lockdown period of the pandemic. However, based on the interpretation of stress scores, it can be concluded that nearly all individuals fall into the high-stress category, necessitating both mental and physical assistance to cope with the stress.

Figure 2. Mental Aspects



The data from the respondent's mental aspects are depicted in Figure 2, along with their average stress scores from the study. The psychological reactions of individuals to the epidemic were examined through the aforementioned factors. Additionally, Table 2 indicates that the p - values for the mental traits depicted in Figures 2(a) - 2(e) were significant.

Figures 2(a) - 2(c) quantified respondents' psychological reactions to their employment being under stress as a result of work from home, to feelings of fear, and to have their normal lives interrupted by the epidemic. These sensations describe an individual's negative emotions / thoughts, and those who responded 'Yes' to feeling job-related stress, fear, and displacement experienced a higher stress level with a 100 percent significant p value than those who said 'No.' The stress scores of those who responded 'No' for the negative thought aspects were found to be in the lower range of the interpretation, corresponding to 10 and below, indicating that they were experiencing significantly less stress than those who

Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak

responded 'Yes' with a score of 14 or higher, indicating that they required immediate mental and physical attention and stress management. The positive thoughts impacted on the stress scores of the individuals correspondingly.

Figures 2(d) - 2(e) depict the percentage of individuals who thought they had meaningful family time and had the opportunity to increase their personal progress during the lockdown period. These factors quantified the lockdown's beneficial effect on responder, corresponding to positive thoughts self-growth and a happy family time. Spending time with one's family and having accomplished something personally contribute to an individual's strengths and make them pleased. The stress scores of these individuals in Figures 2(d) and 2(e) had a significant p-value of 0.05 and 0.02, respectively, showing that those who believed they had improved during the lockdown time reported having lower stress levels than those who did not.

Stress is a response to an external environmental stimuli, an individual assesses his surroundings for possible threats and then elicits a response (H. Selye, 1956). Lazarus proposed a synthesis of prior studies on stress, health, and coping that focused the stress experience on a person's belief of a stressor. How an individual assesses a stressor defines how he or she copes with or responds to it (R S Lazarus, 1966). Later Lazarus and Folkman described how cognitive and behavioural efforts helped an individual to manage stress and categorized them as emotion focused and problem focused. according to his transactional theory of stress and coping there are primary and secondary responses to stress and coping, primary response examines whether the stressor poses a threat and secondary evaluates individuals strategies for coping with the stress (R. S. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The responses elicited by the individuals in the study followed a similar pattern of cognitive appraisal of stress and its responses (Richard S. Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Individuals who perceived the situations negatively, namely job stress, fear of a pandemic, and life displacement, rated the stress response higher, and the results indicated a significant and increased stress response. Their stress levels were shown to be significantly higher than those of others, necessitating psychological support. Additionally, the study found that those who viewed the circumstance positively, such as having quality family time and experiencing personal growth during the lockdown period, nevertheless had lower and significantly lower stress scores than those who viewed the situation negatively. Thus, it may be argued that an individual's cognitive appraisal of his surroundings has an effect on the stress response elicited by them.

Limitations and scope for future research

The study population included for the study worked in the prestigious Information Technology sector. IT employees were able to work from home and be safe with their families during the Covid -19 lockdown period, yet the psychological impact of stress was shown to be significantly worse in them. During the covid 19 epidemic, however, many manufacturing sector employees will not be able to work from home. Even before the covid-19 pandemic, the industrial sector was already struggling with low supply demand, the NBFC crisis, insufficient credit facilities (Aneja & Ahuja, 2021), and the mandated lockdown would have been exacerbated the current situation. Since April 2020, the covid 19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on numerous enterprises, with local governments often mandating lockdowns. Employees in the manufacturing industry could have experienced significant job strain, stress, and worry because of the prolonged economic crisis and the preceding gap in working conditions. There is a dearth of studies on workers' mental health

Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak

during and after the covid epidemic. As a result, it is strongly advised that a post-pandemic study on the mental health of manufacturing workers be conducted.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data demonstrates unequivocally that an individual's social characteristics relative to his psychological characteristics, altered significantly during the pandemic, having an effect on how a person's cognitive appraisal of positive and negative thoughts affected their stress response. The responses of their thoughts were consistent with their stress ratings, implying that an individual's mental state has a major effect on one's health. Chronic stress can have a detrimental effect on an individual's physiological state of health, resulting in several immunological, cardiovascular, and gastrointestinal diseases (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). The pandemic has significantly impacted cognitive performance (Boals & Banks, 2020), increasing stress and related complaints. The current study demonstrates that cognitive appraisal of a situation in relation to the pandemic significantly affected the stress levels experienced by participants.

The current pandemic must prioritize not only the physiological but also the psychological well-being of the individuals. The study population, which consisted of everyday humans without any pre-existing physical issues, reported feeling a tremendous deal of stress and needing rapid psychological assistance.

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Positive and Negative Thought Ramifications of Stress Among Work from Home It Employees During the First Lockdown Period of The Covid-19 Outbreak

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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