

Problematizing child-headed households: The need for children's participation in early childhood interventions

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There is insufficient literature and research that has problematised the use of the phenomenon of child-headed households (CHHs), that is, to find out if it is an acceptable term to use, if it is really a problem, and whether it needs solutions. Hence, the purpose of this study was to problematise the use of the term CHH, taking the theories of Freire and Foucault into consideration. This generic qualitative study consisted of a sample of 16 experts who worked with children from CHH. Data were collected through a questionnaire and individual telephonic interviews with the experts identified. The findings indicate that, for several reasons, the current use of the term CHH is acceptable and is a problem that has to be taken seriously by the relevant stakeholders. In light of the findings, the author emphasises the importance of recognising the capacity of children from CHH to actively participate in early childhood interventions geared to improve their social environments.

Introduction

Over the past decade there has been general consensus among researchers that child-headed households (CHHs) do exist in South Africa despite the contestation over the actual statistics (Meintjies *et al.* 2010; Mogotlane *et al.* 2010; Mturi 2012; Richter & Desmond 2008). Several studies have found that CHHs are prevalent in all nine provinces in South Africa (Guest 2003; HSRC 2002; Madhavan & Schatz 2007; Maqoko & Dreyer 2008; Shisana *et al.* 2005; Van Dijk & Van Driel 2009). These studies bear testimony to the fact that the phenomenon of CHH should be taken seriously. Some academics and researchers may argue, however, that the term CHH has not necessarily been problematised, raising the questions: Is it a real problem? To whom? Can it be solved?

In this article, the author attempts to problematise CHH by first exploring the definitions of 'child', 'households' and 'child-headed households'. Next, he discusses the challenges experienced by children from CHH through a review of literature which reflect CHH being a problem. Then he provides an understanding of 'problematizing' as conceptualised in the theories postulated by Freire and Foucault. In the major part of this article, he presents the actual viewpoints of prominent people working with children from CHH to problematise the use of the term 'child-headed households'. Finally, the findings of this study are linked to the theories of Freire and Foucault, emphasising the point that children from CHH should be recognised as powerful agents who should be involved in early intervention programmes directed at improving their social environments and ultimately their lives.

Definition of child-headed households

The definition of CHH may be contentious as the term 'child' may mean different things to different people (MacLellan 2005; Smart 2003; UNAIDS 2006). According to MacLellan (2005), the most acceptable definition of a child refers to a person under the age of 18 years; however, one should be cautious about the use of a quantitative number in differentiating a child from an adult. One also needs to be cognisant of the term 'childhood', the meaning of which may vary in different cultures (Chilangwa 2004). In their publication *Constructing and reconstructing childhood*, James and Prout (2015) highlight several important aspects in conceptualising childhood. They point out that children should be seen as 'agents and actors in the social world', constituted in and through historical and cultural discourse (James & Prout 2015:ix). As such, the role, experiences and activities of children are essential aspects of childhood which are pivotal to their involvement in society (Pufall & Unsworth 2004; Shriberg *et al.* 2011; Smith 2002; Stainton Rogers 2004).

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According to Mogotlane *et al.* (2008:35), 'a household is a unit that traditionally accommodates a family'. Usually a household is characterised by several aspects, such as, culture, religion, legal frameworks and social dynamics of particular communities (UNICEF 2000). Murphy, Harvey and Silvestre (2005:269) view a household as an economic unit where 'members eat from the same pot' or 'sleep under the same roof'. The construct of a household is problematic due to the fluid nature of its changing membership. The composition and structure of households may change as a result of death, disease, crime, migrant labour, unemployment, conflicts, war, separation and desertion which may contribute to CHH (MacLellan 2005; Sloth-Nielsen 2003; Smart 2003). Ayieko (2004), however, points out that there is a distinction between a family and a household. In the former the people are related, but in the latter they may not necessarily be related even if they live together (Bower 2005; Germann 2005).

The Department of Social Development (2005) defines CHH as occurring when:

... a parent or primary caregiver of a household is terminally ill or has died; there is no adult family member available to provide care for the children in the household; and a child has assumed the role of a primary caregiver in respect of a child or children in the household in terms of providing food, clothing and psychological support. (p. 40)

This comprehensive definition seems to address concerns raised by different authors around the age of children in CHH (Meintjies *et al.* 2010), the presence of sick adults who cannot care for the children (Chilangwa 2004), and the permanent absence of parents or adult caregivers (Bequele 2007; Plan Finland 2005)

Challenges facing child-headed households

An elaborate interrogation of both national and international literature on CHH led to the identification of several challenges that are experienced by children living in such households. Some of these challenges are: increased responsibility of a nurse and care for sick family members (Evans & Becker 2009; Skovdal *et al.* 2009); the difficulty of dealing with the stigma of family members being sick or dead due to HIV/AIDS (Campbell *et al.* 2012); the lack of grief support (Pillay 2012); shortage of resources (Seckinelgin 2007); increased risk of starvation and malnutrition (Madhavan & Townsend 2007); increased school absenteeism and withdrawal (Cluver *et al.* 2012); poor school performance (Guo, Li & Sherr 2012); inadequate access to medical care (Skovdal & Daniel 2012) and the sexual exploitation of girls (Pillay 2012). Several South African studies on CHH have not only corroborated the challenges mentioned but may also have expanded the body of knowledge, especially in terms of the educational, psychological and social challenges that children from CHH are confronted with on a daily basis (Leatham 2005; Pillay & Nesengani 2006).

The challenges experienced by children in CHH clearly reflect their social disempowerment and devastating experiences of

poverty, which are further exacerbated by the lack of adequate social support from their families and communities (Van Dijk & Van Driel 2012). While much focus has been given to the challenges of CHH, one should also be cognisant of the fact that there are several children in such households who display strong resilience (Lethale & Pillay 2013), so one should be aware of the danger of limiting one's perceptions of these children as being only vulnerable (Kessi 2011; Meintjes & Giese 2006). Such perceptions lead to sensitive debates among researchers as to whether the concept of CHH could actually be detrimental to children. For example, Cheney (2010) argues that viewing children from CHH as vulnerable may unintentionally create a sense of dependency and entitlement for relief aid to address the arising pathology. This may actually inhibit the design and implementation of culturally relevant programmes that could enhance the strengths and well-being of the children. Another view may emphasise the vulnerability of such children, arguing that not doing so could lead to undermining and minimising the plight of CHH. Arguments such as these certainly indicate a need for the problematisation of CHH.

Theoretical perspectives of the study

In problematising CHH, the author chose two different theoretical perspectives which he believed would add value in reflecting the contestation over the use of CHH as a concept. Paulo Freire's (1972; 1995) theory on the pedagogy of the oppressed views problematisation as a 'strategy for developing a critical consciousness' (Montero & Sonn 2009:80) directed at challenging so-called truths about oppressed people. Inevitably, one would contend that, in problematising CHH, Freire would develop a strategy for making society critically conscious about CHH. He would probably argue that the 'truths' about CHH would emanate from systemic oppression that leaves children from CHH powerless. On the contrary, Foucault's (1977) theory of power relations challenges the notion that power is oppression. Gaventa aptly sums up Foucault's notion of power as diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them (2003:1).

In the case of CHH, one would interpret this to mean that children are not powerless because they have the ability to be social agents in changing their social environments and life circumstances. Foucault (1977) first encourages us to think about CHH problematically. Deacon (2000:127) notes that the intention is not to obtain one correct solution to a problem, but rather to 'examine how it is questioned, analysed, classified and regulated at specific times and under specific circumstances'. Secondly, Foucault's (1985) focus will be on questioning and analysing CHH at specific times and in context to understand how it became a problem. This involves compiling a history of the truth or the realities of CHH, based on how it is intellectualised and reflected upon.

Taking the above theories into consideration, the author puts CHH forward as a problem in such a way that it allows for 'new viewpoints, consciousness, reflection, hope, and action

to emerge' (Crotty 1998:155). Problematising entails critical scrutiny, even of one's own thinking (Bacchi 2009; 2011; Flynn 2005; Osborne 2003). Hence, the purpose of this study was to problematise CHH in South Africa.

Research methodology

Research design

A qualitative research design was utilised in this study since it was found to be the most appropriate for probing the views of the different participants about the connotations of the term 'child-headed households'. Several writers have indicated that qualitative research would be more feasible for in-depth probing (Bless & Higson-Smith 1995; Krefting 1991; Merriam 1998; 2002). Also, Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004) note that a qualitative research design is more suitable for research that is explorative, descriptive and contextual in nature. This study was explorative in that it aimed at obtaining the views of participants on problematising the use of the concept 'child-headed households'. A descriptive account of the views articulated by the various participants are presented in relation to their work contexts.

Sample

Participants who met the following criteria were purposively selected for this study: they had to have at least 3 years of experience working with orphans and vulnerable children; have some knowledge of CHHs; and have a basic understanding of government policies in relation to children, especially those who were most vulnerable. Participants were associated with various organisation representatives of universities, government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). While most of the participants were academics, others were directors, policy analysts, psychologists and postgraduate students (Table 1).

Data collection

Data were collected either through a questionnaire that was disseminated via email to the identified child experts, or

through a telephonic interview. Face-to-face individual interviews were not possible as some participants were located in provinces other than Gauteng, and many of them had busy schedules. Fourteen of the participants completed the questionnaire and emailed it to the researcher. Two participants preferred a telephonic discussion because they felt that it enabled them to better explain their views. As the aim of the study was to problematise the concept 'child-headed households', the questionnaire was directed at obtaining the participants' views on the use of this concept, and the implications of using this concept or changing it to another, more 'acceptable', one.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) measures to ensure trustworthiness were utilised in this study, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was established by virtue of the author's experience as a researcher and an educational psychologist working with orphans and vulnerable children. The use of verbatim quotes from the data collected allows for transferability of the study. Dependability was achieved through a thorough description of the research methodology. To ensure confirmability, peers working with orphans and vulnerable children were invited to examine the data collected.

Ethical measures

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the university in which the researcher is employed granted approval for the study. All participants were fully aware that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without penalty (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). To maintain confidentiality neither the names of participants nor the organisations they belong to are mentioned in the study.

Data analysis

Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004) pointed out that content analysis is more appropriate for qualitative research.

TABLE 1: Profile of participants.

Participant	Occupation/Organisation	Gender	Race
1. Lebo	Academic	Male	Black people
2. Jane	Academic	Female	White people
3. Suri	Academic	Female	Indian
4. Collin	Academic	Male	White people
5. Carol	Academic	Female	White people
6. Gert	Academic	Male	White people
7. Alvin	Foreign Academic	Male	Black people
8. Andrew	Policy Analyst/UNICEF	Male	White people
9. Eddy	Director/GDE	Male	Mixed Race
10. Abigail	Director/NGO	Female	White people
11. Jill	Director/NGO	Female	White people
12. Vuyo	Senior Manager/NGO	Male	Black people
13. Sam	Psychologist	Male	White people
14. Karusha	Director school Psychological Services	Female	Indian
15. Anne	Psychologist	Female	Black people
16. Rene	Postgraduate student	Female	Black people

Source: Author's own work

Taking this point into consideration, the author used Merriam's (1998; 2002) methods of content analysis as a means of analysing the data that was collected from the participants involved in the study. The responses of the participants in each questionnaire, as well as the transcripts of those interviewed, were systematically read to identify repetitive words and thoughts that contributed to the problematising of CHH.

Findings

Aligned to the main research questions that were posed to the participants, the findings focus on three critical areas, namely their views reflecting the appropriate use of the term CHH, its inappropriate use and the implications for the use of other terms. These themes are presented below in the actual words of the participants, and then followed by a discussion which is linked to literature and theories highlighted in this article.

Appropriate use of the concept of child-headed households

Several participants pointed out that the term CHH is widely recognised and should not be changed. For example, Jane, who is an expert on children's rights and has represented South Africa in numerous international panels and structures stated:

'The term child-headed household has already received widespread acknowledgement (including in the CRC Committee's general comment no. 3 on HIV/AIDS and the rights of the child of 2003), that is at the international law level.' (Jane)

Furthermore, this participant pointed out that:

'moving away from this accepted term carries risks.' (Jane)

Jane's viewpoint was supported by Andrew, who pointed out that the term 'CHH is legally recognised in Section 137 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005'. He added that there was much discussion around this term before consensus was reached on its use. Collin also confirmed this view by emphasising the need to view CHH within the legal framework because 'that's where the support and money might be. Be careful to move away from mainstream concepts'.

Jodine concurred with the view that the term CHH should be maintained because it had been seriously debated in Parliament, saying, 'I was part of the group that spent hours in Parliament debating amendments to the Children's Act'. Furthermore, she pointed out that there are positive connotations to the use of CHH as it makes the point that children 'want to live together as siblings due to multiple losses of relationships and a strong need to maintain sibling bonds'. Jodine added that 'if the children are removed from their home, they tend to lose their home and possessions that are not moved with them to family/neighbours/other persons in their community who just take over the homestead'. Another participant, Abigail, noted that CHH

was positive to her as 'it indicates that the little family unit is together, that is, the children have not been separated and there is a level of resilience'.

Several of the participants found the term CHH acceptable because it depicts the reality of the situation in current South African society. For example, Lebo stated that:

'CHH speaks of the truth of the matter and we need to confront it as such ... It is an unfortunate situation and we should avoid superficialising it by giving it another term. I feel that the phrase should remain as it is.'

Anne felt that the term CHH enables the child to 'experience a sense of authority in leading the house without the constant guidance from the parent ... the title may make the child to [*sic*] feel more independent'. Sam endorsed this view, saying that 'for a child to be able to support other children, with all the responsibilities that that entails, speaks volumes about the resilient nature of children, and the untapped potential that is often hidden within'.

Karusha stated:

'For me it is identifying the leadership in the home – this in itself can be empowering. The term alone does not say anything about level of functionality. The mere term does not promote any judgment of failure or deficiency. It promotes a response of acknowledging support is needed, that it can exist successfully rather than a rescue or dissolving the situation as soon as possible.'

Karusha viewed the term positively because 'all three words in the term for me suggests what is natural, a social construct such as families, viz. "a child," "a head" and "household."' Generally none of these words are perceived as something negative within a family'. It was also pointed out by Alvin that CHH is all-encompassing of the variations involved in child-headed households, viz. parents are present but are ill and the child is heading the home, parents are present but not fulfilling their duties – child forced to assume parent role, for example, drinking/drugging parents; teenage parents running a home and still attending school/or working; or parents are dead and the child takes over the household (Alvin).

Inappropriate use of the term child-headed households

While there was great support for the use of the term CHH, some of the participants pointed out possible difficulties in its use. Andrew stated, 'The only bit of problem with the term CHH is that it might be labelling a household'. Vuyo concurred, saying, 'My view is that its label emphasises the stigmatisation of children'. Some participants felt that the term CHH could lead to the exploitation and violation of children because it becomes obvious that there is no adult supervision in such homes (Eddy). It 'shouts vulnerability and no protection as it very definitely states that there is no adult present' (Abigail). She also noted that the concept may have negative ripple effects in terms of implications related to 'the gaps, shortfalls, deprivation, lack of security (all types),

vulnerability, etc.'. Gert was against the use of CHH because he believed it to be non-descriptive in that it does not give a clear indication of the head or leader in the family, and it does not say anything about parents. Anne noted that the negative implication of CHH is that:

'The title on its own may make the child to [sic] become depressed and feel abandoned in a sense that they are all by themselves due to the title as it is child centred. Children may develop a poor and negative self- concept, most specifically poor self-image as they feel different from children who are living with both parents, they may experience a gap that they are identified as leading their homes as a result of parent involvement.'

Rene also felt that CHH 'denotes sadness as children who have become head of households have placed potential goals such as education, social life, and personal time aside by focusing on caring for the rest of the family members'.

Use of other titles

An overwhelming majority of participants (98%) found the term CHH to be acceptable. There were only two participants who did not approve of this term for some of the reasons noted above. One of them, Gert, suggested the use of the term 'unparented families' instead of CHH. He believed that this title reduces the vulnerability and exploitation of children from these households because it implies that parents are not there for whatever reasons, but it does not necessarily mean that there are no other adults in the household. The other participant who disapproved of the term CHH, Vuyo, suggested the term 'child champions' should be used instead, since these children 'push through the pain until they find their stride'.

There were some participants who made suggestions of other titles even though they were in full support of CHH. For example, Abigail suggested the use of 'independent young households/homes'. For her, this title 'allows for a level of pride in intimating that 'I am coping' in general conversations'. She also pointed out, however, that this title could 'create a level of stigmatisation' and that the word 'independent' should not be 'misread, allowing the powers that be to feel that no interventions are needed'. Another participant, Anne, suggested the use of 'minor-based homes' because 'it wouldn't make the children feel very bad about themselves in a sense of revealing their identity in a broader way'. Sam concurred with this: 'If a 'child' is seen as disempowering, then perhaps 'minor-led family' will be more appropriate'. He indicated that, for him, 'the word "family" has connotations of loyalty and support that "home" does not'. Rene also supported the idea of 'child-headed families' which she believes prevents 'social stratification and separation of children from the rest of the members and institutions in society. The concept also demonstrates that children are not alone within their living environment, protecting them from potential criminal activity and social discrimination'.

Implications of using other titles

The first implication is that it will be confusing for many of the people and organisations working with orphans and

vulnerable children (Andrew). As indicated earlier, CHH is an internationally accepted term in all of the legal instruments that focus on children's rights and issues, so changing the term now may negatively impact on the work done by the numerous people and organisations in South Africa that have driven the concerns of children at all levels.

Secondly, it must be noted that 'there will always be pros and cons to whatever terms we use' (Karusha). For example, Jane suggested, 'a term such as "parentless homes" seems just as stigmatising and does not have positive connotations of children's agency and choice, which child headed households have'. Alvin added to the notion of 'parentless homes' by claiming that it 'is bankrupt in privileging parents unnecessarily given that over 70% of African children live with others than a parent [*with extended family or family acquaintance*]'. Jane concurred that 'parentless homes can be seriously misunderstood and there are large numbers of children who are cared for by adults in parentless homes – older siblings, grannies, etc. Parent could be interpreted/misinterpreted literally'. As such, she added that 'the problem is not in the terminology, it is ignorance as to how this is understood'.

Thirdly, one should be careful of terminology that 'does not acknowledge the leadership role that a child takes on' (Suri). Fourthly, one must be careful of terms that 'include social separation and stratification of learners' that increases the risk of children being exposed to criminal activities and negative peer influence (Anne).

Discussion

An overwhelming majority of participants involved in this study indicated their support for the use of the term CHH. In problematising CHH, however, the researcher's intention was not to determine how many people saw it as right or wrong but to question and analyse its use as postulated by Freire (1972) and Foucault (1977). More so, the intention was to create a critical consciousness of CHH in society, as Freire (1972) would advocate. He would insist that we uncover the 'truths' about CHH and Foucault (1985) would go even further by encouraging one to get to the 'history of truth' about CHH. The responses of most participants clearly indicate a critical consciousness about the concept CHH. Those who were familiar with the legal instruments and policy documents around orphans and vulnerable children advised that CHH is an internationally accepted phenomenon and should not be changed because it may have negative repercussions in terms of the recognition of such children and the support and care that should be administered to them. It is a concept that was extensively debated in government structures and it was derived through a democratic consensual process.

Reflecting on Freire (1972) and Foucault's (1977) 'truths' about a phenomenon, one would contend that this was conspicuous in the findings, especially when participants noted that the truth of the matter is that CHH is a reality in

South Africa and it should be dealt with as such. It should not be called anything else except for exactly what it is, so there is no danger of obscuring or shifting the responsibility of dealing with CHH. The truth, as Freire (1972; 1995) would see it, is that CHH emanates from the oppression and discrimination that exists in society that consistently reinforces the status quo of the poor.

Inevitably, in South African society, one would see people from poor communities constantly exposed to deprived environmental circumstances, often characterised by economic hardship, unemployment, food insecurity, communicable diseases, poor quality education and much more. Inadvertently, all of these characteristics contribute to the escalating number of CHH. Taking the writings of Freire and Foucault into consideration, one may then argue that by only treating the plight of CHH, one may actually be treating the symptom and not the real problem. While one would expect Freire to support all interventions with CHH, he most likely would emphasise systemic interventions that tackle the root of oppression and discrimination of CHH. Hence, government policies and systems need to be structurally and strategically directed at poverty reduction and empowerment of the poor. A substantial amount of research has shown that many children from poor families have inferior education (Mu oz 2012), poor health care (Huston 2011), and fewer job opportunities when they become adults (Holzer *et al.* 2007). Such research further emphasises the need for government intervention in the early education and care of children.

Foucault (1977), on the other hand, will argue that power lies everywhere in society so children from CHH should also have the power to change their lives. This argument resonates well with the view that children should be active participants in decisions taken about their welfare, as pointed out by the participants in this study as well as the literature reviewed. Often children are perceived as incompetent and immature to make decisions about themselves, but Maree (2012) pointed out that adults may actually be the incompetent ones in understanding children's expressions. Taking both Freire and Foucault's theories into consideration, the author advocates that there should not be a choice of which one is more appropriate to the context of CHH. The author postulates that there is a place for both theories because there is a definite need for government interventions, as Freire would suggest, and simultaneously there is a need for recognising the power of children from CHH to be active agents in improving their lives in their interaction with their social environments, as Foucault would advocate.

Similar arguments were noted by previous studies. Many of the participants in this study pointed out that any term used is bound to have some negative connotations as in the use of CHH, but they believed that the benefits of this particular term far outweighed the harms, making it ethically viable. The benefits for using the term CHH have been well articulated by participants in this study, namely, it raises critical consciousness of CHH, exposes the 'truths' about CHH and opens ideas towards intervention and support.

Conclusion: Children's participation in early childhood interventions

In this article, CHH is problematised, that is, it has been identified as a problem that needs to be given attention even though there are diverse views about it. This addresses the first question mentioned in the Introduction to this article, that is: 'Is it a problem?'

In response to the second question: 'To whom is it a problem?' the participants in this study make it clear that it is a problem for children in CHH, government and South African society as a whole. Essentially, the truths about CHH need to be known in such a way that they are embedded in the social consciousness of society. Children from CHH face the challenges of being disadvantaged, marginalised and discriminated against in terms of their human rights and dignity by virtue of not having parents or adult caregivers. It has already been noted that the lives of these children are characterised by poverty, deprivation, vulnerability and the lack of opportunities in virtually all areas (Pillay 2011; 2012; 2014a; Schenk & Williamson 2005; Skanfors 2009).

This brings the author to the last question: 'Can it be solved?' For solutions to materialise, the author points out that interventions for, and with, such children should commence during their early years of development (Bruder 2010). Usually such interventions are conducted with children who encounter biological and environmental risks, and, as noted earlier, children from CHH certainly experience such risks. Early childhood interventions include a wide range of programmes, interventions and support, such as 'therapy, counselling, service planning and coordination, assistance and support to access services such as kindergarten and child care' (KPMG 2014:3). Parenting programmes for child-heads and play groups for the young to facilitate cognitive, emotional and social development should be encouraged, particularly for CHH. The establishment of child and family centres, where all necessary services could be accessed by families at a single stop, would certainly be very useful for CHH (KPMG 2014).

Ultimately, all interventions should be directed at increasing the benefits and reducing the harm to children in CHH (Balen *et al.* 2006; Cocks 2006; Danby & Farrell 2004; Dockett & Perry 2007; Pillay 2014b). The success of early childhood interventions has been illustrated in numerous studies that have indicated improved academic success, better social relationships and better health and well-being of children as they grow older (Anderson *et al.* 2003; Reynolds *et al.* 2001). Undoubtedly one would expect the same in the case of CHH. For the problem of CHH to be solved, Freire (1972) would emphasise the involvement of government, community and religious organisations in supporting children from CHH, in liberating them from their oppressive circumstances and providing them with opportunities for economic growth in order to reduce the ill effects of poverty. Foucault (1977), however, would maintain that the power of such children to negotiate and facilitate positive changes in their social

environments must be recognised and encouraged at all times. In conclusion, it is imperative to note that for the problem of CHH to be solved, government and all relevant stakeholders must take joint responsibility to support CHH. More importantly, the power of children from CHH to be involved in the decisions that affect their social environments and lives must be considered.

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Competing interests

The author declares that he or she has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him or her in writing this article.

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