

The Evolution of Leadership Philosophy from Efficiency Orientation to Human Sustainability: A Theory Development Study

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a qualitative theoretical model explaining how leadership philosophy evolves from a narrow efficiency-oriented logic toward a human sustainability-oriented paradigm in contemporary organizations. This qualitative theory-development study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 senior managers, middle managers, organizational development specialists, human resource professionals, and leadership consultants working in Tehran-based organizations. Participants were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling to capture diverse experiences of leadership transformation across private, public, technology, service, and knowledge-intensive organizations. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, followed by three additional interviews for model refinement and confirmation. Interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes and focused on participants' experiences of efficiency-driven leadership, human costs of performance pressure, changes in leadership assumptions, and emerging practices of human sustainability. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using grounded theory procedures, including open coding, axial coding, selective coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and category integration. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, develop codes, compare categories, retrieve quotations, and support analytical transparency. Analysis generated five main categories: mechanistic efficiency orientation, recognition of human depletion, ethical-relational reframing of leadership, integration of performance and human sustainability, and emergence of regenerative leadership philosophy. The central category was identified as "leadership as stewardship of sustainable human capacity." The proposed theory suggests that leadership philosophy evolves when organizations recognize that short-term efficiency without human renewal produces burnout, distrust, disengagement, and fragile performance. Human sustainability-oriented leadership reframes employees not as resources to be optimized but as meaning-making, relational, and developing human beings whose energy, dignity, learning, and voice must be protected. The study contributes to leadership theory by explaining the philosophical transition from control-based efficiency toward human sustainability. It offers a conceptual framework for organizations seeking to balance productivity, well-being, ethical responsibility, and long-term adaptability.

Keywords: leadership philosophy; human sustainability; sustainable leadership; efficiency orientation; grounded theory; qualitative research; organizational development

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1. Introduction

Leadership philosophy has historically reflected the dominant assumptions of each organizational era. In the industrial age, leadership was largely interpreted through the logic of efficiency, control, standardization, and productivity maximization. The intellectual roots of this orientation can be traced to scientific management, in which Taylor (1911) argued that work could be rationalized through systematic observation, task decomposition, measurement, and managerial control. This view helped establish modern managerial systems, particularly by introducing planning, specialization, standard procedures, and performance measurement. Yet it also constructed a managerial imagination in which the worker was often understood primarily as a productive unit within a technical system. In this paradigm, leadership was not mainly concerned with human flourishing, meaning,



psychological safety, or long-term vitality; rather, it was evaluated through output, time discipline, cost reduction, and operational predictability.

The efficiency-oriented philosophy of leadership became further institutionalized through bureaucratic organization. Weber's analysis of bureaucracy emphasized hierarchy, formal authority, rules, specialization, and impersonal administration as mechanisms for rational coordination (Weber, 1978). Bureaucratic logic offered stability and predictability, especially for large organizations, but it also contributed to a separation between organizational effectiveness and human experience. Within bureaucratic and scientific-management traditions, the leader's role was to design structures, assign tasks, monitor compliance, and ensure that organizational members performed according to predetermined standards. Although these principles contributed to administrative efficiency, they also narrowed leadership to a managerial technology of control. Human beings were frequently managed as labor inputs rather than as whole persons embedded in emotional, social, ethical, and developmental contexts.

The human relations movement challenged the reduction of work to technical efficiency by emphasizing social relations, morale, informal groups, and employee attitudes. Mayo's (1933) work drew attention to the psychological and social dimensions of work, suggesting that productivity could not be fully explained through physical conditions or formal incentives alone. Later, McGregor (1960) distinguished between managerial assumptions that view employees as passive and externally controlled and assumptions that view them as self-directed, responsible, and capable of growth. These developments expanded the philosophical basis of leadership by introducing the idea that human motivation, participation, and development are not secondary concerns but central conditions of organizational effectiveness. Nevertheless, many organizations continued to treat human-centered practices instrumentally: employee satisfaction, motivation, and participation were valued mainly because they improved productivity.

In the second half of the twentieth century, leadership theory increasingly moved beyond administrative control toward inspiration, values, ethics, and transformation. Burns (1978) distinguished transactional leadership, based on exchange and compliance, from transforming leadership, which elevates the motives, values, and moral aspirations of both leaders and followers. Bass (1985) later developed transformational leadership as a major framework emphasizing vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These approaches weakened the purely mechanistic conception of leadership by suggesting that leaders shape meaning, identity, commitment, and collective purpose. However, even transformational leadership has sometimes been criticized when organizational transformation remains primarily tied to performance intensification rather than human sustainability. A leader may inspire employees to exceed expectations while still reproducing overwork, emotional exhaustion, and long-term depletion.

The rise of ethical, servant, responsible, and stakeholder-oriented leadership further broadened leadership philosophy. Greenleaf (1977) conceptualized servant leadership as beginning with the desire to serve, emphasizing the growth, autonomy, and well-being of followers. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) defined ethical leadership as the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, relationships, communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory redirected organizational attention from shareholder primacy to the legitimate interests of multiple stakeholders. Similarly, Maak and Pless (2006) framed responsible leadership as a relational and ethical phenomenon embedded

in stakeholder society. These perspectives altered the moral grammar of leadership: leaders became not only agents of efficiency and performance but also custodians of trust, dignity, fairness, and social responsibility.

At the same time, contemporary organizations operate in conditions of volatility, complexity, digitalization, ecological crisis, social inequality, and workforce fragility. Complexity leadership theory argues that leadership in knowledge-producing systems cannot be reduced to top-down command; rather, it involves enabling adaptive, emergent, and networked forms of problem solving (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). This shift is crucial because efficiency-oriented leadership assumes that organizational problems can be solved through optimization, prediction, and control, whereas complex environments require learning, resilience, distributed intelligence, and adaptive capacity. In such contexts, human sustainability becomes a strategic and ethical issue. Organizations that exhaust attention, trust, health, creativity, and social connection may achieve short-term output but weaken the very human capacities on which long-term adaptation depends.

The concept of sustainability has traditionally been discussed in relation to environmental and economic systems, but scholars increasingly emphasize the human and social dimensions of sustainability. Elkington's (1997) triple bottom line framework expanded organizational performance beyond profit to include people and planet. Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) similarly argued that corporate sustainability requires meeting present stakeholder needs without compromising the ability to meet future stakeholder needs. Pfeffer (2010) specifically criticized the neglect of the human factor in sustainability debates, arguing that management practices have direct and indirect effects on employee health and mortality. This argument is central to the present study: leadership philosophy cannot be considered sustainable if it preserves financial or operational performance while consuming human energy, dignity, well-being, and developmental possibility.

Sustainable human resource management has further developed this line of thought by emphasizing long-term employability, employee well-being, social legitimacy, and the renewal of human resources rather than their short-term exploitation. Ehnert et al. (2016) showed that sustainability reporting increasingly includes human resource issues, while Stahl et al. (2020) argued for a multi-stakeholder and multidimensional approach to HRM that connects corporate sustainability and social responsibility. Sustainable leadership also challenges short-termism. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) distinguished sustainable leadership practices from shareholder-first approaches, emphasizing long-term orientation, employee development, ethical behavior, social responsibility, and organizational resilience. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) similarly argued that sustainable leadership preserves and develops deep learning, avoids depletion, and creates lasting benefit rather than temporary improvement.

Despite these theoretical advances, a significant gap remains in explaining how leadership philosophy actually evolves from efficiency orientation toward human sustainability. Existing studies often examine particular leadership styles, such as ethical, servant, transformational, responsible, or sustainable leadership, but fewer studies investigate the deeper philosophical transition through which leaders reinterpret the meaning of performance, the nature of employees, the purpose of organizations, and the responsibilities of leadership. The issue is not merely whether leaders use supportive behaviors; it is whether they move from a worldview in which people are instruments of organizational efficiency to a worldview in which organizational performance must be designed around the preservation and development of human life, capability, meaning, and dignity.

This gap is especially important in urban organizational contexts such as Tehran, where organizations face intense economic pressure, technological change, competition, uncertainty, and workforce expectations. In such environments, efficiency remains a powerful managerial demand. However, leaders and HR professionals

increasingly encounter the hidden costs of efficiency-driven systems, including burnout, turnover intention, mistrust, emotional exhaustion, work-family conflict, and declining commitment. A qualitative theory-development approach is therefore appropriate because it allows the researcher to explore not only practices but also meanings, assumptions, tensions, and interpretive shifts. Grounded theory is particularly useful when the aim is to construct an explanatory model from participants' experiences rather than test a predefined hypothesis (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Accordingly, the present study seeks to develop a theoretical model of leadership philosophy evolution from efficiency orientation to human sustainability. It investigates how managers, HR professionals, and organizational experts interpret the limitations of efficiency-centered leadership, how they describe the emergence of human sustainability concerns, and what philosophical assumptions define a more sustainable leadership paradigm. The aim of this study is to develop a qualitative theory explaining the evolution of leadership philosophy from efficiency orientation to human sustainability in Tehran-based organizations.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative theory-development design based on grounded theory methodology. The purpose was not to measure the prevalence of predefined leadership behaviors, but to generate an explanatory model of how leadership philosophy evolves from efficiency orientation to human sustainability. Grounded theory was selected because it enables systematic development of conceptual categories from empirical data through constant comparison, theoretical sampling, coding, memo writing, and integration of categories (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The research followed an interpretive orientation, assuming that leadership philosophy is constructed through managers' experiences, organizational narratives, institutional pressures, and reflective interpretations of work, people, performance, and responsibility.

Participants consisted of 24 individuals working in Tehran-based organizations. The sample included senior managers, middle managers, human resource managers, organizational development specialists, leadership consultants, and strategy experts. Participants were selected through purposive sampling at the beginning of the study because they had direct experience with leadership practices, organizational change, employee well-being issues, and performance management systems. As analysis progressed, theoretical sampling was used to select additional participants who could clarify emerging categories, especially the categories of human depletion, relational responsibility, and regenerative leadership. Inclusion criteria were at least seven years of professional experience, direct involvement in leadership or organizational development decisions, employment or consulting experience in Tehran-based organizations, and willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview. Participants who lacked leadership-related experience or were unable to provide reflective accounts of organizational leadership practices were excluded.

Data were collected only through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included broad questions such as: "How do you describe the dominant leadership philosophy in your organization?", "What does efficiency mean in managerial practice?", "What human costs have you observed in efficiency-driven leadership?", "How has the meaning of effective leadership changed in recent years?", "What does human sustainability mean from a leadership perspective?", and "What leadership practices help preserve employees' energy, dignity, learning, and long-term capacity?" Follow-up questions were used to obtain examples, clarify meanings, and explore

contradictions. Interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a private setting or through secure online meetings, depending on participant availability. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when additional interviews no longer produced substantially new categories or relationships among categories. Three further interviews were conducted to confirm the adequacy of the emerging model and refine the central category. The final sample size was therefore 24 participants. This number was considered appropriate because the study aimed for depth, conceptual richness, and category saturation rather than statistical representativeness.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software. The software was used to store transcripts, assign participant attributes, code text segments, compare categories, retrieve quotations, and organize analytical memos. Analysis began with open coding, during which meaningful statements were identified and labeled. Examples of initial codes included “people as replaceable resources,” “pressure hidden behind productivity,” “managerial obsession with speed,” “burnout as organizational cost,” “leader as protector of energy,” “dignity in decision-making,” “psychological safety,” “voice as sustainability,” and “performance without depletion.” In axial coding, related codes were grouped into higher-level categories, and relationships among conditions, actions, interactions, and consequences were examined. In selective coding, one central category was identified and used to integrate all major categories into a coherent theoretical model.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through several procedures. First, constant comparison was used across interviews to identify similarities, differences, and variations in participants’ accounts. Second, analytical memos were written throughout the research process to document conceptual decisions and emerging theoretical relationships. Third, peer debriefing was conducted with two qualitative research experts who reviewed the coding structure and category definitions. Fourth, member checking was performed with five participants, who were asked to comment on the clarity and plausibility of the emerging model. Fifth, maximum variation in participants’ professional backgrounds helped capture different perspectives on leadership philosophy. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and removal of identifying organizational and personal information from transcripts.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 24 participants from Tehran-based organizations. Fourteen participants were male and 10 were female. In terms of professional role, six participants were senior managers, five were middle managers, five were human resource managers, four were organizational development specialists, two were leadership consultants, and two were strategy experts. Participants’ work experience ranged from 7 to 26 years. Seven participants had 7–10 years of experience, nine had 11–15 years, five had 16–20 years, and three had more than 20 years of experience. Regarding organizational sector, seven participants worked in technology and digital-service companies, five in financial and banking organizations, four in manufacturing and industrial firms, three in healthcare-related organizations, three in public-sector organizations, and two in professional consulting firms. Educationally, 15 participants held master’s degrees and nine held doctoral degrees or were doctoral candidates. This diversity enabled the study to capture leadership philosophy across different organizational settings while maintaining a shared contextual focus on Tehran-based organizations.

The analysis produced five main categories: mechanistic efficiency orientation, recognition of human depletion, ethical-relational reframing of leadership, integration of performance and human sustainability, and emergence of regenerative leadership philosophy. The central category was “leadership as stewardship of sustainable human capacity.” This central category explains the movement from viewing leadership as a mechanism for extracting efficiency to viewing leadership as a responsibility for preserving and developing the human conditions that make long-term performance possible.

Mechanistic efficiency orientation. The first category refers to a leadership philosophy dominated by speed, control, measurement, cost reduction, and output maximization. Participants described this orientation as deeply embedded in formal systems, especially performance appraisal, budgeting, reporting, and managerial promotion criteria. In this logic, leaders are rewarded for meeting targets, reducing costs, shortening deadlines, and increasing productivity, while the human consequences of such pressure remain invisible. A senior manager stated, “For many years, a good manager was someone who could get more work from fewer people. Nobody asked what happened to those people after six months.” Another participant explained, “Efficiency became a language that silenced everything else. If someone talked about fatigue or meaning, it was treated as weakness.” This category shows that efficiency orientation is not merely a set of techniques; it is a philosophy that defines what counts as rational, valuable, and legitimate in leadership.

Recognition of human depletion. The second category emerged when participants described the hidden costs of efficiency-centered leadership. These costs included burnout, emotional exhaustion, turnover, cynicism, reduced trust, loss of creativity, presenteeism, and weakening of organizational commitment. Participants emphasized that efficiency gains often appeared positive in short-term reports but produced long-term fragility. One HR manager noted, “The dashboard was green, but people were empty. We achieved the quarterly targets, but the team had no energy left for the next quarter.” Another participant stated, “The organization was proud of being lean, but it was actually becoming weak because every person was carrying the work of two or three people.” Recognition of depletion therefore became a turning point. Leaders began to understand that human capacity is not an unlimited resource and that leadership practices can either renew or consume employees’ psychological, social, and developmental energy.

Ethical-relational reframing of leadership. The third category refers to a shift in how leaders understand responsibility. Participants argued that leadership cannot be reduced to task allocation and performance control because managerial decisions affect employees’ dignity, health, family life, learning opportunities, and sense of worth. In this category, leadership is reframed as an ethical and relational practice. A leadership consultant explained, “When a leader decides on workload, deadlines, or communication style, they are not only managing work; they are shaping people’s lives.” Another participant said, “Human sustainability starts when the manager stops asking only, ‘Did we reach the target?’ and also asks, ‘What did reaching this target do to our people?’” Participants linked this reframing to trust, fairness, voice, respect, psychological safety, and honest communication. The leader becomes responsible not only for results but also for the relational conditions through which results are produced.

Integration of performance and human sustainability. The fourth category shows that participants did not interpret human sustainability as opposition to performance. Instead, they argued that sustainable performance requires the integration of productivity with well-being, learning, resilience, and meaning. Participants rejected both exploitative efficiency and superficial welfare programs. They emphasized redesigning work systems,

redefining performance indicators, developing participatory decision-making, monitoring workload, supporting recovery, and treating employee voice as strategic data. One middle manager stated, “Human sustainability does not mean lowering standards. It means designing standards that people can achieve without destroying themselves.” Another participant added, “The best performance system is not the one that pushes people hardest; it is the one that keeps people capable, creative, and committed over time.” This category indicates a philosophical synthesis: efficiency remains important, but it is subordinated to a broader understanding of long-term organizational vitality.

Emergence of regenerative leadership philosophy. The fifth category represents the most advanced stage of the theoretical model. Participants described regenerative leadership as a philosophy that actively restores and expands human capacity. This includes developing employees’ skills, strengthening autonomy, creating meaning, building community, supporting reflection, enabling learning from mistakes, and protecting human dignity during change. A senior manager said, “A sustainable leader leaves people stronger than before. If people become smaller, more afraid, and more exhausted under my leadership, then I have failed, even if the numbers look good.” Another participant explained, “In the new philosophy, leadership is not pressure from above; it is the creation of conditions where people can think, grow, recover, and contribute.” Regenerative leadership therefore goes beyond reducing harm. It positions leadership as a developmental force that renews human energy, social trust, organizational learning, and adaptive capacity.

The theoretical model developed from the findings suggests a sequential but non-linear evolution. Organizations often begin with mechanistic efficiency orientation because it provides visible metrics, managerial control, and short-term performance gains. Over time, however, accumulated human depletion exposes the limits of this philosophy. When leaders recognize that exhausted employees cannot sustain innovation, commitment, or resilience, they begin to reinterpret leadership responsibility in ethical and relational terms. This reinterpretation enables the integration of performance and human sustainability. At the highest level, leadership becomes regenerative: it does not merely prevent burnout but actively cultivates sustainable human capacity. The core proposition of the model is that leadership philosophy evolves when leaders redefine people from “resources to be optimized” into “human beings whose capacity must be protected, renewed, and developed.”

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding showed that efficiency orientation remains a powerful inherited leadership philosophy in contemporary organizations. Participants described efficiency as a managerial language centered on speed, control, measurement, and output maximization. This finding is consistent with the legacy of scientific management, where the central managerial task was to discover and enforce the most efficient way of performing work (Taylor, 1911). It also reflects bureaucratic rationality, in which formal rules, hierarchy, specialization, and impersonal control are used to secure predictability and coordination (Weber, 1978). The present study extends these classical perspectives by showing that efficiency orientation persists not only as a technical system but also as a philosophical assumption about people and performance. In the participants’ accounts, the efficiency paradigm made human experience visible only when it affected output. This supports the argument that managerial systems often institutionalize narrow performance definitions that privilege measurable productivity over less

visible human consequences. The finding also helps explain why many organizations may adopt modern leadership vocabulary while continuing to operate through older control-based assumptions.

The second finding concerned recognition of human depletion as the critical turning point in leadership philosophy. Participants emphasized that efficiency-centered leadership can produce burnout, emotional exhaustion, distrust, turnover, and reduced creativity. This finding strongly aligns with Pfeffer's (2010) argument that organizations have often neglected the human factor in sustainability, even though management practices affect employee health, well-being, and mortality. It also resonates with sustainable HRM literature, which argues that organizations must avoid consuming human resources in pursuit of short-term performance and instead preserve long-term employability, well-being, and human capability (Ehnert et al., 2016; Stahl et al., 2020). The present study contributes to this literature by identifying "human depletion" as a conceptual bridge between efficiency critique and human sustainability. Participants did not reject performance; rather, they argued that performance becomes fragile when it is achieved through the exhaustion of the people who produce it. This finding suggests that burnout and disengagement should not be treated merely as individual psychological issues but as indicators of a flawed leadership philosophy.

The third finding revealed an ethical-relational reframing of leadership. Participants described leadership decisions as decisions that shape employees' dignity, trust, voice, health, and life conditions. This finding is consistent with ethical leadership theory, which emphasizes normatively appropriate conduct, communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown et al., 2005). It also aligns with servant leadership, which places the growth and well-being of followers at the center of leadership responsibility (Greenleaf, 1977). Moreover, the finding supports responsible leadership theory, which views leadership as a relational and ethical phenomenon involving multiple stakeholders rather than only leader-follower exchange inside the firm (Maak & Pless, 2006). The present study extends these perspectives by showing that ethical and relational leadership becomes especially important when organizations confront the human costs of efficiency. In other words, the movement toward human sustainability begins when leaders reinterpret performance decisions as moral decisions. Workload, deadlines, communication, evaluation, and restructuring are not neutral administrative acts; they are ethically consequential choices that can either protect or damage human dignity and capacity.

The fourth finding showed that human sustainability does not mean abandoning performance, but integrating performance with well-being, learning, resilience, and meaning. This finding is aligned with the triple bottom line logic, which expands organizational success beyond economic results to include people and planet (Elkington, 1997). It also reflects corporate sustainability theory, which emphasizes meeting present stakeholder needs without compromising the capacity to meet future needs (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). Sustainable leadership literature similarly argues that long-term organizational success depends on practices that develop people, preserve knowledge, encourage ethical behavior, and strengthen resilience (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). The present study contributes by clarifying that integration is not achieved through symbolic well-being programs alone. Participants criticized superficial welfare initiatives when underlying work systems continued to create overload and fear. Therefore, human sustainability requires redesigning the architecture of performance itself: indicators, incentives, routines, workload distribution, participation mechanisms, and recovery norms must be aligned with the long-term preservation of human capacity.

The fifth finding identified regenerative leadership philosophy as the most developed form of leadership evolution. Participants described sustainable leaders as those who leave people more capable, confident,

connected, and meaningful than before. This goes beyond harm reduction and corresponds with contemporary views of leadership as enabling adaptation, learning, and collective intelligence. Complexity leadership theory argues that leadership in knowledge-based environments must enable adaptive capacity, emergence, learning, and networked problem solving rather than relying exclusively on command-and-control structures (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Regenerative leadership also connects with transformational leadership's emphasis on development, inspiration, and higher-order purpose (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), but it differs by placing explicit emphasis on the renewal of human energy and dignity. The present study therefore suggests that human sustainability-oriented leadership is not simply a kinder version of performance management. It is a philosophical redefinition of leadership as stewardship of the human conditions necessary for long-term adaptation.

Overall, the findings support the development of a theory in which leadership philosophy evolves through five interconnected movements: efficiency inheritance, depletion recognition, ethical-relational reframing, performance-sustainability integration, and regenerative leadership. This model contributes to leadership studies by focusing on philosophical evolution rather than only leadership style. Much prior research examines what leaders do, while the present study emphasizes how leaders reinterpret the meaning of people, performance, and responsibility. The central category, "leadership as stewardship of sustainable human capacity," integrates sustainable leadership, responsible leadership, ethical leadership, and sustainable HRM into a theory of philosophical transition. It suggests that leadership maturity is not measured only by strategic competence or motivational ability but by the capacity to produce results without depleting the human foundations of future performance.

The findings also have important implications for organizations in Tehran and similar contexts characterized by economic uncertainty, competitive pressure, technological disruption, and workforce strain. In such contexts, efficiency pressures are real and cannot be ignored. However, the study shows that efficiency becomes dangerous when it is detached from human sustainability. Leaders may believe they are strengthening the organization by increasing speed and reducing costs, while they are actually weakening trust, learning, commitment, and resilience. The theoretical model suggests that organizations should treat human sustainability as a strategic capability rather than a peripheral HR concern. This requires senior leaders to ask whether current performance systems renew or consume human capacity.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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