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Self-Love among Javanese Women: A Phenomenological Study in Cultural Context

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Abstract

Self-love is often understood as an individual psychological process, yet in collectivist cultures it is profoundly shaped by social and cultural expectations. This study explores how Javanese women experience and express self-love within the framework of traditional Javanese values. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with three Javanese women aged 23–29 years living in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The findings reveal that self-love manifests primarily through filial devotion to parents, freedom of choice exercised within cultural boundaries, and conscious self-care and personal development. Key supporting factors include family encouragement, positive social relationships, an attitude of sincere acceptance, and healthy self-esteem. However, patriarchal norms, age hierarchy, and fear of social judgment remain significant barriers to fuller expression of self-love. The study concludes that self-love among Javanese women is essentially relational and context-bound, requiring a delicate balance between personal well-being and cultural obligations. These insights highlight the importance of understanding self-love as a culturally embedded phenomenon rather than a universal individual trait.

Keywords

Cultural Values, Javanese Culture, Javanese Women, Phenomenology, Self-Love.

1. Introduction

Humans are essentially required to be able to face various life challenges through the ability to solve problems, adapt, and accept the realities of life, so that they can form a stable identity (Putri, 2018). In the process of living life, humans cannot escape conflict, so the ability to adapt is an important aspect of maintaining psychological well-being. The environment plays a major role in shaping the way individuals think, act, and respond to various life situations (Rahmawati, 2021). Thus, humans tend to develop behaviors that are in harmony with the conditions of the environment in which they live.

One of the most influential elements of the environment is culture. Culture encompasses values of togetherness, routines, behavioral norms, symbols, language, artifacts, and customs that shape patterns of social interaction (Neukrug, 2012). Furthermore, culture also includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, traditions, and skills that are learned and passed down from generation to generation within a society (Liliweri, 2005). Because it encompasses various aspects of life, culture is a significant factor that influences individual behavior, perspectives, and characteristics.

The island of Java, with its majority Javanese population, demonstrates how local culture shapes people's behavior patterns. Javanese culture is understood as a set of values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior patterns that are shared and passed down from generation to generation through language and other means of communication (Rahmawati, 2021). Values such as *sapa garwe bakal nganggo* (he who makes it, he will bear it) and *nrimo ing pandum* (acceptance of life's circumstances) are traditional teachings that influence how Javanese people perceive themselves and life. These values are the basis for why Javanese people are known to be gentle, patient, and accepting of situations. This phenomenon shows that culture plays a crucial role in shaping a person's identity and personality.

In a psychological context, culture can influence the concept of self-love. According to Henschke and Sedlmeier (2023), self-love is an attitude of being kind to oneself that can be learned and maintained throughout life. Individuals with self-love tend to understand themselves, accept their strengths and weaknesses, and consciously take care of themselves to build a positive relationship with themselves. Self-love also has moral and personal dimensions that are important for psychological well-being (Xue et al., 2021). Although sometimes misunderstood as selfishness, self-love is different from narcissism; self-love is adaptive, while narcissism is an excessive form that tends to be negative (Virgita et al., 2024).

This study aims to understand how Javanese culture influences self-love, particularly among Javanese women. The focus on women is important because various studies show that women have higher levels of psychological vulnerability than men. Hadi et al. (2017) found that women are almost twice as likely to experience major depression due to biological factors such as hormonal differences, as well as social factors such as physical and sexual violence, poverty, single parenthood, and gender discrimination. The combination of social pressure and cultural values embraced by Javanese society has the potential to influence how women view and value themselves. Therefore, this study is important to examine in depth how Javanese cultural teachings shape the concept of self-love in Javanese women, given the socio-cultural dynamics and higher psychological vulnerability of this group.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Self-Love

Fromm (1947) explains that self-love is a feeling of loving oneself that is expressed through caring, appreciating, understanding, and taking responsibility for oneself. In line with this, Henschke and Sedlmeier (2023) state that individuals with self-love strive to understand their strengths and weaknesses, accept themselves as a whole, and consciously care for themselves in order to build a healthy relationship with themselves. This perspective positions self-love as a foundational ethical attitude that enables genuine love toward others. In contrast to this view, Freud (1957) defines self-love as a form of narcissism, in which libido is directed towards oneself and is considered the opposite of love for others. However, contemporary views distinguish between the two; self-love is seen as a positive, adaptive trait, while narcissism is a form of excessive and negative self-love (Virgita et al., 2024). The clear differentiation between healthy self-love and pathological narcissism has become a critical cornerstone in modern positive psychology and clinical practice.

Xue (2021) emphasizes that self-love is an important aspect of human life that has personal and moral significance. Self-love is not only related to caring for the body, but also appreciating one's character, abilities, reputation, actions, and paying attention to one's future. Thus, self-love emerges not merely as an emotional state but as a comprehensive moral orientation that integrates personal well-being with ethical responsibility. Based on these various perspectives, self-love can be defined as a feeling of love for oneself that is manifested through behaviors such as caring for, appreciating, understanding, and taking responsibility for oneself for the sake of future well-being and development. This working definition serves as the primary conceptual lens for examining how self-love is experienced and expressed within the specific cultural framework of Javanese women.

2.2. Aspects of Self-love

Xue et al. (2021) propose a structured model of self-love consisting of five interrelated aspects: self-cherishing, self-acceptance, self-persistence, self-responsibility, and self-restraint. Self-cherishing reflects a positive valuation of oneself that manifests in caring for the body and health, protecting personal safety and reputation, and demonstrating respect toward oneself and others. Self-acceptance involves the unconditional recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses, coupled with a sustained commitment to personal growth toward an ideal self-image. Self-persistence, in turn, emphasizes firmness in upholding personal principles and beliefs, maintaining integrity and dignity even when facing external pressure. These three aspects are primarily inward-oriented and focus on the individual's internal relationship with the self. However, in collectivist cultures such as Java, the expression of self-cherishing and self-persistence is often moderated by social expectations and the need to preserve harmony. Therefore, what appears as personal valuation may simultaneously serve the broader goal of maintaining family honor and social acceptance.

The remaining two aspects highlight the moral and regulatory dimensions of self-love. Self-responsibility underscores the individual's awareness of being fully accountable for their life choices, roles, and the quality of their actions in accordance with personal values. Self-restraint refers to the capacity for self-discipline and behavioral control in alignment with social and moral norms, including the ability to refrain from actions that could harm oneself or others. Together, these five aspects form a comprehensive framework that integrates emotional, cognitive, and ethical elements of self-love, providing a useful analytical lens for exploring how the concept is lived and negotiated within the collectivist and hierarchical context of Javanese culture. In the Javanese setting, self-responsibility and self-restraint are particularly salient because individual actions are rarely perceived as purely personal; they carry

implications for family reputation and communal harmony. This cultural overlay suggests that healthy self-love among Javanese women may require a delicate balance between personal needs and culturally prescribed obligations, making Xue et al. (2021) framework both applicable and in need of contextual adaptation.

2.3. Javanese Culture

Javanese culture is rich with values that emphasize harmony, balance, and alignment in life. One of the central concepts is *nrimo ing pandum*, which is the attitude of sincerely accepting all of God's provisions. This value is not a form of passive surrender, but reflects willingness and patience in facing various conditions after individuals have done their best (Wulandari, 2017). In a contemporary context, *nrimo ing pandum* is often misinterpreted as fatalism; however, research findings show that this philosophy functions as an adaptive coping mechanism that helps individuals manage life's pressures more positively (Wibowo, 2021). For women in particular, *nrimo ing pandum* can simultaneously serve as a source of psychological strength and as a cultural justification for limiting personal ambitions when they conflict with family or social expectations. Consequently, the practice of self-love among Javanese women is frequently filtered through this lens of acceptance, making the boundary between healthy self-acceptance and self-suppression sometimes ambiguous.

In addition, Javanese culture is also characterized by social values such as *tepa salira* (empathy), *rukun* (harmony), and *gotong royong* (cooperation), which form the foundation of social relations in the community. These values are reflected in various forms of interaction, including the use of language levels that are adjusted to the social status or age of the interlocutor as a form of respect and manners (Suyanto, 2011). This strong emphasis on harmony and respect for hierarchy often requires individuals, especially younger women, to prioritize collective well-being over personal desires, even in matters that directly affect their own happiness or self-development. As a result, expressions of self-love that might be considered assertive or self-prioritizing in individualistic cultures can be perceived as disruptive to *rukun*, creating an implicit cultural tension for Javanese women who seek to cultivate authentic self-love.

2.4. Javanese Women

In Javanese culture, the term *woman* comes from the expression *wani ditata*, which means "dare to be regulated," reflecting the expectation that Javanese women are obedient, adaptable, and follow prevailing social norms (Erlangga, 2022). Women are also often referred to as *kanca wingking* or "friends behind," which emphasizes their role as supporters of their families and husbands. However, Javanese culture recognizes the important contribution of women through the concept of *tut wuri handayani*, which means providing encouragement from behind as a source of strength for men's success (Pratisthita & Wardani, 2022). These values are also reflected in the symbolism of traditional household tools, such as graters and hoes, which symbolize the steadfastness and sharpness of Javanese women's characters (Suryadi, 2019). Thus, Javanese women are traditionally positioned as supporting figures who work behind the scenes.

Historically, the position of Javanese women has often been understood through domestic roles such as housekeeping, cooking, and childcare, as described in the proverb *macak, manak, lan masak* (Erlangga, 2022). However, historical records show that Javanese women also held strategic positions, such as Queen Shima of the 7th-century Kalingga Kingdom, who was known for her firmness and fairness. Nevertheless, traditional perceptions still limit women's mobility. In the literary work *Hati Sinden*, Javanese women are depicted as experiencing marginalization, stereotyping, subordination, and various forms of violence, including economic, physical, psychological, and sexual violence (Dewi, 2014). Cultural values such as

nrimo, *ikhlas*, *rila*, *pasrah*, and *rukun* reinforce the expectation that women should be gentle and obedient, including the rejection of tattooed women because they are considered incompatible with the image of refined Javanese women (Handoko, 2010). Social change and the passage of time have brought about a shift in the role of Javanese women. Although traditional values still influence public perception, many Javanese women are now trying to actualize themselves in both the public and domestic spheres. They are beginning to develop their personal potential, participate actively in various fields, and show that the role of women is no longer limited to domestic functions alone (Budiati, 2010).

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to deeply explore the lived experiences of Javanese women regarding self-love and how these experiences are shaped by cultural context. Phenomenology was selected because it focuses on understanding the meaning individuals attribute to phenomena in their everyday lives, making it particularly suitable for capturing the subjective and culturally embedded nature of self-love (Moleong, 2019). The research was conducted in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, an area widely recognized as a center of Javanese cultural preservation, between March and June 2025.

Participants were three Javanese women aged 23–29 years, all unmarried, holding at least a bachelor's degree, and actively engaged in professional or academic activities. Purposive sampling was applied with the primary inclusion criterion that participants self-identify as Javanese, were raised in a Javanese family environment, and regularly use Javanese language and cultural practices in daily life. Participants were recruited through personal networks and snowball techniques to guarantee trust and openness during interviews.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in locations chosen by the participants to create a comfortable and natural atmosphere. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used, covering topics such as the meaning of self-love, its daily manifestations, supporting factors, and cultural barriers. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the primary framework, following the steps developed by Smith et al. (2011): (1) repeated reading of each transcript, (2) initial noting of exploratory comments, (3) development of emergent themes, (4) clustering themes into super-ordinate themes for each participant, and (5) cross-case analysis to identify patterns across participants. Analysis was performed manually with the aid of highlighting and margin notes to maintain closeness to the original data. Ethical principles were strictly observed: participants received full explanation of the study objectives, signed informed consent forms, were assured of confidentiality (pseudonyms were used), and retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

4. Results

4.1. Description of Self-love in Javanese Women

Based on the interview results, it was found that filial piety towards parents is one of the most dominant forms of self-love among Javanese women. Informants described that fulfilling their parents' expectations, obeying their advice, and trying to make them happy gave them a sense of satisfaction and strengthened their self-esteem. Although the concept of self-love focuses on individual well-being, in the Javanese cultural context, self-love is internalized through fulfilling responsibilities to parents. The interview results also show that the orientation to be devoted to parents is the main guideline in daily behavior, including in decision making and identity formation. Parental validation is considered very important; several

informants stated that they found it difficult to feel complete self-love without parental acceptance. These findings show that self-love among Javanese women is relational and strongly influenced by the values of collectivism and moral obligations in Javanese culture. Devotion to parents as a pathway to building self-love is also observed among Javanese women who work as traders, where obedience and making parents proud become central to their self-worth (Sabrina et al., 2024).

Based on the interview results, freedom of choice emerged as an important form of self-love for Javanese women. Informants described that the ability to make independent choices, especially in terms of education, work, and other life decisions, brought happiness and increased self-esteem. However, this freedom did not always mean complete freedom from the influence of others. The interview results show that Javanese women still consider the opinions of their parents, lecturers, or friends as a form of respect for cultural values. However, the final decision is still made based on personal considerations, so that they feel they have control over their lives. These findings confirm that self-love in Javanese women is manifested through a balance between personal independence and obedience to cultural values that uphold social harmony. The ability to negotiate personal choices while maintaining respect for family and social norms is a recurring theme in contemporary Javanese women's construction of self-love (Sawitri et al., 2024).

The interview results also show that caring for oneself and developing personal potential are important aspects of self-love among Javanese women. Informants mentioned that self-care includes maintaining physical health, hygiene, and appearance, including practicing traditional treatments such as using natural scrubs. These actions not only reflect care for the body but also serve as a way to increase comfort and self-confidence. In addition, self-development through improving skills, knowledge, and self-worth is also seen as a form of self-love. Informants explained that self-improvement is a conscious effort to increase personal value in order to be more useful in social life. These findings show that Javanese women understand self-love not only as physical care, but also as an internal process to achieve better quality of life. Active engagement in self-care and continuous personal development, even within limited economic and cultural spaces, has been identified as a practical expression of self-love among working Javanese women (Rahmayanti & Abdullah et al., 2025).

4.2. Factors Influencing Self-love in Javanese Women

Based on the interview results, family support is a very decisive factor in the development of self-love among Javanese women. Informants explained that when families provide trust, guided freedom, and support in decision-making, they feel more valued and able to express themselves with more confidence. This condition reinforces a positive view of oneself and increases self-love. Conversely, the interviews also showed that families who tend to be restrictive or limit their freedom can lower self-esteem and make it difficult for individuals to develop self-love. Informants who experienced excessive control from their families described themselves as finding it more difficult to express their opinions, feeling restricted, and lacking confidence in making choices. These findings show that parenting styles and emotional support within the family play an important role in shaping self-love. The quality of family emotional bonds and the degree of autonomy granted within hierarchical family structures directly affect the emergence of a coherent sense of self and identity, which in turn becomes the foundation for authentic self-love (Mayer, 2023).

Positive social relationships also contribute to strengthening self-love. Based on the interviews, interactions with friends and a supportive social environment provide a sense of being valued, accepted, and understood. In Javanese culture, which upholds the value of harmony, good social relationships can be a source of emotional and moral encouragement, which ultimately supports the development of self-love.

Informants described how the attention, advice, and appreciation from their surroundings helped them assess themselves more positively. When a person is valued by others, they tend to find it easier to value themselves. This confirms that interpersonal relationships in Javanese culture have a significant influence on the formation of self-love. Similar mechanisms are observed in other traditional societies where pragmatic politeness and communal ethical norms reinforce individual feelings of worth and belonging, thereby facilitating the growth of self-love (Ardiati, 2022).

The interview results show that the attitude of *urimo*, or acceptance of circumstances, is an important mechanism in shaping self-love among Javanese women. This attitude helps them manage life's pressures and reduce negative emotions. By accepting the conditions they face, individuals feel emotionally lighter and are able to focus on the things they can control. The *urimo* attitude functions as a coping mechanism that makes Javanese women more able to accept themselves as they are. This plays a role in maintaining emotional stability and providing space for the growth of self-love in a cultural context that emphasizes patience and willingness. Acceptance of life circumstances as a culturally shaped coping strategy parallels the hermeneutic-phenomenological process of meaning-making in adolescents use to maintain psychological stability when facing identity transitions in highly mobile or multicultural environments (Keuss & Willett, 2009).

Self-esteem is a significant internal factor that influences self-love. Based on the interview results, informants with high self-esteem feel more confident in expressing their opinions, assessing themselves realistically, and considering the opinions of others without having to accept them entirely. They described that having self-esteem made them more selective in responding to external influences, so they were not easily affected by negative judgments from their environment. This shows that self-esteem provides a strong psychological foundation for Javanese women to love themselves, make independent decisions, and maintain personal integrity. From a neurophenomenological perspective of love, stable and positive self-esteem functions as one of the key experiential layers that allows the broader phenomenon of self-love to emerge and be sustained across cultural contexts (Kao et al., 2022).

4.3. Barriers to Expressing Self-Love in Javanese Women

Based on the interview results, Javanese culture is the main obstacle to the expression of self-love among Javanese women. Informants described how strong patriarchal cultural norms place women in a subordinate position and limit their freedom of movement. This culture emphasizes that women are responsible for the domestic sphere, do not need a higher education, and should not surpass men in terms of ability or career. Informants also explained that restrictions on going out at night, limitations on activities outside the home, and rules demanding that women always be obedient are still common, both within families and in society. These conditions make it difficult for Javanese women to develop themselves, express their opinions, and feel free to make their own life choices. These findings confirm that patriarchal cultural constructs can hinder the development of self-love by limiting opportunities for self-actualization. Similar patriarchal pressures have been reported among contemporary Javanese women trapped in toxic relationships, where cultural expectations of obedience and harmony make it extremely difficult to prioritize personal well-being and authentic self-love (Yuwono et al., 2024).

The interview results show that age hierarchy is another obstacle to expressing self-love. In Javanese culture, the opinions of older people always take precedence, so younger individuals tend to follow the decisions of their seniors even if they do not agree with them. Informants said that their voices are often ignored because older people are considered more powerful and have authority in family decision-making. This situation limits young women's ability to make their own choices and forces them to negotiate to have their wishes accepted. A strong age hierarchy causes

individuals to feel less free to express their needs and aspirations, thus hindering the development of self-love based on independence and personal decision-making. This hierarchical suppression of younger voices parallels the experience of Indian women who choose self-partnering, where breaking free from age- and family-imposed expectations is described as the primary barrier to embracing a life centred on self-love (Dhillon & Gupta, 2025).

External factors in the form of social pressure also pose a significant obstacle to self-love among Javanese women. Based on interviews, informants admitted that public opinion, neighbors' comments, and social judgment often influence their self-confidence. In Javanese culture, which upholds the values of harmony and unity, public opinion is considered very important, so individuals tend to suppress their personal desires so as not to conflict with social norms. Informants described how negative comments about women's education, judgments about behavior, or societal expectations made them hesitate in making decisions. Concerns about “what people say” became a psychological pressure that prevented individuals from expressing themselves authentically. Therefore, a normative and judgmental social environment is one of the factors that weakens the development of self-love among Javanese women. Such socially constructed barriers to authentic self-expression and resilience are also evident among Buddhist practitioners, where the self and happiness are treated as relational and communal constructs rather than purely individual ones, making deviation from social expectations a major impediment to self-love (Kapoor & Darda, 2022).

5. Discussion

The present study reveals that self-love among young urban Javanese women is profoundly relational, with filial devotion to parents emerging as one of the most salient expressions. Fulfilling parental expectations and gaining their approval generate deep emotional satisfaction and strengthen self-esteem, confirming that in collectivist-hierarchical contexts, personal well-being remains inseparable from family harmony (Sabrina et al., 2024). This pattern echoes findings among Chinese participants in Xue et al.'s (2021) original model, yet the Javanese case adds a stronger filial-moral layer that appears to override individual self-cherishing when the two conflict. For many participants, making parents happy or proud was explicitly framed as “the highest form of self-love I can do right now,” illustrating how the boundary between self-care and care-for-others becomes porous in everyday lived experience. Within Xue's five-aspect framework, therefore, self-love in Java is heavily moderated by heightened self-restraint and self-responsibility toward the collective, suggesting the need for a culturally sensitive extension of the model in similar societies (Mayer, 2023). This finding also aligns with earlier ethnographic observations of Javanese women's *kearifan*, where devotion to parents is not experienced as a burden but as an intrinsic source of self-worth and psychological security (Budiaty, 2010; Nugroho, 2012). Thus, any intervention that attempts to enhance self-love without acknowledging and incorporating this filial dimension risks being perceived as culturally alienating or even selfish.

Freedom of choice, self-care, and personal development were also recognised as legitimate forms of self-love, yet always negotiated within culturally accepted boundaries. Participants consciously balanced personal aspirations with respect for parents and social harmony, a dynamic also observed among contemporary Javanese women traders and educated Indian women who practise self-partnering (Sabrina et al., 2024; Dhillon & Gupta, 2025). The attitude of *nrimo ing pandum* further functions as an adaptive coping mechanism that facilitates self-acceptance and emotional stability, aligning with earlier interpretations of *nrimo* as a source of resilience rather than fatalism (Wibowo, 2021; Putri & Aulia, 2021). Such acceptance, however, can

blur into self-suppression when patriarchal norms and age-based authority persistently silence younger women's voices.

Patriarchal values continue to pose the most significant structural barrier. Traditional ideals encapsulated in phrases such as *wani ditata* and *kanca wingking* and literary representations in *Serat Wulang Putri* still shape everyday expectations, restricting mobility, education, and career ambitions (Nugroho, 2012; Fitriana, 2019; Erlangga, 2022). Age hierarchy compounds this limitation by granting elders near-absolute decision-making power, forcing young women into constant negotiation rather than autonomous choice. Social judgment and fear of disrupting *rukun* further push participants to internalise external evaluations, replicating patterns documented in earlier studies of Javanese gender roles (Budiati, 2010; Ismawati, 2018). These barriers illustrate why self-love in this context rarely resembles the unrestricted self-prioritisation celebrated in Western positive psychology, but instead emerges as a delicate, continually renegotiated equilibrium.

Theoretically, the findings challenge universal applications of existing self-love models and support calls for culturally embedded frameworks that incorporate relational-filial dimensions alongside individual aspects. Practically, counsellors and mental health practitioners working with Javanese women are encouraged to integrate traditional values such as *nrimo* and filial devotion into interventions rather than imposing purely individualistic self-compassion techniques. Narrative and family-systemic approaches that validate devotion to parents while gently expanding space for personal voice, such as reframing "making parents proud" to include educational and career achievements, appear particularly promising. Educational programs could also promote critical awareness of lingering patriarchal interpretations of *kearifan lokal* without rejecting Javanese identity altogether. Ultimately, supporting authentic self-love among Javanese women requires respecting cultural harmony while creating legitimate pathways for younger generations to harmonise personal fulfilment with collective obligations.

6. Conclusion

Self-love among Javanese women emerges as a distinctly relational and culturally negotiated phenomenon. Rather than an isolated individual achievement, it is deeply intertwined with devotion to parents, preservation of family harmony, and the ability to exercise choice within accepted boundaries. Acts of self-care, personal development, and limited autonomy are recognized as valid expressions of self-love, yet they remain framed by core Javanese values such as *nrimo ing pandum*, respect for hierarchy, and the priority of collective well-being. Family support, positive social relationships, inner acceptance, and self-esteem act as the primary enablers, while patriarchal norms, age-based authority, and fear of social judgment continue to function as significant restraints. Thus, self-love in this context is not the unrestricted self-prioritization often celebrated in Western discourse, but a balanced, adaptive process that seeks personal fulfillment without disrupting cultural harmony.

The findings carry practical implications for counselors, educators, and families who wish to support healthier self-love among Javanese women, highlighting the need to respect cultural identity while gently expanding spaces for individual voice and choice. However, the study is limited by its small sample of three educated, unmarried young women from an urban area, which may not fully represent the experiences of older, married, rural, or less-educated Javanese women. Future research should therefore include larger and more diverse samples, explore the perspectives of different generations within the same family, and examine how rapid modernization and exposure to global values are reshaping the meaning and practice of self-love among contemporary Javanese women.

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Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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