



Emotional well-being of black African queer employees in the workplace



Authors:

Nkosana Tshisa¹ 
Freda van der Walt¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Business Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Central University of Technology, Welkom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Freda van der Walt,
fvdwalt@cut.ac.za

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Orientation: Despite continuous sexual-orientation discrimination against sexual minorities in the workplace, many queer individuals have managed to create meaningful and happy lives inside and outside the organisation.

Research purpose: To explore the work experiences of African queer employees and establish how their work experiences as sexual minorities have affected their emotional well-being within the work context.

Motivation for the study: Most previous research studies focusing on the queer population have been conducted in Western countries. There is, therefore, scant empirical research focusing on African queer individuals. In addition, most previous studies explored queer individuals in general society from a pathological perspective. Because of the increased focus on the mental health crises in Africa and the detrimental impact, it may have on organisations; the current study explored the well-being of a marginalised group within the African work context.

Research approach/design and method: This qualitative study included nine black queer participants working in Africa. Data were collected using snowball sampling.

Main findings: The findings of the study show that the participants experienced both positive and negative affects. Although some reported to be satisfied with their work, others reported a neutral or a negative stance.

Practical/managerial implications: More needs to be done to ensure that queer employees' feel included and accepted in the workplace. Hostile working environments affect queer employees' work experiences and well-being, and as such, management plays an indispensable role in creating a welcoming and supportive working environment.

Contribution/value-add: The findings of the study contribute to the limited body of knowledge on the work experiences of black African queers. The findings should be of value to human resource practitioners and leaders who seek to create harmonious working environments in which all employees can excel and flourish.

Keywords: emotional well-being; black African queers; workplace experiences; sexual-orientation discrimination; queer.

Introduction

Worldwide, great strides have been made to recognise queer (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender [LGBT]) rights. However, there are still numerous cases of continuous sexual-orientation discrimination at work which is associated with lower physical and emotional well-being and negative work results (De Souza et al., 2017). In contrast to the negative experiences that queer employees are often exposed to at work, and in everyday life; however, Riggle et al. (2014) assert that many queer individuals are living happy and meaningful lives despite incidents of persecution that they are exposed to. This sentiment is shared by Rumens et al. (2019), who assert that research confirmed that it is possible for queers to live meaningful lives outside and within the work context. Riggle et al. (2014) and Feinstein et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of sharing positive experiences, to encourage other queer individuals to form positive identities, and greater well-being and inner strength. Therefore, it is important not only to focus on challenges that queer employees face, but also to investigate their positive experiences and how they create meaning and happiness within the work context despite being marginalised.

Although queer employees have been the focus of previous empirical studies, very few research studies have included black queer employees, and specifically within an Afrocentric context. Previous studies have almost exclusively focused on the work experiences of white queer individuals

(Badgett et al., 2009; Johnson & Otto, 2019). Furthermore, most previous studies focusing on queer individuals have been conducted in Western societies, such as the UK and the US. In one of the few studies focusing on the African queer community, Dhatemwa (2014) found that social dynamics in South Africa make it impossible for queer employees to enjoy workplace benefits and freedoms, as they experience social and workplace exclusion throughout their working lives.

Several African countries still have laws in place that are designed to ostracise queer persons and preclude them from living their 'truth'. These countries not only propagate the notion that queer identity is 'un-African', but also deepen the lack of acceptance that many black communities have displayed towards non-heterosexual individuals which have infiltrated workplaces. Although this is greatly influenced by Africa's hegemonic colonialist background, many sexual minority groups continue to experience patriarchy and misogyny within society and the work context. As such, it is necessary to investigate whether African queer individuals have managed to create happy and meaningful working lives despite their heteronormative social and work environments. For this study, two African countries were selected, namely, Malawi and South Africa. The reason being that these African countries are not only 'hot spots' of the homosexual debate in Africa, but also are examples of recent developments that offer interesting insights as far as queer rights and acceptance are concerned.

Theoretical framework

According to Islam (2014), social identity theory (SIT) is a classic social psychological theory that attempts to explain intergroup conflict as a function of group-based self-definitions. Proposed by Tajfel (1972), SIT states that the group that a person belongs to is an important source of pride and self-esteem, and that this group gives the person a sense of belonging, or an identity (Harwood, 2020). Social identity theory defines social identity as 'the individual's knowledge that they belong to certain social groups, together with some emotional value significant to them of group membership' (Tajfel, 1972, p. 31). The dissimilarity between these groups is often the reason why there is prejudice, bias, discrimination and conflict. This is usually because members of the in-group have harmonious, favourable interactions with one another, while there appears to be hostility towards members of the out-group. One may be a member of a myriad of social groups, and they form an important part of how one perceives, feels and behaves in social interactions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the case of sexuality, members of society who are heterosexual are perceived to be 'normal' and part of the in-group, while those who identify as queer are perceived to be 'different', and thus part of the out-group.

Literature review

Sexual orientation

'Queer' is an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender

expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms (American Psychological Association, 2015). Traditionally a negative term, queer has been reclaimed by some people and is considered inclusive of a wide range of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions (International Organisation for Migration, 2021). It may be used as an overarching locution for people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, or as an alternative to the acronym LGBT. Queer challenges the binary way of thinking about sexualities (i.e. heterosexuality or homosexuality) in favour of a more complex project, of capturing the enormous diversity of sexualities, from gender ambiguity, transsexualities, or intersex to cross-dressing and more (Calafell & Nakayama, 2017). Finally, queer embraces whatever is non-normative. In this sense, it is anti-essentialist, as it does not claim any essential underlying character to the various categories of sexual identity.

In a heterosexist society, most individuals (i.e. heterosexuals) are granted benefits and opportunities that make it possible for them to enjoy a harmonious work environment, fruitful job experiences and high levels of occupational satisfaction (Brickell, 2001; Morison et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the same cannot always be argued for their homosexual counterparts. This implies that a homosexual person may sometimes be tolerated in a heterosexist society, but not always accepted, possibly because of perceptions and attitudes that derive from the limited social liberties that queer persons enjoy. Furthermore, it is possible that the burden of unacceptability is often experienced by those who openly identify as either gay, bisexual, transgender or any other sexual orientation, because they are 'different' from the norm.

The hegemonic nature of preferred heterosexuality gives rise to social constructs that most believe are the 'right' way to exist within society. These heteronormative social constructs are thus adhered to in routinised economic participations, and they influence most organisational cultures, which are typically devoid of queer experiences. A robust body of research indicates that experiences of heterosexist discrimination (e.g. being shunned or rejected for being a sexual minority, being the victim of a hate crime) and internalised heterosexism (negative attitudes towards homosexuality and/or bisexuality and towards oneself as a sexual minority person) are associated with poorer mental health outcomes among sexual minorities (Velez et al., 2019). Furthermore, non-affirming environments are associated with higher rates of internalised heterosexism (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Chow & Cheg, 2010; Szymanski & Sung, 2013), and in turn, increased internalised heterosexism is associated with psychological distress (Velez et al., 2019) and negative mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation for LGB individuals (McLaren, 2016). Thus, because of the antagonistic attitudes and negative perceptions of society in general, individuals with a sexual orientation that deviates from the societal norm (i.e. heterosexual) are likely to be discriminated against, not only in society generally, but also in the workplace.

Ensher et al. (as cited in Bhana, 2013) argue that when employees perceive mistreatment because of their group membership, they experience emotions of alienation and anger, which may result in negative work-related behaviours, as well as negative physical and psychological effects on the individual's well-being. Thus, one should consider the work experiences of sexual minority groups to understand how they affect their emotional well-being, and consequently their behaviour within the work context.

Emotional well-being

According to Choi (2018), emotional well-being, often referred to as 'hedonic well-being', refers to the quality of an individual's emotions and experiences, that is, sadness, anxiety, worry, happiness, stress, depression, anger, joy or affection, which leads to either unpleasant or pleasant feelings. Emotional well-being is also regarded as one's general interests, satisfaction and feelings about life (Keyes et al., 2012). Lamers et al. (2011) assert that emotional well-being includes a cognitive appraisal of satisfaction with life in general. Life satisfaction may be a sense of overall contentment, or satisfaction, with past or present life, or with life domains, such as work and marriage (Keyes, 2003). Fredrickson and Joiner (as cited in Langeland, 2014) state that positive emotions trigger upward spirals towards emotional well-being. As such, emotional well-being may be seen as a component of positive mental health (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

Keyes and Lopez (2002) state that the symptoms of emotional well-being include scales of positive affect, negative affect and satisfaction with life overall. Studies reveal that measures of acknowledgement of emotional well-being in terms of satisfaction and happiness are related but distinct dimensions (e.g. Andrews & Withey, 1976; Badri et al., 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2020). Measures of expression of emotional well-being in terms of positive and negative affects are also regarded as related but distinct dimensions (e.g. Bradburn, 1969; Watson & Tellegen, 1985; Weinstein, 2018). Fredrickson (as cited in Langeland, 2014) suggests that positive emotions broaden people's attention and thinking and thought-action repertoires, undo lingering negative emotional arousal, and promote psychological resilience, thus building personal resources and promoting psychological and physical well-being. These factors will, in turn, trigger upward spirals of emotional well-being, resulting in human flourishing (Langeland, 2014). Applied to the work context, emotional well-being includes three dimensions, which are operationalised by Rothmann (2013) as employee perceptions of job satisfaction, positive affect (i.e. pleasant reactions towards things happening at work) and negative affect (i.e. unpleasant reactions towards things happening at work).

Research purpose and objectives

The study seeks to explore the work experiences of black African queers, and how their work experiences as sexual minorities have affected their emotional well-being within the work context. The goal of the study is, therefore, to

expand the current limited body of knowledge of the lived experiences of black African queer individuals within the work context. This insight and new knowledge created could help organisations to promote gender equality, inclusiveness, acceptance and transformation, which all reflect African values (e.g. ubuntu) and democratic societies.

Methods

Research approach and design

The study was approached from an interpretivist paradigm, where participants become actively involved in all phases of the research process, by giving meaning to their interpretation and understanding of a social phenomenon (De Vos et al., 2011). A qualitative approach was followed, which means that the researchers sought to understand the meaning participants ascribed to their experiences of emotional well-being within the work context.

Participants and procedure

Participants were sampled by means of snowball sampling. The sample consisted of nine black African queer individuals from two African countries – South Africa and Malawi. Included in the sample were four homosexual males (participants 1, 3, 6 and 8) and one homosexual female (participant 5), one bisexual male (participant 9) and one bisexual female (participant 7), and two heterosexual females (participants 2 and 4) who identified as transgender. Eight of the participants were single and one participant is involved in a life partnership. Eight of the participants were 24 years and older, while one was 23 years and/or younger. Seven of the participants work in the education sector, one participant is in the chemical sector, and one participant is in the food and beverage sector.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from a higher education institution to undertake the study. To ensure that the participants gave informed consent to participate in the study, an introduction was given outlining the purpose of the study and the research procedure that would be followed, as well as ethical considerations that would be observed, such as confidentiality and the protection of identities. The participants were also made aware that participation in the study was voluntary, and that, as such, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data generation

Prior to collecting the data, an explanatory letter was emailed to the participants a week before the scheduled interviews, explaining the nature and the objectives of the study. Data were collected by means of in-depth interviewing, where semi-structured interview schedules were used. The semi-structured interview data allowed the researcher to obtain a deep understanding of the black queer employees' perceptions, feelings and experiences. The rationale for the

use of this data collection method was to allow for the collection of sufficient data, without missing any significant information. The interviews were conducted at a venue that was agreed upon before the interviews commenced, and the interview took approximately 30 min. Participants were given sufficient opportunity to tell their stories, as they had experienced them. It was requested that the interviews be conducted at the workplace, which was the natural setting in which the black queer employees were working. However, not all participants felt comfortable with this request, and therefore, some participants were interviewed at a venue that they identified as convenient. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

With qualitative studies, the researcher becomes the research instrument, and therefore, it is important to consider the trustworthiness of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To ensure trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability were considered. Credibility was advanced through developing a research procedure that generated sufficient, multi-faceted and credible data from participants. Rapport was established with participants and the interviews were conducted by one of the authors, who is a queer individual, to promote transparency and prolonged engagement. Transferability and dependability were ensured by clearly defining the research sample, using an interview schedule, and documenting the research methodology used. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and data were coded according to themes that emerged from the literature review and participants' responses. Confirmability was ensured by linking the findings and conclusions reached in a logical manner. This was achieved by developing interview questions from the purpose of the study and the literature review.

Data analysis

All data collected from the recorded interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were inspected and analysed. The cleaning process and preparation of the interviews for coding included a thorough review of the transcripts. Thereafter, both the researcher and the coders discarded the typographical errors and missing words. The qualitative data were gathered, summarised, coded, and reorganised and sorted according to themes (categories), after which it was interpreted and given meaning, in accordance with the steps suggested by Flick (2014). This was done using inductive reasoning, since meaning was created from patterns in the observed data.

Findings and discussion

Three key themes emerged from the data analysis process: (1) positive affect; (2) negative affect; and (3) job satisfaction. We present the evidence for the three themes and a discussion of each theme.

Positive affect

One of the sub-dimensions of emotional well-being is positive affect. The participants emphasised positive affect, which

may be associated with feelings of happiness. Participant 1, for example, stated:

'I am always happy, and you will never ever see me angry at all, because I am an open and talkative person. So whenever you do wrong to me, I tell you. Therefore, I am happy, and the work make it more enjoyable for me.' (Homosexual, M)

Participant 5 shared these sentiments:

'I forced myself to be this happy person every day when I go to work. I don't let the problems or the circumstances at work get me down, just to have a happy environment at work.' (Homosexual, F)

Some of the other participants mentioned that they are happy at work, because they are treated with respect and are understood (participant 8, Homosexual, M), they work with people who share the same values and ideas (participant 7, Bisexual, F). and they can be themselves (participant 7, Bisexual, F). Participant 7 also mentioned that she feels 'peaceful' at work and participant 6 (Homosexual, M) mentioned positive emotions, such as 'ease, comfort and calm'.

In the study, most participants reported feelings of positive affect, which are mostly related to the work they do. Some participants reported to be in good spirits, a feeling they attributed to their ability to not allow themselves to engage with negative situations at work, thus ensuring that they are always happy at work. The findings in terms of positive affect show that many participants respond positively to their work and things happening at work. In this regard, Riggle et al. (2014) argued that many queer individuals are living happy and meaningful lives despite incidents of persecution that they are exposed to. Although the participants did not necessarily refer to being persecuted and discriminated against, they have managed to create happy and meaningful work experiences. Williamson (2020) argues that work experiences are connected to wider societal dynamics, and therefore, the one cannot be isolated from the other.

Negative affect

While some participants experienced positive affect at work, others mentioned negative affect. Participants reported that they experience feelings of dejection, which include sadness, depression, criticism and being undermined by peers. Some participants mentioned that they feel sad when they cannot engage in conversations with their colleagues because of their perception of having a different sexual orientation. For example, participant 4 explained:

'Pretty much. You know, at work people may be talking about topics. So I hear them talking about queer people or gay people. Obviously, I would not want to engage in those kinds of topics, because I do not want them to find out about me. So that is when I come across sadness at work.' (Transgender, F)

Participant 2, an openly transgender woman, mentioned that she experienced feelings of sadness at work when other

women colleagues make oblique homophobic comments. She described how she felt:

'I'm a transgender woman, a transgender heterosexual, [and] I would say the things that made me feel sad: some of my female colleagues were being weird around me in a sense that I kind of felt like I was being discriminated against. They would just throw kind of indirect homophobic comments, whereby they would say, "Oh, you're doing things more than us." That would just make me feel sad afterward, because basically what they are saying is that there's "us," which is them, and then there's me.' (Transgender, F)

It seems that transgender individuals are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and prejudice inside and outside the workplace. Clements et al. (2021) allude to research, indicating that transgender and non-binary individuals often experience rejection and job discrimination, which negatively impacts on their identity formation.

Other participants experienced feelings that arguably transcend sadness. They reported feeling depressed at work to a point, where they feel demotivated and withdrawn. For instance, participant 3 stated:

'Emotionally, I think sometimes I feel depressed at work, 'cause I know sometimes when it affects me that I don't want to participate anymore in whatever. So I would say that sometimes there is a feeling of depression that comes from the whole situation.' (Homosexual, M)

Participant 9 (Bisexual, M) perceived being affected by criticism because of his sexual orientation. The participant highlighted: 'When I am being criticised because of who I am in terms of sexuality, it is not easy'.

Some participants lamented being undermined by colleagues because of their sexual orientation. For instance, participant 5 asserted:

'So sometimes these two [managers] are being on their own side. They do not involve me in a few things. Yes. So I also do believe sometimes it is because of my sexuality.' (Bisexual, M)

Similarly, participant 8 maintained that colleagues disregard her opinions, because they believe that she is not intellectually sound. She stated:

'People tend to think that my opinions are clouded by my sexuality. Nothing is professional when it comes from me because of my sexuality. They feel as though I am rebellious to a point where I am negative, and which is not true. I am very professional.' (Homosexual, M)

Participant 7, who has not disclosed her sexuality in the workplace, also experiences that her intellectual capability is undermined by colleagues. She bemoaned:

'I feel mostly rejected at work when people intentionally step on your toes because you are young or because you are different, and they identify you differently because of your sexuality. I feel like people ignore me on purpose. A lot of people just ... you would be with colleagues, and they are talking about a certain subject. You are with them. You raise a point, and they just ignore

it. Small things like that, especially when you think you are making sense. That really pressures me.' (Bisexual, F)

A few participants revealed that emotionally, they felt numb, anxious and fatigued. Participant 2, for example, stated:

'I think lately it's just been [I don't know if fatigue is an emotion], but monotone, just OK. I haven't been excited, I haven't been sad. I just ... I don't feel. I feel numb.' (Transgender, F)

From participant 7's perspective, the feeling of anxiety when going to work is never absent, because she is unsure of what to expect from colleagues, including how they are going to receive her. The participant explained:

'I am mostly anxious. Will I be able to complete that even if you know you are going to be able to complete that? From the moment you start in the work environment. Morning briefings, you're 2 minutes late. You start thinking, "What they think of me?" when I am walking into that room. When they look at me, "What are they going to think?" You never know what people are thinking from that moment on till you prepare to go to your class. I am mostly anxious.' (Bisexual, F)

Participant 6, however, reveals feeling more tired (fatigued) than sad, because the work that he does requires a lot of energy:

'I have been in many positions where I feel exhausted or fatigued, which is a completely different feeling from [being] sad. So yes, I do not think I have felt sad yet. It might come, it might not, but I think fatigue is what would be best positioned for me in relation to the work that I do.' (Homosexual, M)

These findings concur with those of Everett (2015), where some participants indicated that they often experience feelings of dejection, which are usually triggered by an inability to engage in conversations related to their sexuality with their co-workers. It was also indicated by some participants that the feelings of dejection are at times evoked by the homophobia that they experience at work. One participant explained that 'they would just throw kind of indirect homophobic comments, whereby they would say, "Oh, you're doing things more than us." That would just make me feel sad afterward'. This confirms Choi's (2018) assertion that emotional well-being often pertains to the quality of an individual's emotions and experiences, that is, sadness, anxiety and worry, which leads to either unpleasant or pleasant feelings. Becker et al. (2014) emphasise that the stress that sexual minority individuals experience is largely dependent on 'input' factors, such as society's or co-workers' negative, and at times even hostile, attitudes.

Job satisfaction

While participants shared different views regarding the overall feelings that they experience at the workplace, they also gave insights on their level of job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is the third sub-dimension of emotional well-being within the work context, as operationalised by Rothmann (2013). Most participants mentioned that they are satisfied with their work. For example, participant 2 asserted: 'I love my work. It's very character-building, and it has made

me the person that I am today. And my experience with it, it's been incredible'. (Transgender, F)

Similar to the above perspective, participant 6 stated that he enjoys his work, because he is given a chance to impact his field of study: 'I think I enjoy what I do. I enjoy it from a standpoint of being able to create'. (Homosexual, M)

Participant 8 shared similar perceptions:

'Where I work right now people treat me way better. Management offers ways in which, if I work on myself from where I am, and I want to be who I want to be, [...] they promote me to be myself, rather than me always holding back. And that will eventually leave me stagnant, because I will be someone I'm not, and I will never be the person I can be.' (Homosexual, M)

Although most participants showed feelings of satisfaction with their work, a few participants reported to be neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Participant 3 explained the reason for this attitude:

'My workplace doesn't give the opportunity for creativity in terms of research or other activities that you would want to engage with the institution that you attach your activities to. So I would say that I don't explore all my creativity at the workplace, 'cause of the restrictions that are there.' (Homosexual, M)

One of the participants highlighted being dissatisfied with the work he does, and as a result, he cannot wait to be outside the work premises. Participant 7 asserted: 'At work, when you mostly help, it is when everybody is happy too. Otherwise I cannot wait till I knock off. Then I become happy'. (Bisexual, F)

Most participants indicated that they are satisfied with their work. Some even mentioned how supportive supervisors allow for autonomy and offer opportunities for advancement, which, in turn, fosters loyalty towards the organisation. The findings confirm Hur's (2020) assertion that inclusive work environments have a positive effect on queer employees' job satisfaction and affective commitment. For employees who identify as queer, cooperative, supportive and empowering work environments have significantly positive effects on job satisfaction (Hur, 2020). Some participants did bemoan, however, that they feel unfulfilled and limited in their job positions. It should also be noted that some of these participants have not disclosed their sexual identity at work. In a study examining factors that promote job satisfaction among sexual minority employees, Tatum (2018) found that there is a positive relationship between sexual identity disclosure and job satisfaction in affirming work environments, but there is no relationship between disclosure and job satisfaction in non-affirming work environments. Carpenter (2008) found that queer women were less satisfied with their jobs than heterosexual women. Drydakis (2015) also reported that queer men and women were less satisfied than heterosexuals with dimensions of job satisfaction, such as pay, promotion and respect from their supervisor. They were also less satisfied with work in general.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The study had several limitations. Although it was difficult to recruit study participants, saturation was reached after interviewing nine participants. The sample was quite diverse, consisting of transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. In addition, there is limited academic literature on black queer managers and employees, particularly in Africa. Therefore, it is important that the body of academic literature related to this selected sample be expanded. More research is needed to confirm the findings of the current study. It would also be interesting to understand this dynamic through a black and a white transgender employee lens, as this kind of research is often avoided. Finally, despite Africa's history of lack of acceptance of queer individuals, it can be concluded from this study that some black African queer individuals celebrate their identity and thus have purpose and direction, which contributes immensely to their communities, and they are valued by the organisation. However, the problem of sexual-orientation discrimination in the workplace still needs more attention, which implies that employers should facilitate open discussion on issues related to harassment, bullying, transphobia and transformation to create equal and inclusive workplaces.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the work experiences of black African queers, and how they affect their emotional well-being within the work context. Although the participants did not report being discriminated against, many forms of discrimination were mentioned. Thus, it seems that sexual-orientation discrimination has not been eradicated, and that many queers are still expected to 'de-queer' (Rumens et al., 2019) to be accepted and have positive and meaningful experiences at work. Nevertheless, it is commendable that some employers are supportive of queer employees and do not treat them any differently from the norm or make the workplace hostile and uncomfortable for these employees. Creating such favourable workplaces seems necessary for queer employees to experience a sense of belonging, which could encourage their emotional well-being or optimal functioning in the work context. Despite efforts made by organisations, it is suggested that more effort should be made to mitigate the hostility of African societies generally towards queers for them to experience emotional well-being inside and outside the workplace.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

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Data availability

Identifiers were used to protect the identity of the participants.

Disclaimer

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