RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Writing One's Own Obituary: Student Reflections on an Assignment in a Positive Psychology Class

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#### **Abstract**

Writing one's own obituary has been promoted as a means to feel less anxiety regarding death and, as an experiential educational exercise, to clarify one's values and goals and crystalize one's professional visions. This study examined students' responses to engaging in an exercise that involved writing one's own obituary as part of a college course in positive psychology. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 97 assignments using a grounded theory approach. Students reported that they wanted to be remembered for positive personal characteristics and making a difference in people's lives. Elements of a satisfying life included achievements both in the personal realm, as well as contributions to others and the world. Importantly, student reflections on the assignment indicated that they acknowledged that it was valuable in serving as a motivator to strive towards an ideal self, although some made comments relating to downplaying the role of achievements. Our findings contribute to prior literature exploring how psychology students interact with and benefit from experiential exercises in the classroom. They also provide much-needed insights into the subjective experiences of individuals engaging in this well-known positive psychology intervention.

Keywords: Positive psychology, obituary, happiness, optimism, intervention, qualitative method

Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.

--Steve Jobs

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) defined positive psychology as the study of positive individual traits and experiences to help improve quality of life, while also working against adverse obstacles that may occur when life lacks meaning. With the field's emergence, exercises related to positive psychology have been easier to develop, interpret, and investigate within classroom settings. Seligman et al. (2009) theorized that educating students about positive psychology and engaging in particular exercises could improve life satisfaction, foster more creative thinking, and counterbalance depression. These exercises included identifying one's character strengths and using them in a new way or writing three things one is thankful for every day for a week. It should be noted that the field of positive psychology has its controversies; most relevant to this study is the lack of focus on the negatives and hardships that contribute to a complete life (Arslan & Wong, 2021; Ryff, 2022). Despite positive psychology being a relatively young field, research on human experience, in its full range of possibilities, has a long-established history.

As early as the 1970s, well before the founding of the field of positive psychology, Shneidman examined 100 obituaries written by college students and found that they struggled with conceptualizing their own deaths, perhaps due to beliefs about immortality among these younger individuals. In their obituaries, students ignored how they would die, spoke subjectively rather than objectively, experienced identity crises as they "fantasized" about their

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lives, and added humorous anecdotes (Shneidman, 1972). Conversely, Vail et al. (2012) demonstrated that reflecting on one's death could lead to prioritizing growth-oriented goals, following through on beliefs, healthy relationships, and developing more open-minded behavior. Identifying meaning in mortality has further been explored by Wong and Tomer (2008, 2011) in their work addressing meaning management theory (MMT) as an explanation for people's focus on determining purpose and reason throughout life and when faced with mortality in particular. The key argument of MMT is that the primary response to death anxiety is to find meaning to justify living life fully, even with the threat of death. MMT is also strongly related to self-determination theory (SDT), explained by Ryan and Deci (2000), as both posit that the innate human drive to grow and intrinsic desire for autonomy shape decision making and how people view those decisions. More recently, Bland (2020) considered this with a humanistic psychological approach, explaining that key components of this exercise include developing meaning and embracing sought-after goals.

The more positive and humanistic approaches to thought processes regarding mortality seen in MMT and SDT are in contrast to terror management theory (TMT), which claims that self-esteem and faith act as protection from anxiety arising from the fact that death is inevitable (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). This is an important concept to consider as it heightens participant risk, given that thinking about one's death could have adverse effects. Juhl and Rutledge (2016) assert that awareness of one's death can cause extreme anxiety and adversely impact psychological well-being for those who lack proper buffers, such as feelings of meaning grounded in worldviews that influence values, standards, and self-worth. Cultural differences may also impact the influence of an obituary exercise. Du et al. (2013) showed that independent self-esteem in individualist cultures was valued more than interdependent self-esteem in terror management compared to collectivist cultures. However, Rogers (2011) has documented that people's worldview defense can be mitigated when people consider their mortality in a meaningful manner that aligns with their worldview. Thus, understanding how this activity could impact students is valuable when assigning it in a classroom setting.

By asking students to write their obituaries, they might be mentally protracting their lifespan as they imagine their future selves looking back on their lives. Socioemotional selectively theory (SST) purports that decision and goal-making are influenced by time perception (Carstensen et al., 1999). Research has shown that constraints on time shift ambitions from knowledge-based to emotional. Given that this exercise encourages a retrospective review of an entire life while simultaneously making mortality salient, we can expect to find a relatively even mix of knowledge typed and emotional typed themes in their obituaries.

Several important psychological theories shed light on the reasons an obituary writing exercise may be impactful for young adults. Although they offer ways for hypothesizing why the obituary assignment may be useful for students, there is a gap in the literature regarding how students themselves experience and make sense of the assignment. This study aimed to expand on the limited research examining the obituary exercise to provide insight into its usefulness as a teaching tool and as a potential intervention for college students studying positive psychology. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of students' written obituaries to determine common experiences and reactions to the experiential exercise in a college classroom setting.

#### **Method**

We utilized a qualitative methodology to analyze the content of students' reflections on an obituary writing assignment. Qualitative findings are useful in elucidating how positive psychology interventions are experienced and understood by individuals participating in them, and as such are essential to contributing to the positive psychology body of literature (Corbin, 2017; Rich, 2017).

#### **Participants and Procedures**

We qualitatively analyzed assignments submitted as part of undergraduate and graduate-level positive psychology courses at a large, diverse, public research university in the United States. The university's institutional review board approved the study. The study sample consisted of students assigned to engage in and think critically about positive psychology interventions. As reported in Payne et al. (2020), in addition to writing one's obituary following a fruitful and satisfying life (Vail et al., 2012), students took note of things they were grateful for (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman et al., 2005), practiced giving active and constructive responses (Passmore & Oades, 2014), performed acts that were philanthropic and pleasurable (Otake et al., 2006), practiced savoring (Jose et al., 2012), identified and reflected upon character strengths (Seligman et al., 2005), and made a "gratitude visit" wherein

they wrote and delivered a letter to someone whom they had not formally thanked (Kumar & Epley, 2018; Seligman et al., 2005). Assignments from students in six undergraduate courses (five of which were honors-level courses) and one graduate-level course (N = 109) were included. Ninety-seven assignments were available for analysis, as some students did not submit an assignment.

Although students self-selected into this course, they took it for multiple reasons beyond an interest in positive psychology (e.g., fulfilling an elective requirement). Students were not required to have any prior knowledge of positive psychology, making them an ideal group to provide access to the subjective experience of pedagogy as it applies to positive psychology.

# **Data Collection**

Qualitative data were pulled from the study sample's written class assignments. The senior author designed and conducted all courses between 2015 and 2019 and graded the assignments for course credit prior to them being analyzed for the current study. To avoid biasing results, only study personnel who were not involved in the course designed the analytic plan and coded the data.

Writing one's obituary was the third of seven assignments intended to allow students to engage in and reflect upon positive psychology topics and interventions discussed in the course. Participants submitted the assignment to an electronic course management program. The instructions were:

Imagine that you have passed away after living a fruitful and satisfying life. What would you want your obituary to say? Write a 1–2-page essay summarizing what you would like to be remembered for the most.

Students were not incentivized to react in any specific way to the assignment. They were encouraged to reflect honestly on their experience in engaging with the assignment and provide insightful, thoughtful responses. The analyses were conducted after the course's conclusion, and participants were unaware that their assignments' content would be used for research, further ensuring unbiased results. IRB approval was obtained to conduct analyses on the deidentified text of the homework assignments and to waive of consent.

# Data Analysis

Assignments were downloaded from the courses' electronic course management program and uploaded to a secure, password-protected laboratory server. Data were uniformly formatted and de-identified before being uploaded to MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019), a qualitative analysis software program. Three members of the authorship team (a trained MPH-level graduate student and two trained undergraduate research assistants) independently reviewed one-third of the data before generating a preliminary codebook of deductive (based on the assignment prompt and prior review of the literature) and inductive (topics that arose in the data) codes. Each team member noted any comments or ideas in their coding to be discussed with the team.

A grounded theory-inspired approach to qualitative research informed the thorough open and axial coding of the qualitative data. Grounded-theory approaches emphasize the importance of participants' subjective experiences and value topics that arise in the data as essential to understanding the issue being studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In addition, the grounded theory approach informed a constant comparative method of analysis to ensure reliability and validity of the results, as well as to ensure uniform coding by all team members (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The coding team met weekly in an iterative process of independently coding assignments, discussing any patterns or changes to the codebook, and resolving any issues or disagreements about coding. Any changes agreed to by all coders were applied to all of the assignments. The study team determined achieved consensus of coding to ensure reliability. Final codes were used to identify recurrent themes in the data, and representative quotes were culled from the data.

#### Results

Overall, students wanted to be remembered for positive personal characteristics and making a difference in people's lives. Elements of a satisfying life included achievements both in the personal realm, as well as contributions to others and the world. Importantly, student reflections on the assignment indicated that they acknowledged that it was valuable in serving as a motivator to strive towards an ideal self, although some made comments relating to

downplaying the role of achievements. Major themes and their subthemes are described below and representative quotes are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Themes and representative quote

Theme	Sample Quote
Personal history	" lived a long, fulfilling life, passing away in her sleep at the ripe old age of 101 at her favorite place, her childhood home in, New York was born in 1995 and grew up in with her brother and parents, and She grew up on Long Island and attended College and graduated in 2017, pursuing a career in Psychology. She also attended Stony Brook University where she received her Master's in Psychology the following year. She met the love of her life,, while studying abroad in 2016, and they were inseparable ever since, marrying in 2021 is survived by her husband, four beautiful children, and 16 grandchildren."
Happiness/optimism	"There is a lot of negativity and depression that is around some of the people we meet in our lives, I want to change that. I always try to be optimistic, and if I catch myself ever drifting into a pessimistic attitude, I immediately fix that. The happiness I want to achieve is not only for my sake but for others as well. Helping people who are depressed find their feet and rise up to enjoy life is definitely something I try to whenever I get the chance. It's just who I am. Making others genuinely happy, makes me genuinely happy. So, that's what I want to be remembered for.!"
Making a difference in others' lives	"As a professor, she mentored many students. She thoroughly enjoyed teaching her students and engaging in discussions often spent time as an advisor to assist students with planning their course selections, but also how to achieve their career goals. She always was looking for and generating positions for her students to give them hands-on training through her organization but also her research. Additionally, she strongly valued providing access and opportunity to those who have previously been denied it, including people with limited education, or difficult situations."
	"I don't want to be lauded for any personal accomplishments; when I'm gone, these aren't necessarily the things that matter anymore. I would instead want my obituary to show how, through my actions, I was able to positively impact some people's lives. I would want it to note that I always tried to put the needs and the comfort of others at the top of my priority list, and that I valued equality and justice above all else. I would want to be known as someone whom my family members could always lean on in times of hardship, and as someone who was always there when others needed support or advice
	"She wanted to be remembered for her humor and strong opinions. She started out as a teenager who had a fervor for sharing her political and social positions on social media."
Personality and characteristics	"I want to be someone who smiled all the time and made people laugh constantly. I also want to be remembered as the kind of person who refused to judge or harm anybody."
	"I would also like for it to capture the kind of person I was in life, determined, fearless, and even at times defiant to stand up for what I cared about and for what I thought was right."

# Components of a fruitful and satisfying life

"One thing that means a lot to me is family, and one of the things that I know I want in the future is to have children and create a family of my own when I am older. In my obituary I hope that I will be remembered as being a great wife and mother who was always there for my husband and children, and that I always tried to do what was best for them."

"I also want to be remembered as a generous and compassionate friend, always reading and willing to go to the extra mile for those I love and those who I care about deeply."

"I want to become an environmental lawyer, and continually learn about these issues, even after all my schooling is done.

"She was also a skilled pianist who had been playing since she was six years old and continued to share the joy of music with as many people as she could by volunteering to play at local events and filling her house with sound.

"I want to travel the world, skydive, scuba-dive, witness an aurora (preferably Australis) and many other wonders nature has to offer, have a vacation romance, live in another country (if only temporary) and understand their culture, I want to have a psychedelic experience with trusted people, push myself to my physical limit by challenging myself to a triathlon, start a tech business, write a book (or multiple books, if possible), modify my physical appearance slightly to look the best I can while I'm young and many other things that life an adventure."

Reflections

"In here lies the challenge for the modern man: 'Might we strive for influence, power, beauty, fame, intelligence, wisdom, love, and leisure, while remembering that our worth in the spectrum of all time is rather determined by virtue.' Virtuous people will be remembered most fondly."

"Contemplating your death isn't often something that comes to mind when thinking of positive psychology. However, meditating on what you want to be remembered for reminds us of our strengths, and helps us emphasize these aspects in our day-to-day actions. So instead of writing my own obituary, I decided to think about what I wanted to be in it instead, as it felt a little less immediately morbid."

"I am not very comfortable with the assignment. Actually, I think it could be better worded as I am not interested. It is not that I am put off by it because it is morbid, I just don't know how productive of an idea it is to reflect like this. I know for a lot of people, how they will be remembered after death is a large source of meaning in their lives, but to many other people the striving after sculpting themselves into the image they want to be remembered by is an enormous cause of suffering. The assignment says summarize "what you would like to be remembered for the most" so it doesn't necessarily say create an ideal self that you would want to be remembered as, but at the same time it says "you have passed away after living a fruitful and satisfying life" so it isn't saying how would you want to be remembered if you died today. For many people this line of thinking ruins their enjoyment of the present.

# Personal Histories in Obituaries

Student assignments were often written in the third person as an obituary would be, but sometimes students wrote in the first person, noting how they would like to be remembered; see Table 1 for illustrative quotes. Some descriptions of one's personal history involved an incredible amount of creativity and detail, such as providing the number and names of imagined children and grandchildren and the date and location of their demise. Others were less precise, with students acknowledging their lack of a clear vision of some of the specific details of their future

lives. Some challenged the notion of wanting to be widely known or remembered saying, "I can easily settle for being remembered by those who I love and are close to me. I don't have a desire for the whole world to know my name and my whole life's story". In contrast, others indicated a wish to leave a legacy, "I want my life to leave an impact. I hope to leave the world different than when I came into it, and I hope to be remembered for it."

#### What Students Wanted to be Remembered for

# Happiness and Optimism

Appropriate for students taking a positive psychology course, a major theme of what they wanted to be remembered for was being happy and optimistic and spreading happiness to others. One student mentioned that when reading his deceased father's obituary, "It's amazing how I can almost pass by his specific jobs and accomplishments, even his military service. What I can't pass by is his humor--the jokes he would tell that highlight various sections of the page."

# Making a Difference in Others' Lives

Students were very focused on having a positive impact on others, whether it was in their careers or their personal lives. Typical comments were: "I want my excitement to inspire others and to have the opportunity to influence lives through mentorship" and "When I am gone, my personal achievements won't really mean much anymore; but if I was able to impart something positive onto other people, this impact can last beyond my final days. That is what, at the end of the day, is most fundamentally important to me."

# Personality and Characteristics

Students wished to be remembered for aspects of their individuality, which varied widely. Attributes included being honest, selfless, a hard worker, compassionate, driven, quirky, determined, fearless, ambitious yet down-to-earth, passionate, energetic, perseverant, generous, gentle, understanding, kind, a lover of learning and books, humorous, opinionated, and passionate.

# Components of a Fruitful and Satisfying Life

Students' conceptions of a fruitful and satisfying life revolved around the personal, such as marriage/family, friendships/other relationships, career, financial/material ownership, success in hobbies, travel, experiences, and helping others and the world. This is exemplified by the quote, "What I want to do is make sure I have the perfect balance of personal and professional achievements, sprinkled generously with adventure, exploration, and growth."

#### Reflections on the Exercise of Writing an Obituary and the Assignment

Students were also reflective about the usefulness of the assignment of writing an obituary, with some describing it as helpful and others likening it to a fool's errand. For example, one student said, "overall, I think this exercise has been useful in getting me to think about what's important. I'm often worrying about the test that's coming next week or what I'll have to do in lab tomorrow, but when I take a step back and look at what I want my legacy to be, I feel that I shouldn't be worried about those things." Another said, "To quote the musical Hamilton, no matter how powerful or great our lives are, we have no control over 'who lives, who dies, and who tells your story." Similarly, one student said, "I think that thinking of my potential legacy can help motivate me to act a certain way while I'm still alive. I think it helps me set a goal and strive toward that ideal self I hope to one day become" Another noted, "This assignment is also strange for me because I don't believe that specific achievements or professional success have much significance outside of providing personal life satisfaction, the financial means by which to sustain your life and the lives of your dependents, and the potential to spread positivity and wisdom with the people you interact with directly."

However, some students reported discomfort completing the assignment. One said, "I know for a lot of people, how they will be remembered after death is a large source of meaning in their lives, but to many other people the striving after sculpting themselves into the image they want to be remembered by is an enormous cause of suffering." Although acknowledging the reasoning behind the assignment, reflecting on how one wants to be remembered may reinforce negative feelings about oneself and one's choices, as "...this line of thinking ruins their enjoyment of the present."

#### **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore the self-described impact of an obituary experiential exercise on college students and to contribute to the literature within the field of positive psychology. This experiential exercise is designed to engage students in reflection and foster positive regard for one's future, promoting a healthy relationship with the self. Given the potential of positive psychology interventions for improving mental health in college students (Seligman et al., 2009), these findings also contribute to understanding the extent to which such interventions may be feasible to implement in a classroom setting.

The students expressed several themes, including descriptions of personal history, happiness/optimism, making a difference in others' lives, being remembered for specific personality characteristics, and thinking about the components of a fruitful and satisfying life. We found that students expressed a variety of values, from concrete goals regarding career, travel, and material things, to purposes related to societal and emotionally-fulfilling pursuits, such as the cultivation of happiness, stewardship, and being of service to others. For instance, as noted in Table 1, students wished to share joy and positively impact people's lives instead of being lauded for personal accomplishments. From a pedagogical perspective, the usefulness of having emerging and young adults identify their most important goals may be a valuable component of the obituary exercise, particularly in the early college years when students declare majors and adjust to living away from home for the first time. For graduate students, this may entail serious investigation into values and balancing socio-emotional goals with academic research and career pursuits. Future work could explore this specific exercise component and relate it to longitudinal outcomes of student success, goal formation, and fulfillment.

Students also described their experiences completing the assignment through a written reflection, with some finding it an enjoyable experience that helped clarify their values and others having a more difficult time. Some expressed discomfort with the exercise, citing the concept to be morbid, but did still find value in the exploration of value formation, noting that it reminded them of their strengths and to try to use them in their day-to-day actions. Educators may wish to be mindful of this aspect of the prompt. Students may feel some problematic emotions when asked to think about death, depending on various circumstances and the culture into which this is proffered. It is important to note that expressed difficulty is not necessarily negative. When investigating the myriad of human experiences, valences are inevitable and inherently relational; the positive cannot coexist without the negative (Ryff, 2022). These reactions may be further parsed in future studies to see if there may be a cultural component in differing reactions (Ma-Kellam & Blasovich, 2012).

By incorporating theoretically-informed experiential exercises such as this one in the classroom, psychology educators may be able to help shift the culture away from death being regarded as taboo or morbid and prompt students' exploration of values, which aligns with the study of socioemotional selectivity theory (Fung et al., 1999; Fung & Carstensen, 2006). This posits that when one contemplates or comes closer to death, one desires to focus and cultivate emotional ties to others rather than focus on knowledge-gaining pursuits. Relationships become more essential, and acquiring information and achieving goals become less. The focus of students' dreams can become crystallized by this exercise and thereby become the nexus of fruitful conversation and planning regarding the more practical side of collegiate advising, career counseling, and life planning (Bland, 2020; Bundick, 2011). These findings may inform and help build both an academic and a socio-emotionally supportive program that would foster a more rewarding experience during this remarkably malleable student timeframe. These exercises could also act as a springboard to integrate positive psychology more fully into the collegiate experience, as a more positive outlook on life fosters a more extended life (Carstensen et al., 2011).

The exercise was structured in a way that primed for meaning in the student's life. The terms of reflection, prompting the student to contemplate a 'fruitful and satisfying life,' cues the student to make value judgments about a life well-lived. The considered crafting of this question guides the student when writing the obituary. It may segue the students from a Terror Management approach (TMT) to a Meaning Management approach (MMT; Roger, 2011, Wong & Tomer, 2011). TMT perceives death through the lens of avoidance and anxiety. TMT proposes that the individual's confrontation with death prompts a motivation to avoid stress produced by the topic, and thus individuals seek meaning in life as a poultice. MMT reframes the individual's relationship with death from avoidance and defensive meaning-making to the primary source motivation of creating meaning. This is in

conversation with the Self Determination Theory (SDT) and the focus on meaning-making as a primary motive (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Students encouraged to ponder values-based moments of a meaningful life may step into the space of SDT and MMT rather than the defensive space of TMT. This shift in focus from TMT to MMT and SDT aligns with the area of positive psychology.

Other students questioned the reflection, as writing about what you would like to be remembered for most seemed to call into practice a striving for an ideal that could cause much suffering and compromise enjoying the present. This may be an exciting place for value formation analysis, how students formulate the difference between "being remembered for" versus "living a fruitful and satisfying life."

#### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although these findings contribute valuable information to the literature, the study has several limitations. Demographic information was not collected on the participants, as the assignments were not used for research until after the classes had concluded. However, the courses were generally representative of the study body of the university between the years 2015 to 2019, when these data were collected. The undergraduate university population averaged 52.68% male and 41.1% White, 39.06% Asian, 12.52% Hispanic or Latino, and 9.2% Black or African American. The graduate population averaged 42.76% male and 49.88% White, 29.48% Asian, 8.14% Hispanic or Latino, and 6.7% Black or African American (Enrollment Dashboard, 2020). Although the university has a diverse student body, the culture is primarily that of a Western environment, with corresponding norms and mores. These may factor into the responses made. It would be helpful for these exercises to be presented across various cultures and environments, perhaps at other universities domestically and internationally, to assess cultural differences. The impact of culture may cause different responses to mortality salience in individuals of Eastern and Western cultures, with the focus of holistic eastern thinkers connecting mortality salience with a more significant linkage to positive life experiences (Ma-Kellams & Blasovich, 2012). Future work should explore the characteristics of participants likely to respond in similar ways.

These exercises were assignments, which carries the possibility that students may naturally endeavor to be seen positively by the instructor, thus promulgating some response bias. The assignments were graded for completion, not content, to mitigate response bias. The previous exercises administered in the weeks preceding this exercise were the character strength exploration and the daily recordings of "three good things." The students completed the VIA character strengths survey and found their core character strengths. The following week, students recorded three daily positive items or events in their lives. There may have been a possible order effect since the administration of these prior exercises may have bulwarked students' positive regard for themselves before participating in this obituary writing activity.

Qualitative research is inherently subjective to the individual participants but provides rich, exploratory data to inform future quantitative and intervention studies. Using different quantitative assessment scales available in positive psychology (Hills & Argyle, 2002; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), in conjunction with experiential exercises such as this one, may help quantify the strength and direction of effects on participants. It would also be helpful to pinpoint trends that may occur generationally, tracing goal formation with that of ephemerality and acceptance of temporal exigency of one's life.

Although there may be some initial resistance to the contemplation of death dependent on age, and we would want to be sensitive to student concerns about morbidity, this exercise may normalize conversations about death. Accepting the finality of one's life may have far-reaching positive consequences in that it may help students think more broadly and deeply about the nature of existence and calibrate goals informed by corresponding values.

# **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

#### **Ethical Standards**

All study procedures involving human participants followed institutional and/or national research committee ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments and comparable ethical standards. The study was also approved by Institutional Review Board.

#### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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# **Data Availability**

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

# **Author Contributions**

Jackelyn Payne directed the data analysis and took the lead in manuscript preparation; Devan Jones assisted with manuscript preparation; J. Susie Hwang assisted with manuscript preparation; K. Olivia Mock assisted with manuscript preparation; Human Babar assisted with data analysis; Elizabeth Tse assisted with data analysis; Anne Moyer conceptualized the project, collected the data, and assisted with manuscript preparation.

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