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Work–Family Conflict and Well-Being Across Europe: The Role of Gender Context

Emma Hagqvist[1] · Katja Gillander Gådin[2] · Mikael Nordenmark[1]

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Abstract This study analysed whether gender context is important to differences in the relationship between work–family conflict (WFC) and well-being across Europe. We hypothesised that in countries that support equality in work life and where norms support women's employment, the relationship between WFC and low well-being is weaker than in countries with less support for gender equality. Cohabiting men and women aged 18–65 years from 25 European countries were selected from the European Social Survey. A multilevel analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between well-being and WFC, and two measurements were used to represent gender context: gender equality in work life and norms regarding women's employment. Contrary to the hypothesis, the results showed that the negative relationship was stronger in countries with high levels of gender equality in work life and support for women's employment than in countries with a relatively low level of gender equality in work life and support for traditional gender relations. The context in which gender is constructed may be important when studying the relationship between WFC and well-being. In addition, emphasis should be placed on policies that equalise both the labour market and the work performed at home.

Keywords Gender context · Europe · Gender relations · Multilevel analysis · Well-being · Work–family conflict

1 Introduction

Today, European men and women juggle many life factors, such as work and family. The concept of work–family interference describes this juggling that occurs on a daily basis. When demands from work life interfere with family life, scholars often describe this

✉ Emma Hagqvist
Emma.Hagqvist@miun.se

[1] Department of Health Sciences, Mid Sweden University, 831 25 Östersund, Sweden

[2] Department of Health Sciences, Mid Sweden University, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden

situation as work–family conflict (WFC) (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). WFC arises from role stress theory, and the argument is that multiple roles from work and family can lead to conflicting demands from the different spheres. The multiple roles compete for individuals' limited resources, creating feelings of strain (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). Individuals increasingly emphasise that to obtain life satisfaction, it is important to have balance between work and family life (Drobnič et al. 2010). It is known that the relationship between balance in life and life satisfaction differs across European countries (Drobnič et al. 2010; Grönlund and Öun 2010; Lunau et al. 2014), but the reasons for these differences are still not well understood (Drobnič 2011), and there is a lack of consensus regarding how the relationship between WFC and well-being is distributed across countries.

The gender context, within which policies and laws are constructed, influences men's and women's opportunities to make choices regarding work and family (Brighouse and Wright Olin 2008). For instance, state financed child care enable mothers to work after having children. Consequently, countries differ in the degree to which women and men participate in work life and child care. Strains from competing demands arise from multiple roles, and there may be context distinctions in individuals' role burdens related to the construction of gender and to women's participation in the labour market (Lewis et al. 2008). The construction of gender and the power structure in gender relation can also contribute to differences in the perception of well-being (Saltonstall 1993). Therefore, it is of interest to study the role of these gender contexts in the relationship between WFC and well-being. Hence, the aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of the relationship between WFC and well-being and to determine whether the context in which gender is constructed contributes to differences in this relationship. This will be achieved via a multilevel analysis of 25 European countries. A multilevel approach is appropriate when examining relationships among variables on both individual and context level and when cases are hierarchically nested. Next, the concepts of gender relations and gender contexts will be discussed, including how policies can influence men's and women's opportunities and capabilities with regard to work and family life.

1.1 Theoretical Background and Previous Research

Work (both in the labour market and in the home) is an arena in which femininity and masculinity are socially constructed and reconstructed (Connell 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987). This situation results in gender-specific work specialisation: housework and caring for the family are perceived as feminine endeavours, while being a breadwinner, earning money and being successful in work life are perceived as masculine (Connell 2009). Time-use statistics confirm this gendered work specialisation: on average, men spend more time on paid work, while women spend more time on unpaid work in the home (Aliaga 2006; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and Eurofound 2014; Hook 2006). European women's employment rates and work times differ across countries, resulting in a difference in the amount of time left for housework and family care (Lewis et al. 2008). In the light of time use research, the assumption is that the gender-specific work specialisation should cause men and women to perceive WFC differently. Furthermore, because women most often bear the main responsibility for housework, the effect of spending time on paid work should be stronger among women than among men. However, previous research show different outcomes: men sometimes report higher levels of WFC and sometimes women (cf. Fahlén 2014; Gutek et al. 1991; Lunau et al. 2014; McGinnity and Calvert 2009). The effect of paid work seems to effect women's level of WFC to a greater deal than men (McGinnity and

Calvert 2009). As the construction of gender differs across countries, the need to affirm masculinity through paid work is less urgent in countries where gender equality is the norm and where income and paid work are less highly valued in general (Evertsson and Nermo 2004; Thébaud 2010). Lunau et al. (2014) suggest that gender differences in level of WFC seems to differ across countries. All in all, this lead to the expectation that the context in which gender relations are constructed is important for level WFC.

One important issue in the public health field is addressing gender inequalities in health by approaching men's and women's unequal life opportunities resulting from political, social and behavioural factors (Annandale and Hunt 2000; Öhman 2008). Hence, gender relations in work specialisation and WFC constitute an important analytical dimension in the study of gender inequalities in well-being. A body of research has connected different health variables to WFC (cf. Artazcoz et al. 2013; Boye 2011; Grönlund and Öun 2010; Hagqvist et al. 2012; Lunau et al. 2014; Strandh and Nordenmark 2006). It is even shown that perceived work stress and WFC are more important to subjective well-being than the actual time spent performing paid and unpaid labour (Drobnič et al. 2010; Hagqvist et al. 2012). In addition, WFC seems to overshadow the positive effects of paid labour on well-being (Boye 2011).

In a gender order, the gender stereotyped expectations and behaviours of men and women also influence how men and women perceive well-being and express health (Connell 2012; Saltonstall 1993). Hence, studying the relationship between WFC and well-being from a gender perspective seems important, and because gender context is relevant to both the perception of well-being and the level of WFC, a gender context comparative approach is needed.

To date, few country-comparative studies of WFC and well-being have been conducted, and to the best of our knowledge, most of these studies used family policy models to compare policy contexts. Artazcoz et al. (2013) show that there are no associations between work and family demands and health in countries in northern and eastern Europe but that such an association does exist in southern and western Europe. Grönlund and Öun (2010) and Lunau et al. (2014) argued and found support for the idea that living in the Nordic countries, which adhere to a dual-earner society, has a buffering effect that reduces the negative relationship between WFC and measures of well-being and life satisfaction. These authors argue that extensive family policies that support both men and women in combining work and family create an environment that reduces both the interference between work and family and the negative relationship between WFC and life satisfaction or well-being. However, both articles analyse differences across countries using policy groups, which obscures some of the nuances within groups (Bergqvist et al. 2013). Hence, in this article, countries will be compared separately to gain a more thoroughly understanding of the mechanism that influences WFC and well-being. Additionally, the focus will not be on family policy models but on gender context, measured as country differences in the level of gender equality in work life and the country's norms regarding women's employment. Hence, we do not study policies and laws per se but the context in which gender relations are influenced by them. The hypothesis is that in countries with higher levels of equality in work life and norms that support women's employment, there is a weaker relationship between WFC and low well-being than in countries with less support for gender equality.

1.2 Gender Context

As warranted above, context seems important for the construction of gender which in turn influences level of WFC and perceptions of well-being. As such, this section will describe different gender contexts and how these context can be important for individuals'

perceptions of WFC. Institutions influence individuals' opportunities and capabilities in regard to work specialisation through the framing of laws and policies (Brighouse and Wright Olin 2008). The state establishes the framework for inclusion and exclusion in society; for example, antidiscrimination laws can regulate women's access to work and their opportunities for equal pay and career advancement. Additionally, policies that support both men's and women's ability to combine work and family life can influence gender equality norms (Connell 2009; Pascall and Lewis 2004). For instance, family-friendly policies that allow both fathers and mothers to stay at home with benefits are important for gender equality (Ray et al. 2009) and can influence attitudes about men as care providers. To accentuate the relationship between the state, policies, the market and gender, countries in Europe have been clustered into groups according to their common characteristics. Most importantly, the clustering of countries distinguishes between policy structures that support women's roles in work life and those that encourage a more conservative structure with women as the main homemaker (Thévenon 2011). Though clusters are not applied in this study the characteristics of the clusters, constructed by Thévenon (2011) describes the different gender contexts that are the focus of this study. The Nordic countries support dual roles among both men and women to a great extent. Women's labour market participation is high, and policies are generous, enabling both men and women to combine work and family. Anglo-Saxon countries lack public support for childcare, relying on the market and kin for such accommodations. In Southern Europe, public support for childcare is low, and entitlements depend on the individual's position in the labour market (Ferrera 1996). Family policies follow conservative values, with men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. The Eastern European countries have experienced a transition towards a market economy in recent decades that has resulted in a move from universal coverage towards means-tested support, resulting in less support for women's labour market participation (Rostgaard 2004). The last cluster comprises the countries in continental European where public support for families is framed by conservative values, and benefits and tax breaks support one parent caring for the children. In sum, policies and values in different contexts support gender equality differently and in this study two measurements are applied as proxies for gender context: level of equality in the labour market and the norms related to women's employment at different levels. Additionally, gender equality norms also shape gendered work specialisation and family roles, and hence the opportunities and expectations in relation to WFC, within a given context (Crompton and Lyonette 2006; Hobson and Fahlén 2009).

2 Methods

This article is based on data from Round 5 of the European Social Survey (ESS), which focuses on family, work and well-being. The ESS is a cross-sectional, cross-country study that aimed to measure differences in social attitudes within Europe. The present study uses data from interviews conducted across 25 European countries (listed in Table 1) in 2010 and 2011. The study respondents were living in a coupled relationship, were working full or part time and were aged between 18 and 65 years, resulting in a sample size of 14,212. Weights were used to account for differences in inclusion probabilities and biases in the sampling design.

Table 1 Overview of the included countries and their respective GGI-E scores and gender-equal norms supporting women's employment

	GGI-E score	Gender norms level
Norway	0.8306	5.89
Sweden	0.7695	6.24
Finland	0.7566	5.84
Lithuania	0.7555	3.51
Denmark	0.7438	6.27
Ireland	0.7409	5.51
Switzerland	0.7267	4.36
Netherlands	0.7230	5.73
Slovenia	0.7229	4.87
United Kingdom	0.7210	4.92
Estonia	0.7193	4.43
Germany	0.7138	4.75
Belgium	0.7097	5.39
Ukraine	0.7074	2.90
Hungary	0.6894	3.25
Bulgaria	0.6843	4.29
Portugal	0.6723	4.23
France	0.6610	5.02
Croatia	0.6606	4.23
Poland	0.6526	4.16
Slovakia	0.6375	4.04
Cyprus	0.6300	3.28
Spain	0.6240	4.99
Greece	0.6209	3.41
Czech Republic	0.6205	4.14

2.1 Statistical Methods

To compare countries, a multilevel linear regression analysis (MLA) (Hox 2002) was performed. The MLA allows the inclusion of measurements on the country level by visualising contextual differences across countries. In this study, the country-level variables are used as a proxy for gender context and measured as the level of gender equality in work life and the gender equality norms regarding women's employment. The MLA is presented in two separate tables. In the first table (Table 2), null models for both well-being and WFC are presented, showing both individual- and country-level differences. The null model for well-being and WFC was initially developed to explore country-level variance in the two main variables. Well-being and WFC were then tested to determine the effect of the two context measurements. The second table (Table 3) presents six MLA models with well-being as the outcome variable. First, WFC was entered, and then, WFC was allowed to vary across countries, resulting in variance in the slope measurement. Finally, the two contextual measurements were imputed as multipliable interaction variables with WFC in two different models. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) is presented for all models. The model fits are presented with their log likelihood (−2 LL) values. SPSS version 22 was used for all analyses.

Table 2 MLAs with well-being and WFC as outcome variables

	Work–family conflict						Well-being					
	Model 1.0		Model 1.1		Model 1.2		Model 2.0		Model 2.1		Model 2.2	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Intercept	5.525***	0.108	8.905***	1.300	4.540***	0.397	9.940***	0.121	7.610***	1.585	8.425***	0.530
GGI-E			−4.830*	1.850					3.330	2.259		
Norms					−0.244*	0.106					0.327**	0.112
Residual	5.582***	0.063	5.582***	0.063	5.582***	0.063	7.992***	0.090	7.993***	0.090	7.993***	0.090
Country variance	0.283***	0.084	0.226***	0.069	0.237***	0.070	0.353**	0.106	0.336**	0.103	0.265***	3.213
−2 LL	71,759.236		71,749.983		71,756.891		77,081.041		77,075.429		77,076.057	
ICC (%)	4.8		3.9		4.1		4.2		4.0		3.2	

The null models, followed by the respective country context measurement: GGI-E scores for gender-equal work life and gender equality norms supporting women's employment. B-values (Coef), significance levels, standard errors (SEs) and ICCs are presented

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

Table 3 MLAs with positive well-being as the outcome variable presented for 6 models

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Intercept	11.416***	0.193	11.409***	0.196	7.287***	1.281	6.021***	1.336	9.530***	0.436	9.105***	0.463
WFC	−0.376***	0.010	−0.377***	0.015	−0.378***	0.017	0.373*	0.179	−0.377***	0.016	−0.170*	0.073
GGI-E					5.761***	1.812	7.712***	1.890				
WFC*GGI-E							−1.073***	0.255				
Norms									0.408***	0.085	0.498***	0.091
WFC*Norms											−0.045**	0.015
Residual	7.126***	0.083	7.102***	0.083	7.100***	0.083	7.100***	0.083	7.101***	0.083	7.101***	0.083
Country variance	0.212**	0.065	0.242**	0.089	0.165*	0.068	0.161**	0.063	0.101*	0.048	0.099*	0.045
Variance of random slope			0.004*	0.002	0.005*	0.002	0.002[a]	0.001	0.004*	0.002	0.003*	0.001
-2 LL	71,130.678		71,110.488		71,099.259		71,085.733		71,097.196		71,096.106	
ICC (%)	2.9		3.3		2.3		2.2		1.4		1.4	

Model 1 includes work–family conflict (WFC) as a fixed variable. Models 2 through 6 include WFC as both fixed and random variables. In Models 3 through 6, the two contextual measurements (GGI-E and norms) are added. Model 4 includes the multiplicative interaction variables WFC*GGI-E, and Model 6 includes WFC*Norms. In all models, control variables—gender, hours of paid work, children living in the household, years of education and age—are tested but not displayed. B-values (Coef), significance levels, standard errors (SEs) and ICCs are presented

[a] $p = 0.059$

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

2.2 Measurement

Well-being was measured using a composite index of three questions asking whether over the last 2 weeks the respondent felt (1) cheerful and in good spirits, (2) calm and relaxed, and (3) active and vigorous. Questions were answered on a 6-point scale ranging from "Never" to "All the time", providing an index ranging from 0 (low well-being) to 15 (high well-being; Cronbach's alpha = 0.821). WFC was measured using three questions that were combined to produce an index ranging from 0 (low levels of conflict) to 12 (high levels of conflict; Cronbach's alpha = 0.684). These questions probed how often the respondent (1) worries about paid work when at home, (2) feels too tired after paid work to enjoy the things they normally do, and (3) finds that their job prevents them from spending time with their family. The answers ranged from never to always on a 5-point Likert scale.

Gender was coded as women or men with men as the reference group. Paid work has been found to increase well-being but exhibit a negative relationship with WFC; therefore, this variable was included as a control and measured as the estimated number of hours of paid work per week. Having children living in one's household likely increases WFC (Gallie and Russell 2009); therefore, this factor was included as a control. Years of education and respondent age were also included as control variables.

Diagnoses of the measurement show that no multicollinearity exists.

2.3 Contextual Measurement

Two measurements considering the level of gender equality within a country are used as a proxy for gender context. The first contextual measurement is based on the economic participation and opportunity section of the 2010 global gender gap index (hereafter, GGI-E signifies the section of the global gender gap index used in this study) (Hausmann et al. 2010), which measures the gender equality in working life across countries. The GGI-E consists of three areas: (1) the participation gap (i.e., the ratio of female labour force participation to male labour force participation); (2) the remuneration gap (i.e., the wage equity between men and women for similar work); and (3) the advancement gap (i.e., the ratio of women to men among legislators, senior officials and managers, and technical and professional workers). A value of one on the GGI-E score signifies perfect equality, whereas zero indicates the highest level of inequity. The GGI-E scores are presented in Table 1.

The second contextual measurement comprises the gender equality norms regarding women's employment. The variable is aggregated at the country level using the individual-level questions concerning the respondents' attitudes towards women's labour market participation. Attitudes towards women's participation in the labour market comprised an additive index composed of two questions answered on a scale ranging from 0 to 8 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.663), where a high number signifies a relatively positive attitude towards women's labour market participation. The respondents used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly" to answer whether a women should be expected to decrease her amount of paid work for the sake of the family and whether men should have more rights to jobs than women when jobs are scarce. On the aggregated level, norms regarding women's employment ranged from 2.90 to 6.27, where higher values indicate greater acceptance of women's employment. The countries' levels of gender-equal norms regarding women's employment are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that the GGI-E scores and country-level gender-equal norms regarding women's employment differ somewhat. The Pearson's r shows that the correlation between the two variables is fairly high but not perfect: 0.589 ($p < 0.001$).

To detect whether the relationship between WFC and well-being depends on the gender context, multiplicative interaction variables were created to relate our two contextual measurements (GGI-E and gender-equal norms) and WFC.

3 Results

The left side of Table 2 shows the WFC variance among countries. The results show that 4.8 per cent of the individual variation in WFC is explained by living in different countries (Model 1.0). Individuals in countries with a higher GGI-E, i.e., countries that have a more gender equal work life, reported lower levels of WFC (Model 1.1). The participants in countries with norms that support women's employment also reported lower levels of WFC (Model 1.2). Approximately 20 per cent of the cross-country variance in WFC could be explained by either the level of gender equality in work life or norms regarding women's employment when between-variance reduction was calculated.

The right side of Table 2 presents well-being as the outcome variable. The results show that ICC was 4.2 %; hence, context explained 4.2 % of the variation in well-being among men and women in Europe. Although the GGI-E did not explain differences in the level of well-being (Model 2.1), norms regarding women's employment did (Model 2.2). Individuals who lived in countries where women's employment is supported reported higher levels of well-being compared to individuals in countries with more conservative norms. The between-variance reduction calculations showed that approximately five per cent of the country difference in well-being was explained by the GGI-E score, and approximately 25 % is explained by the norms regarding gender equality.

In sum, in countries that have a more gender-equal work life and norms that support women's employment, men and women report less WFC and higher levels of well-being.

3.1 The Importance of Gender Context

Table 3 explores the importance of gender context to the relationship between WFC and well-being. Initially, in Model 1, WFC was entered as a fixed variable; as expected, the results show that there is a negative relationship between WFC and well-being on the individual level. Hence, those who experience greater WFC perceive themselves as having lower levels of well-being. When WFC was entered, the between-variance reduction was calculated to be approximately 40 %, indicating that WFC explains a large part of the country variance in well-being (comparing Model 2.0 in Table 2 and Model 1 in Table 3).

In Model 2, WFC was allowed to vary across countries to measure countries' variance in slopes. The results showed that the variance across countries was small; nevertheless, the relationship between WFC and well-being significantly differed across countries.

Model 3 included the GGI-E, which did not affect the individual level of WFC, indicating that the variable was robust with regard to the GGI-E. Adding the interaction variable GGI-E*WFC in Model 4, we found that the negative relationship between the experience of WFC and well-being was stronger in countries with higher GGI-E scores than in those with lower GGI-E scores. Contrary to our hypothesis, this finding indicates that in countries with higher gender equality in work life, there is a stronger negative

relationship between WFC and well-being than in countries with less gender equality. The coefficient value of the WFC variable on the individual level changed from negative to positive, mainly because of the high correlation between WFC and the interaction variable. When the interaction variable was entered in Model 4, the variance of the slope became borderline significant, with a p value of 0.059.

The variable norms regarding women's employment were added in Model 5. As with GGI-E, no changes in the fixed WFC variable occurred. The results in Model 6 show that the negative relationship was stronger in countries with more gender-equal norms that support women's employment than in countries with less gender-equal norms. When the interaction variable was added, the variance of the slope remained essentially the same and significant; thus, the conclusion regarding the random parameters was that the relationship between WFC and well-being differed significantly across countries.

In Table 3, all of the models included the following control variables: gender, paid labour, education, age and having children living in the household. These variables did not change the main results, indicating that the data are robust (results without control variables are not shown).

4 Discussion

The evidence from this study shows that gender context constitutes an important analytical dimension for understanding the relationship between WFC and well-being. Although individuals living in countries with higher levels of gender equality in work life and norms that support women's employment reported lower levels of WFC, the negative relationship between WFC and well-being was stronger among the individuals in these countries than among the individuals in countries with lower levels of equality and with norms supporting conservative gender relations.

In countries where women's participation in the labour market is supported through policies and antidiscrimination laws and through norms of gender equality, the expectations that partners will share work equally and that women will earn money and have a career are probably higher than in countries where work is perceived as more gender specific and where more women are homemakers (Lewis et al. 2008). Although support for women's employment and for the equal sharing of labour exists in contexts with greater gender equality, women are still expected to bear the main responsibility for the home and children. Hence, even in a gender context that supports dual-earners, such as Sweden, the norm of good motherhood includes dimensions of being irreplaceable as a mother and having the primary responsibility for the children and their well-being (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001). Although Swedish fathers are increasing the amounts of time they spend with their children (Unpublished data by Hagqvist et al.), societal support for fathers taking parental leave remains weak (Haas et al. 2002). Thus, in the Nordic countries, parallel ideals seem to exist: equality is valued, but at the same time, social and cultural expectations of women as the main caregivers persist. However, according to the time-use data, more weight seems to be placed on equality in breadwinning activities than in care-related responsibilities as women in the Nordic countries still perform the majority of the housework (Hook 2006). In practice, the idea of equality increases the work and family demands on both men and women, unlike in countries where work tasks are gender specific. Being unable to uphold the norms of similarity and share work equally between partners might result in feelings of low well-being and thus produce a stronger negative

relationship between WFC and well-being. Furthermore, the experience of WFC may also be seen as a greater failure in a context where the norm is that one should manage to be highly engaged in both working and family life, and this may generate increased frustration and a lower level of well-being.

Different working conditions (Byron 2005; Marmot et al. 2008; Winter et al. 2006) and psychosocial work environments (Grönlund 2007) partially explain the relationship between WFC and health. Job control is important with regard to reducing WFC; indeed, for women, WFC only decreases when job control is at a high level (Grönlund 2007). Even in the relatively gender-equal countries in northern Europe, the labour market is gender segregated, and women are more likely to have jobs with less status and greater demands (Elwér et al. 2010). Furthermore, in most countries (conservative or dual-earner), women with tertiary levels of education are more likely to participate in the labour force. However, compared with other countries in Europe, Nordic countries employ a significantly higher proportion of women with low and medium levels of education (Korpi et al. 2013). Thus, working women in more gender-conservative countries are more likely to belong to a higher socioeconomic class and have jobs with higher control and fewer demands. Because only respondents who were working answered questions regarding WFC, a selection bias might exist, especially among women living in countries such as Spain and Portugal that are more gender-conservative with regard to paid work. Working women in these countries are somewhat norm-breaking and might face other obstacles in life that could enhance their feelings of conflict.

In conclusion, the context in which gender relations—measured here as the level of gender equality in work life and norms regarding women's employment— are constructed is an important factor in studying the relationship between WFC and well-being. It is thus important for countries to both strive towards a more gender-equal labour market through policies and laws that support women's employment (e.g., quotas for managerial positions, family policies, and antidiscrimination laws) and to include policies supporting a balance between work and family for both men and women. Such policies must support men's participation in unpaid labour and family care, thus normalising the perception of men as people with care-related responsibilities and capabilities.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest No conflicts of interest.

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