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Teachers and Inclusive Practices Against Bullying: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The study investigates inclusivity practices and bullying management in a group of teachers. The study involved 18 volunteer teachers from upper secondary school in Italy (12 of them were women). They ranged in age from 33 to 66 years of age ($M = 44.53$). A semi-structured interview was adopted to explore their knowledge on inclusivity within teaching interventions or programmes, and experiences about bullying management. Data were collected using online interviews through specific platform such as Zoom, Skype, and Google Meet. The interviews were carried out between April 2020 and October 2020 in the participant's native language. Using thematic analysis, we identified themes within individuals' brief narratives. Analysis was inductive and involved line-by-line coding with codes deriving from brief narratives. Four major themes emerged: (1) Contact with the phenomenon of bullying (i.e., direct experience versus lack of experience); (2) Educational-didactic practices (i.e., lack of specific knowledge regarding educational-didactic practices versus attempted solutions); (3) Awareness of the bullying phenomenon and its effects on students; (4) Avoidance solutions of topics concerning bullying incidents (i.e., disengagement and disconfirmation responses). Theoretical and psycho-educational implications are discussed.

Keywords Bullying · Teachers · Education · Interview · Rounded theory

Highlights

- The study suggests some critical issues in teacher training.
- This study suggests how sometimes bullying is not considered by teachers in a proper way.
- These findings highlight how teachers should apply critical awareness to their inclusivity practices, starting with a revision of educational curricula, and appropriate training.

School bullying is a major phenomenon across the world (Due et al., 2009). A higher percentage of male compared to female pupils reported being physically bullied (6% versus 4%), whereas a higher percentage of female students compared to male students reported being the targets of rumors (18% vs. 9%) and being excluded from activities on purpose (7% versus 4%). (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Bullying is defined as harmful behavior (i.e., physical, verbal, or indirect) by a person or a group that occurs repeatedly over time against a less powerful person as a target or victim (Salmivalli & Peets, 2018). Bullying between students based on ethnic background is very common, i.e., studies showed a high prevalence of bullying behaviours at school due to ethnic minority belonging (Kisfalusi et al., 2020; Kilpatrick et al., 2003). Moreover, it spreads because socio-community strategies are not promoted to counter bullying and victimization (Palladino et al., 2020; Longobardi et al., 2018). Aside from ethnic intimidation, another form of bullying is the bullying rooted in homophobia. The prevalence of homophobic bullying is relevant in all countries worldwide and in all

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social classes, as evidenced by previous studies in the USA and Europe in which it has been estimated that between 45 and 92% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth have been victims of homophobic insults (e.g., Albaladejo-Blázquez et al., 2019). Homophobic bullying is a specific form of bullying behaviour motivated by homophobia and directed towards students who identify themselves as or who are perceived as (but do not necessarily identify as) lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Rivers, 2011). The victimization of young people of sexual minorities negatively affects their mental health and academic performance, which may affect the victims even for decades, through memories of traumatic experiences (Rodríguez-Hidalgo & Hurtado-Mellado, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2010).

Adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) often face significant academic problems in school and adjustment difficulties (Kosciw et al., 2013). Despite gender identity not being a characteristic that in itself places students at risk for negative outcomes, different studies showed that LGBT youth are most often victims of discrimination, harassment, bullying that they experience from peers and adults at school in response to their sexual orientation or gender expression (McGuire et al., 2010).

In a social support theoretical framework, teachers are viewed as playing an important role in buffering the negative effects of school climate; they may do this by intervening when bullying or harassment occurs, inculcating a culture of inclusion and acceptance of LGBT students, and helping to create a safe learning environment (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Education, with its didactic actions, is a crucial institution and academic achievement is especially important among immigrants and other minorities as a path to upward mobility and other opportunities in life. Education also provides the knowledge, values, and skills needed by a developed country's workforce (Agirdag et al., 2014). Teacher responses to bullying incidents are critical to addressing bullying in schools (Demol et al., 2020). However, teachers often lack sufficient knowledge of the phenomenon and consequently do not know how to intervene (Lester et al., 2018; Dake et al., 2003).

The Key-Role of Teachers in School Bullying

Besides Nordic countries, it is only during the past decades that there has been a growing awareness of bullying in Europe and elsewhere (O'Moore, 2000). The prevalent misconception among adults that bullying is a normal phase of development needs to be challenged. It is especially important for teachers that they understand what bullying is and its different forms, so they will then be able to identify it and deal with it in an appropriate manner (D'Urso et al., 2017; Dèttore et al., 2014). There is evidence that teachers tend to underestimate the level of bullying among school children (e.g., O'Moore, 2000). Furthermore, the results of a nationwide study on bullying in Irish schools showed that there are teachers who do not recognize bullying as a problem (O'Moore, 2000).

The literature indicated how teachers often do not notice or respond to incidents of bullying (Yoon et al., 2016). Moreover, teachers often hold faulty beliefs about bullying, such as, "helping victims will make bullying worse" and "victims are bullied because they did something to provoke the bully" (Horne et al., 2004). While bullying in schools has begun to receive attention, little is known about the relationship between classroom management and bullying in the classroom. Research from several fields suggests that several variables conspire to create environments where bullying is more likely to occur. These variables include harsh and punitive discipline methods, lower-quality classroom instruction, disorganized classroom and school settings, and student social structures characterized by antisocial behaviours (Allen, 2010).

Teachers' response to bullying significantly varies, and their action in a bullying situation is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by many different factors. Existing studies suggest that teachers' own beliefs and attitudes are involved in the process of evaluating a bullying situation (Yoon et al., 2016). Yoon and colleagues (2016) found that teachers were more likely to discipline bullies and to teach victims prosocial skills in physical bullying as opposed to relational or verbal. Moreover, teachers were generally less likely to discipline bullies of a different ethnicity than their own and more willing to discipline victims if their gender matched the gender of victims (Yoon, 2004). The study conducted by Yoon (2004) showed how self-efficacy of teachers in behavioural management, empathy toward victims, and perceived seriousness of bullying situations are important factors in predicting the likelihood of intervention by teachers in response to students' bullying behaviours. In addition, teachers often refuse to talk about diversity topics in their lessons, and even ignore any bullying against ethnic or homophobic minorities (D'Urso & Petruccelli, 2021; Msibi, 2012; D'Urso et al., 2017).

Teachers may fail to intervene in bullying incidents for different reasons: because they are afraid to get involved; because they believe it is not their responsibility (particularly in extreme situations involving violence) or simply because they are not informed by students and do not perceive the bullying (Ellis & Shute, 2007). A study examined teachers' perceptions and practices concerning school bullying prevention activities and showed that 86.3% of teachers had serious talks with both the bully and victim, 31.7% of teachers set aside classroom time to discuss

bullying, 31.2% involved students in creating classroom rules against bullying. This study showed that teachers perceived post-bullying activities as the most effective means of reducing bullying problems, followed by improved student supervision, and by environmental bullying prevention activities (Dake et al., 2003).

The Kiva programme is one of the most effective antibullying programs to implement prosocial attitudes and improve the school climate in motivational and relational terms, through the participation of all the actors of the educational scene (Garandeau et al., 2014). In fact, the literature has shown how this program increased empathy among peers, enhanced children's antibullying attitudes, increased their ability to protect victims, and decreased reinforcing and assisting the bully (Kärnä et al., 2011). It was also found to have a significant impact on children's perceptions of their teachers' attitudes and their ability to reduce bullying, as well as teachers' self-evaluation of their competence to reduce bullying (Ahtola et al., 2012; Veenstra et al., 2014).

The Current Study

This study wants to investigate how teachers manage diversity in the classroom; their knowledges about practices that facilitate inclusive and prosocial attitudes among peers, also considering their personal experience. Knowing the teachers' point of view, following an inclusive school model that invites the active participation of all the actors of the educational scene, is the starting point for implementing interventions. In fact, the literature suggested how prejudices, with forms of disengagement or negative feelings, may impede the actions of teachers (Dessel, 2010; D'Urso & Symonds, 2021), and how teachers sometimes are not able to manage bullying in their classroom (e.g., D'Urso et al., 2017). According with Higgins's (1989) theory, prejudices and false beliefs can block the need for teachers to educate themselves on issues they pretend not to see, even if they exist and need to be addressed. In other words, negative attitudes towards sexual and ethnic minorities can derive from an unclear perception of the representations of social reality and, consequently, of didactic actions, as well as from cognitive and social mechanisms that modulate the person's own action. The research question that drives the study is: what are the strengths and weaknesses of teachers in identifying and managing bullying and its forms (ethnic and homophobic)? The rationale of this study is to add more insight into how risk factors related to teaching actions can be ameliorated, and protective factors be amplified, by providing a better understanding of the techniques that have been applied to reduce bullying and victimization in schools.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study involved 18 volunteer teachers from the upper secondary school in Italy (50% from the North). They ranged in age from 33 to 66 years of age (M = 44.53, SD = 9.92), and 12 of them were females (66.7%). Potential participants were identified and invited to take part in the study. All teachers hold a degree, and they have taught for at least 8 years. All teachers have teaching certifications to teach their own subject. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards and were approved by the ethic committee of Social and Forensic Psychology Academy (Rome). An anonymous link containing the description of the study objective and its purposes for the advancement of scientific knowledge on inclusive teaching methodologies was sent to those who accepted to participate in the study. Eighteen teachers at upper secondary school agreed to participate in the study. Teachers were interviewed online, via Zoom and/or other platforms, and transcribed omitting sensitive data. In fact, it was not possible to trace the identity of participants.

Measures

Interview

A semi-structured interview protocol was adopted to explore the knowledge on inclusive teaching methodologies and their experiences about bullying phenomenon. Questions about experiences on homophobic and ethnic bullying and their teaching career knowledge about inclusive strategies were asked. Specifically, the interview schedule was divided into three sections relating to specific experiences: (a) their direct knowledge of bullying phenomena and ways to deal with it within the classroom (examples of questions were: Have you ever had or become aware of school situations of homophobic bullying and/or bullying of foreign minors? If yes, how was the matter handled? Do you think the two forms of bullying are the same?); (b) their opinion on the usefulness of forms of inclusive education (examples of questions were: Do you think that in schools it is useful to use forms of teaching aimed at implementing inclusive attitudes towards people of different ethnic groups and towards gay and lesbian people? Why? Do you think there is a difference between the two forms of teaching? If yes, which ones?); (c) knowledge and application of inclusive teaching methodologies (examples of questions were: Do you know educational practices in this regard? Do

you put them into practice? Do you know anyone who does? How are these topics addressed?).

Data Collection

Data were collected using online interviews through specific platform such as Zoom, Skype and Google Meet. The interviews were carried out between April 2020 and October 2020 in the participant's native language. During the interview we used additional prompts to encourage the in-depth description of the lived experience, such as questions which sought greater detail on topics already spoken about or questions aimed at exploring the issues relating to bullying phenomena and teaching strategies. Interviews lasted between 20 min and 1 h, with an average length of 40 min. The interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Verbatim transcription refers to the word-for-word reproduction of verbal data, where the written words are an exact replication of the audiotaped words (Poland, 1995). Quotations reported here were translated into English.

Data Analysis

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into ATLAS.ti (Version 8), a research software program designed to assists in the coding and retrieval of qualitative data. In line with the Grounded Theory perspective (Chun Tie et al., 2019), a thematic analysis was carried out without a predetermined coding scheme. The words of the participants will bring out the recurring themes. Without generalizations, the interviews will be examined at the content level, through open and selective coding, to bring out the general and superordinate themes in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of the school system on the issues of the questions. They represent the general assumptions that will then body the theoretical conceptualization. An approach to analysis will be used as free as possible from theoretical prestructuring. Using thematic analysis, we identified themes within individuals' brief narratives. Analysis was inductive and involved line-by-line coding with codes deriving from brief narratives. A three-step coding procedure was used (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the first step, the words used by participants were considered and used to generate meanings. In step 2, data were aggregated to identify the emerging codes and categories. In step 3, theoretical coding was applied to explore relationships between categories. Theoretical coding occurs at the conceptual level, merging the substantive codes and categories together into a more general and central theme (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). All interviews were double coded and the coders (by two authors of this paper: both are researchers in psychology and one of them is also a school

psychologist) met to discuss codes and their definitions. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached.

Results

Four major themes emerged during the interviews: (1) Contact with the phenomenon of bullying (direct experience versus lack of experience); (2) Educational-didactic practices (lack of specific knowledge regarding educational-didactic practices versus attempted solutions; (3) Awareness of the bullying phenomenon and its effects on students; (4) Avoidance of the proposed topics (disengagement responses and disconfirmation responses). The themes are summarized in Fig. 1.

Contact with the Phenomenon of Bullying (Direct Experience versus Lack of Experience)

Most participants (specifically, 14 teachers out of 18) declared that they had no direct experience with the bullying phenomena that were the subject of our study. Below are some significant statements:

> "No, I've never seen any particular situation" (interview 1).

> "It has never happened to hear about bullying problems" (interview 4).

> "Absolutely not. I have never seen such phenomena in my classes " (interviews 8 and 9)
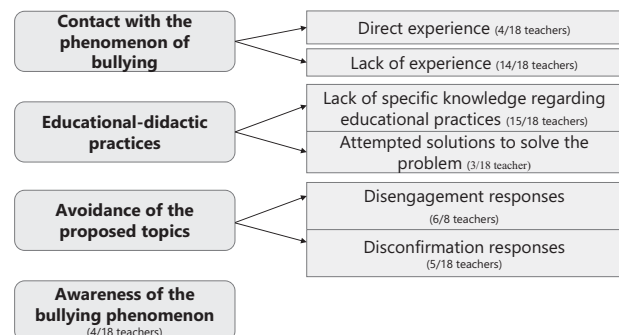
> "Not directly" (interview 11).

Fig. 1 Themes

"No, no such situations have happened" (interview 10).

Only four teachers reported having direct experience of the phenomena within their classrooms, as follows:

"Yes, I observed both phenomena in my class" (interview 7).

"Yes, during my career I have witnessed bullying against foreigners" (interview 15).

"Yes, specifically, the phenomenon concerned bullying statements in the classroom" (interview17).

"To be honest, I have unfortunately witnessed bullying, but in all cases they were aimed at Italian (non-homosexual) boys. I believe that what happened was very serious, as it would have been if on the other side there had been a homosexual or foreign student" (interview 18).

Educational-Didactic Practices (Lack of Specific Knowledge Regarding Educational-Didactic Practices versus Attempted Solutions)

Most teachers (15 participants out of 18) highlighted the lack of specific knowledge of inclusive good practices, thus signal the need to receive specific training in this regard. Some statements were:

"I believe that these interventions would be among the special educational needs, inclusive teaching already exists" (interview 16).

"As far as gay / lesbian students are concerned, there are no educational practices for inclusion. Usually, it is the religion teachers and sometimes the Italian teachers who talk about these particular situations with the students in the classrooms" (interview 4).

"They are both important. However, for students of different ethnic backgrounds it is necessary to act towards them in didactic terms, while for gays/ lesbians it is necessary to act in educational terms as towards all students " (interview 9).

"I don't know of any educational practice, nor do I know anyone who does it" (interview 17).

"No, as I said I do not know targeted educational practices" (interview 18).

Only 3 of them reported having implemented some solutions, always declaring the absence of specific training in this regard.

"The school has always collaborated with the territorial SERT (i.e., Public Addictions Centre) and its experts, which protects the special educational needs, organizes film screenings and conferences with experts on various types of diversity. All teachers take inspiration from these activities to organize their teaching" (1 interview).

Always the first interviewee continued:

"I have often used the English language (but I am a teacher of Mathematics) to deal with various topics, so that everyone can use a language other than their mother tongue" *"I recommend to students rather mature cultural circles that deal in an open, sensitive, and truthful way with these issues, I give them suggestions or tell them about my experiences with so-called "different" people, the evenings, the discussions, all things that all individuals have in common… there is no real difference"* (interview 10).

"I think that in the classroom we must teach, first of all, that every form of diversity is to be considered as an enormous wealth and not as a limit. Regarding the inclusiveness of people of different ethnicities (as well as activities for linguistic improvement, which could be the first tool to promote integration in a class group), gays or lesbians, I would propose activities, supported by videos or interviews, that favor debate and exchange of ideas" (interview 17).

Awareness of the Phenomenon and its Effects on Students

It seems useful to report this theme that emerged in 4 teachers out of 18. They seem to agree with the common matrix of these phenomena and their potential deleterious effects on growing students.

"I think that the forms of bullying both regarding skin colour and sexual orientation create immense and deep wounds, so I don't think there are differences" (interview 1).

"The two forms of bullying are not similar, but the underlying problem is similar, namely the fear and non-acceptance of diversity seen as a threat" (interview 7).

"However, I believe that in every form of bullying there is an identical matrix: discriminating against the "different" to hide one's weaknesses" (Interview 9).

"I honestly think that any form of bullying is terrible, regardless of the victim's origin or sexual orientation" (interview 18).

Avoidance of the Proposed Topics (Disengagement Responses and Disconfirmation Responses)

Avoidance question: disengagement responses

Some answers that were provided by 6 teachers out of 18 deserve attention. Here are the most significant:

"Every day I happen to hear some pupils (especially men) who show a repulsion towards gays or lesbians, saying that even in the family it is the same" (Interview 11).

"Foreigners are often marginalized but, at times, they isolate themselves" (interview 1).

"With regard to homophobic bullying it must be said that the children themselves sometimes hide their situation, so even the related problems very often do not reach the teachers" (interview 4).

Avoidance question: Disconfirmation responses

Five out of 18 teachers expressed an attitude of disconfirmation (e.g., they answered avoiding the question about bullying management going to another area) with respect to the issues dealt with which it seems useful to point out as follows:

"For students of different ethnic backgrounds there is certainly a need for targeted teaching, especially linked to the teaching of the language and culture of the host nation. For gay / lesbian people, I don't think there is a need for personalized teaching" (interview 4).

"The values of the Italian Constitution underline equality and respect. If we follow this vocation, the greatest work is the choice of materials, not the teaching itself" (interview 7).

Discussion

This work identifies several strengths and criticalities of the school system regarding inclusive practices towards minorities. The main result of the study shows that most of the participants stated that they had no direct experience with bullying phenomena and it highlighted the lack of specific knowledge of inclusive good practices. This result suggests the need to implement teacher training regarding inclusion practices due that most of the teachers interviewed reported that they have never had direct experiences with bullying. These results in fact seem to be not in line with the data reported by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica ISTAT (2015)), which show how one out of two children suffers episodes of verbal, psychological and physical violence (although bullying can occur in the classroom and in other places such as schoolyards, corridors, or in cyberspace (cyberbullying)). Consequently, it can happen that teachers declare that they have no experience because they do not notice the phenomenon, or underestimate it (D'Urso et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the lack of knowledge of inclusive practices by teachers could lead many of them not to recognize, minimizing or ignoring bullying episodes. It is important that teachers understand properly what bullying is, the number of forms of bullying, and educational actions to deal with it. In this way, they can identify and respond appropriately to episode of victimization episodes, improving the school climate, that is the relationships between peers, and between teachers and pupils (O'Moore, 2000, O'Moore et al., 1998).

The results suggest how many teachers, due to the lack of specific inclusive education practices, may not feel up to tackling or coping with bullying and, consequently, may not see the problem or deny it to protect themselves from feelings of personal/professional incompetence. In this sense, it is essential to change the way of thinking about teacher training, which must consider teaching good educational practices to combat bullying and protect pupils, helping teachers to feel effective not only from the point of view of transmission teaching skills but also with a view to "education in inclusiveness" (Polat, 2011; Atlas & Pepler, 1998).

Moreover, the study highlights how many teachers are unaware of the consequences of bullying. In fact, only 4 teachers out of 18 know the potential deleterious effects on the psychological health of students. Sometimes teachers do not go beyond the didactic learning relationship, and may fall into the error of not considering how bullying is a phenomenon that occurs in school contexts (Ellis & Shute, 2007), and which can have significant negative effects on all the actors involved, in terms of emotional and social well-being (Allen, 2010; Mishna et al., 2005; Dake et al., 2003). It is also possible that, on the other hand, teachers are aware of the phenomenon, but are unaware of it, thereby minimising its effects (Dèttore et al., 2014). This result, transversally, suggests how necessary an emotional grammar is in the relationships between pupil and teacher.

However, some teachers are aware of how important and complex the bullying phenomenon is and how the common matrix is the non-acceptance of diversity. The choice of included practices and teacher training should start from this awareness or lead towards this awareness. In this direction, inclusion perspective takes on its connotations which must be translated into the promotion of a positive climate in the classroom, through a communication that does not send the wrong messages but rather transmits values of respect and broadens the visions of all the actors in the educational scene (Peetsma et al., 2001; Polat, 2011).

The study suggests how many teachers also try to avoid the problems getting to the heart of the matter by making use of mechanisms of moral disengagement. Avoidance through the use of mechanisms such as the attribution of blame and advantageous comparison can help the person feel better with their conscience and therefore with their role. However, a reflection on the use of these mechanisms can lead to openness and a critical reflection towards some attitudes (D'Urso & Petruccelli, 2021; D'Urso & Symonds, 2021). Furthermore, other teachers show an attitude of disconfirmation, especially towards sexual minorities, which, in an even deeper way than disengagement, can reduce inclusive impulses and consequently not act to promote inclusion. In both cases, avoidance can induce the teacher not to see the dimensions of discomfort that students can sometimes experience. If teachers ignore issues like bullying, the message that gets to the actors involved is that the problem does not exist, especially to the victim, reinforcing the bully (Dèttore et al., 2014).

Although the study highlights relevant situations experienced by the Italian teachers at schools, it must also be considered in the light of the limitations it presents. The number of participants is small and does not allow to generalize the results obtained either to geographic areas or to all teachers. Subsequently, the use of interviews can implement the social desirability of the participants. Future studies could expand the sample, also through other methodological procedures (e.g., implicit tools or self-report questionnaires that also include a questionnaire on social desirability). The study suggests that it is necessary to investigate the tools through a mixed method approach in order not to leave salient aspects, especially from the teachers.

Conclusion

This study highlights how teachers should apply critical awareness to their inclusivity practices, starting with a revision of educational curricula, and appropriate training on issues that are especially important for the socio-emotional development of children and adolescents.

This exploratory study does not want to generalize on the perception of forms of bullying and their management, but wants to raise awareness of these issues. This is essential for new research to be developed to not only prevent but also monitor the actions of teachers, also implementing targeted programs in Italy (e.g., Kiva antibullying program). This study suggests how inclusive action by teachers should create a pluralistic school climate that values diversity in equal dignity, and pedagogical management teaching that favors the establishment of positive relationships, and which counteract prejudices, racism, and discrimination (Zadra, 2014). Furthermore, it seems necessary to define that the actors of inclusion are all the actors that populate the social scene. Teachers often believe that inclusive practices should be addressed to the individual child, forgetting that inclusion is something global that has no ethnicity or orientation. Inclusion becomes a protective factor for those who feel marginalized, because it promotes (should) prosociality in class, respect as well as a fundamental emotional grammar in the relationship between peers. Pretending bullying does not exist means, in fact, abdicating educational responsibility (D'Urso et al., 2017). It means not breaking the vicious cycle in bully-victim relationships. At least, the study highlights how some social resistances and the lack of knowledge of good practices can limit the view of bullying and victimization, thus creating a risk for secondary victimization.

Data availability

Data can be requested directly from the corresponding author.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards and were approved by the ethic committee of Social and Forensic Psychology Academy (Rome).

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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