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# (In)vulnerable Managers in an Immigration Context

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## Abstract

Our study examines managerial vulnerability in a bureaucratic context, namely in Finnish immigration centres. We bring a care ethics perspective to the study of vulnerability and address how managers navigate relationships with vulnerable clients and their own vulnerability. Based on empirical data collected through interviews with immigration centre managers, we show how managers negotiated their (in)vulnerability through two alternating positionalities: (1) professionalism, through which they seek to control negative emotions in order to manage their own experiences of vulnerability and affective relationships with clients, and (2) temporal disconformity, which provides space to engage and manage with a variety of emotions and manoeuvre bureaucratic professional norms. Our study then contributes to the literature on managerial work by demonstrating how managers cope with their vulnerable selves and how different notions of care emerge in complex, ethically sensitive managerial situations.

**Keywords** Ethics of care · (In)vulnerability · Immigration centre managers

## Introduction

Organisational research on human vulnerability has predominantly focussed on the workplace inequalities experienced by vulnerable individuals. Previous studies have identified and addressed the experiences and challenges faced by specific groups of people who are particularly vulnerable in organisational contexts, notably people with disabilities (Jammaers et al., 2016), migrants, people from different ethnic backgrounds and ethnic minorities (Holck, 2020; Zaroni et al., 2017), and precarious workers (Valenzuela et al., 2023). Vulnerability is generally conceptualised in all research as a contextual position, a state of defencelessness or lack of effective coping mechanisms against various risks, shocks, and stressors (Chambers, 1989). Vulnerable subjects are then seen as dependent on the decisions of others and rarely appear as decision-makers

themselves. Overall, vulnerability implies a limited degree of autonomy (see critical assessments in Brown et al., 2017; Fineman, 2008; Gilodi et al., 2024; Johansson & Wickström, 2023).

It is not unexpected that the role of a manager has traditionally been perceived as distant from experiences of vulnerability. Prevailing norms in the management literature have promoted the image of a manager as an individual characterised by strength, control, and extensive knowledge. Within this framework, vulnerability has been interpreted as equivalent to irrationality, weakness, or a lack of resilience (for critical assessments see e.g. Clarke et al., 2009; Corlett et al., 2019, 2021; Hay, 2014; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015; Knights & Clarke, 2017). These notions have been further reinforced in organisational models, particularly those situated within bureaucratic structures, which place great emphasis on the need for formal mechanisms to limit emotional expression. Although previously held taboos surrounding invulnerable managers and emotionless bureaucracies have since been challenged and dismantled (Gittell and Douglass, 2012; Martin et al., 1998), empirical studies of managerial vulnerability remain scarce.

To gain a more comprehensive ethical perspective on managerial work, it is essential to delve into the ways in which managers perceive, navigate, and manage their vulnerability (e.g. Corlett et al., 2019; Grønbaek

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Pors, 2019; Hay, 2014, 2022; Sims, 2003). In our conceptualisation, we draw on Gilson's (2014) distinction between context-specific and ontological forms of vulnerability. Context-specific vulnerability refers to "specific manifestations of vulnerability within the social context that individuals experience differently due to their different positions" (p. 37). These facets of vulnerability have been extensively documented in studies that illustrate the experiences of those who are positionally vulnerable. Conversely, ontological vulnerability, as described by Gilson, is an "inevitable state of receptivity, openness, and the capacity to both influence and be influenced" (p. 37) and has received comparatively less attention. It is this dimension of vulnerability that we draw on to shift the analytical focus towards understanding managerial vulnerability. Accordingly, our study seeks to elucidate how managers deal with anxieties and concerns that go beyond rational and transactional relationships and navigate their own vulnerability.

As acknowledging one's vulnerability informs interactions and practices involving others (Johansson & Wickström, 2023), we draw on feminist (care) ethics (e.g. Antoni & Beer, 2023; Levay & Andersson Bäck, 2021; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015; Tronto, 2013), with a particular focus on the notion of caring with others (e.g. Antoni & Beer, 2023; Johansson & Wickström, 2023). From this perspective, vulnerability is seen as an indicator of openness and the ability to connect with others, rather than a sign of weakness. As a result, care is seen as an inherent aspect of human relationships and interdependencies. At the same time, existing literature has emphasised how caring relationships emerge from mutual dependency and the ambivalence surrounding this dependency (Fotaki, 2023). However, these democratic and humane principles may favour close relationships, raising questions about their feasibility in bureaucratic contexts (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). Given the limited empirical research in this area, it is crucial to understand how managers navigate this potential paradox.

Our empirical data are drawn from reception centres for asylum seekers in Finland, providing important insights into the multifaceted ethical challenges often faced in such settings (e.g. Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; Darling, 2011; Vandevordt, 2018). In the field of immigration management, ethical dilemmas often arise from the operational environment, which includes factors such as the lack of clear instructions and policies, value conflicts such as unfair decisions on asylum applications, and relational sources such as inadequate support (Okkonen & Takala, 2019). Such circumstances evoke emotions and feelings related to the vulnerability of asylum seekers. At the same time, reception centres are characterised by bureaucratic regulations that emphasise a professional ethos, with a focus

on impartiality, objectivity, and depersonalisation (du Gay, 2008; Valenzuela, 2019). Drawing on empirical data from 26 interviews with immigration centre managers, we explore their managerial work in relation to care and vulnerability.

Our findings show how managers both experience and manage their vulnerability within their organisational context. The managers drew on a professional discourse that helped them to mitigate their vulnerability by emphasising bureaucratic ethos, professionalism, and emotion regulation. By constructing boundaries, managers produced coping mechanisms that to some extent distanced them from their clients. Conversely, managers also employed an alternative discourse characterised by temporal disconformity, which challenges the rigidity of strict professional norms. This discourse enabled managers to carve out temporal spaces within the confines of bureaucratic regulations, thereby facilitating the cultivation of relationships founded on empathy.

Our contribution to research on vulnerability within management and organisational studies (e.g. Corlett et al., 2019, 2021; Sims, 2003) is to highlight how managers position themselves in relation to vulnerable clients while managing their own sense of vulnerability. We argue that such experiences can expand the boundaries of managerial agency within organisational relationships. At the same time, we consider how maintaining a degree of distance from deeply caring relationships serves as a managerial coping strategy to address and manage the limits of one's vulnerability.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we present our theoretical framework on the ethics of care, followed by an exploration of the context of immigration management as a site of managerial vulnerability. We then consider the empirical context and research materials. We then offer an analysis of how immigration managers manage their vulnerability within their managerial roles. Finally, we engage in a discussion and present our conclusions, elaborating on how managers navigate vulnerability in complex situations.

## Feminist Ethics of Care as an Approach to Vulnerability as a Shared Phenomenon

In (feminist) ethics of care, interpersonal dependency and vulnerability are highlighted, as people both give and receive care all the time, not only when they are very young, old, or ill (Tronto, 2013). All humans are fragile and vulnerable, and some more than others, as vulnerability is experienced uniquely by each of us (Fineman, 2008). This experience is shaped by the quality and quantity of the resources that we have or can control. Care ethics thus departs from a more mainstream thinking, in which vulnerability is often considered a flawed condition that undermines citizens' autonomy and independence (see e.g. Fineman, 2008; Held, 2005; Kittay, 1999; Tronto, 1993, 2013). In this study, we

use Tronto's (2013) concept of democratic care, or more specifically *caring with*, which argues that collective responsibility, rather than individual responsibility, can generate relationality, 'togetherness' at an organisational level.

Tronto's (1993) political ethics of care originally included four phases and related moral qualities—developed with Berenice Fisher—regarding how care can be practised: attentiveness—noticing unmet caring needs; responsibility—taking the burden of those noticed needs; competence—actual care work; and responsiveness—responding to the care work. These phases are concerned with caring about, caring for and giving and receiving care (Tronto, 1993). Later, Tronto (2013) introduced a fifth phase, caring with, as a solution to one-dimensional, self-interested ways of thinking about politics and the world in general. Caring with completes the set of caring practices by adding plurality, communication, trust, and respect to the moral qualities (cf. Sevenhuijsen, 1998). In summary, caring with is about solidarity, collective responsibility that requires trust, and an activity in which people are constantly engaged. Tronto (2013) concludes that through the practice of democratic caring, we can care for each other, actualise solidarity, distribute responsibility, flatten social hierarchies, and care for democracy itself, so that everyone can live well, not just the few.

Tronto's concept of democratic care stems from the study of care practices between citizens at the societal level. However, these care perspectives are increasingly used in organisational research, for example, in the management of (external) stakeholders (e.g. Antoni et al., 2020; Liedtka, 1996; Linsley & Slack, 2013; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) and in approaching professional (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Johansson & Wickström, 2023) and managerial (Johansson & Edwards, 2021; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Pullen & Vachhani, 2021; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015) work from a feminist ethics and/or ethics of care perspective. Care ethics has further shed new light on work teams (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012) and interactions between disabled forced migrants and professionals (Ottosdottir & Evans, 2014). This body of work shows that the expression of care in a professional field involves a deep entanglement between caring values and the development of particular skills in situated contexts (Antoni & Beer, 2023).

At the same time, however, scholars have noted that assumptions of care can sometimes be built on paternalism, raise questions about prioritisation, or have self-sacrificial tenets (e.g. Durmuş, 2022; Hoagland, 1990; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Pettersen, 2012). Accordingly, scholars have increasingly called for multiplicity, complexity, openness, and relational reciprocity to challenge the fixed and predetermined perception of caring leadership as always serving others (Levay & Andersson Bäck, 2021; Nicholson & Kurucz,

2019; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015). For example, Johansson and Wickström (2023) explored how marginalised individuals' sense of otherness enabled them to promote concern and care for others in a theatre organisation. The authors argued that the vulnerability arising from otherness created sensitivity to inequalities, which led to caring with others rather than caring for them (see Tronto, 2013). In result, "individuals who expressed caring intentions sought to 'co-become' with the care receivers building upon empathic emotions and affective connectedness" (Johansson & Wickström, 2023, p. 329). Thus, caring with can mitigate power differentials between parties and prevent caring from becoming paternalistic, thus providing spaces for ethical agency. Nevertheless, overcoming these power dynamics can be challenging. Therefore, we now turn to the bureaucratic context of immigration management.

## Immigration Management as the Site of Analysis for Managerial Vulnerability

Research in immigration management has commonly applied vulnerability to address the experienced disadvantages of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees and evaluate the required state obligations towards them (Koistinen, 2017; Leboeuf, 2022). Hence, vulnerability in the (im)migration context is often used as a bureaucratic category to identify those who are considered at risk of being subjected to discriminatory practices, social and economic disadvantages, and violations or abuse of human rights and those who lack the capacity to avoid, resist, or recover from harm (Flegar, 2018; Gilodi et al., 2024).

Much of the earlier work on immigration management focuses on street-level bureaucrats (Andreetta & Nakueira, 2022; Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; Eggebø, 2012; Zacka, 2017), while the ambiguities and vulnerabilities faced by management-level staff have received less attention. However, the positions rarely are clear-cut. This is because in an immigration context, managerial work intertwines with bureaucratic norms and grassroots work as managers collaborate closely with other civil servants, such as the police, and are obliged to execute immigration procedures and laws related to the reception centre context. Yet there tends to be limited possibilities for practising care in bureaucratic conditions. For example, beliefs in "procedural correctness" (Wettergren, 2010, p. 414) result in mitigation of work-related ambivalences and suppressing one's feelings such as guilt, shame, and anxiety. Reliance on professionalism is considered a form of protection from emotional exhaustion and burnout (Swinkels & van Meijl, 2020; Wettergren, 2010). Professionalism has been metaphorically described as putting "on a mask" that enables migrant integration policy officials to

disconnect “emotionally from political values, but also from concrete incidents at work to which they might have objected on personal grounds” (Swinkels & van Meijl, 2020, p. 72).

While bureaucracies often appear to be rigid and constrained operating environments, there are in fact opportunities for manoeuvre within them. Reception centres represent a particular type of bureaucratic organisation in which interpersonal relationships play a central role (Gittell & Douglass, 2012). The role of managers in these centres inherently involves caring for clients. However, their agency is often constrained by bureaucratic structures and organisational processes, fragmented and hierarchical relationships, and certain professional standards, including the duty to treat clients impartially, maintain emotional neutrality, and exercise authority responsibly. There is thus a constant negotiation between being relationally attentive to others’ concerns, addressing the immediate situation at hand, and maintaining professionalism to avoid overly personal relationships and potential bias.

In addition, centre managers are not only street-level workers, but also have managerial responsibilities. This multifaceted professional complexity further complicates their work as they juggle multiple demands, providing an opportunity to explore the multidimensional nature of managerial vulnerability in the context of care work. Our understanding of vulnerability differs from the conventional view of it as a position and an attribute, as we consider it to be an ontological condition. Gilson (2016, p. 72) describes vulnerability as the basis of our responsiveness to each other: “It is because we are vulnerable that we need ethics and social justice, but it is also because we are vulnerable—because we can be affected and made to feel sorrow, concern, or empathy—that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically or seek justice”. This perspective allows us to practice caring in a broader sense, encompassing attentiveness to the needs of others, emotional and cognitive connection, and mutual respect. It highlights the importance of leaders extending this care not only to others, but also to themselves or their multiple and divided selves (Driver, 2023; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012).

## Methodology and Methods

### Context: Refugee Crisis and Reception Centres in Finland

In 2015, Europe faced an unseen influx of asylum seekers, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. This event is generally called Europe’s refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2015). There was a rapid increase in asylum seekers entering Finland that year, with nearly 32,500 asylum seekers seeking international protection (over the 10 years prior to 2015, there had been a steady rate of 3000–4000 asylum seekers

per year; Finnish Immigration Service, 2017). The government needed to act rapidly in a crisis-like situation through measures such as border controls and accommodation for asylum seekers.

The Finnish Immigration Service responded to this massive increase in asylum applications by tightening its interpretation of asylum policy (Saarikkomäki et al., 2018). For example, asylum seekers’ fear of violence and other forms of persecution (e.g. certain religious convictions) in their home country were no longer considered legitimate reasons for international protection in 2017, as they were in 2015. Moreover, by 2017, asylum seekers were required to give much more detailed proof of their experienced persecution. Hence, the number of undocumented asylum seekers staying illegally in Finland (without social security) rose, as they were increasingly denied residence permits but either refused to leave for their home country voluntarily or were unable to be forcibly deported (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021).

Our empirical fieldwork targets immigration managers working in reception centres<sup>1</sup> as an important site for the study of vulnerability in managerial work (Patton, 2002). The context we study is unique in that centre managers are not street-level workers per se but have other managerial responsibilities that add to the complexity of their work as they attempt to navigate multiple demands. Managerial work in this type of context involves implementing decisions made by immigration officials. While sometimes asylum seekers receive a residence permit, in which case their integration into Finnish society is supported at the reception centre, sometimes managers are involved in carrying out forced deportations (asylum seekers who are forcibly returned to their home country after a residence permit has been refused). Refusal of residence permits can lead to agony and despair for asylum-seeking families, especially when children are involved. In addition, prolonged processing of residence permits can lead to frustration and mental health problems when asylum seekers are subjected to prolonged living in a passivating environment and precarious situation. This situation can sometimes last for several years.

### Data Collection

The study involved semi-structured interviews with a total of 20 immigration centre managers, assistant managers, and area managers (7 women and 13 men) working across 20 reception centres in Finland, elaborated in Table 1 below.

<sup>1</sup> In Finland, the required services are determined in the Act on the Reception of Persons Applying for International Protection and on the Identification of and Assistance to Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings (746/2011).

**Table 1** Participants of the study

Participants	Age	Position	Working experience as a centre manager, assistant manager, or area manager	Working experience in the context of immigration
Allison (interviewed twice)	40	Area manager	8 years	10 years
Andrew (interviewed twice)	31	Manager	1 year and 5 months	1 year and 4 months
Claire (interviewed twice)	36	Manager	1 year and 3 months	3 years
Dylan	36	Manager	2 years	2 years
Eleanor	33	Manager	6 months	1 year and 2 months
Evelyn	51	Manager	12 years	21 years
Henry	44	Manager	7 months	4 years
Jack	53	Manager	4 years and 6 months	18 years
Jason (interviewed twice)	38	Manager	3 years and 10 months	18 years
John	48	Manager	3 years	6 years
Jonathan	43	Manager	4 years and 6 months	20 years and 6 months
Leo (interviewed twice)	43	Assistant manager	2 years and 11 months	2 years and 11 months
Lucy	42	Assistant manager	6 months	18 years
Luke (interviewed twice)	33	Manager	6 months	1 year and 6 months
Natalie	45	Manager	1 year 6 months	1 year and 6 months
Nolan	46	Manager	8 years	13 years
Nora	62	Manager	4 years 6 months	12 years
Oliver	57	Assistant manager	3 years and 11 months	32 years
Ryan	44	Manager	9 years	19 years
Sebastian	55	Manager	1 year 4 months	1 year and 4 months

At the time of the interviews (between 2017 and 2020), the number of reception centres varied from 79 in 2017 to 33 in 2020. The first set of interviews (20 in total) was conducted by the second author between 2017 and 2019. In addition, six more interviews were conducted in the fall of 2020 (also by the second author) by re-interviewing some of the managers who had been interviewed in the first interview round.

A purposeful sampling strategy was applied, focusing on immigration reception centre managers. Potential participants were contacted by calling reception centre offices and asking for managers' contact details, as these were not publicly available. In addition, participants were contacted through snowball sampling, with existing participants being asked to suggest colleagues who might be willing to participate in the study. The managers who agreed to participate were sent a follow-up email with a brief explanation of the study and a consent form. They were asked in advance to think about any ethical dilemmas they had encountered in their managerial roles. The managers' educational background varied, including nursing, the military, and political or social science.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face, on the phone, or on Teams in Finnish. The average time per interview was a little over an hour, and in total,

the interviews constituted 26 h and 17 min of audio recordings. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participants' quotes were eventually translated from Finnish into English preserving interviewees' authentic tone as much as possible. All names used are pseudonyms.

Although the interview questions were based on predetermined topics, the interviewer spontaneously rephrased questions. The interviews were also aimed at giving room to interviewees' voices and enabling their perspectives and experiences to emerge (Bell et al., 2019; Patton, 2002). This created room for discussion, as the interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on their accounts. The first 20 interviews included the following topics: background information (age and working experience); general questions (e.g. how satisfied interviewees were and/or had been with the work); an ethically challenging situation or situations, including specific questions on (a) the situation (e.g. What happened? Why? When? Who was involved?), (b) the consequences (e.g. feelings, reactions, and outcomes), and (c) reflections (e.g. Were there alternative ways to act?). The reflections on ethically challenging situations at work related to issues such as the termination of reception services after asylum seekers were denied residence permits, the ambiguity of discretionary power, children's interest and vulnerability, and asylum seekers' mental health issues.



Six more interviews, conducted in the fall of 2020, focussed on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and reflections of this in relation to the (im)migration crisis of 2015. These re-interviews included a brief recap of what had been discussed during the first interview round, and the current situation was then elaborated in relation to the earlier discussion.

## Data Analysis

When analysing the interviews, we undertook an interpretative and relational–constructionist stand, as our aim was to understand the interviewees' subjective and lived experiences (Grandy, 2018; see Cunliffe, 2008, 2011). This perspective focuses on the micro-level in terms of how individuals create meaning intersubjectively and dialogically in a particular setting. Cunliffe's (2008) notion of relationally responsive orientation to being and knowing considers that intersubjectivity is more than two individuals negotiating meaning. Thus, experience is intersubjective and dialogical (Cunliffe, 2008, 2011), and multiple local rationalities, realities, and forms of life emerge in these ongoing relational processes (Hosking, 2011).

We applied thematic analysis to identify certain patterns that emerged in the interviews. Specifically, we aimed to identify and make sense of the main themes in the interviews (Bell et al., 2019; Patton, 2002). The first round of analysis focussed on the ethical dilemmas that the managers had encountered in their work in reception centres. The second round focussed on specific features of the ethics of care, such as care, compassion, emotional involvement, receptiveness, and responsibility. Emotions and feelings (e.g. anger, frustration, guilt, and sadness), as well as experienced trust issues and social and procedural injustices (related to asylum seekers) were open coded (Bell et al., 2019). Finally, bureaucratic ethos, professionalism (separation between professional and private selves), and emotion regulation were added as open codes.

In particular, we considered how managers experienced and constructed their own vulnerability. We did this by first focussing on a discourse that emphasised care, concern, compassion, and trust, as well as anger in relation to social and/or procedural injustices, which we interpreted as implying that managers were inevitably affected by their client cases. We then explored how managers navigated this vulnerability. Our analysis and findings indicated alternating positions. The managers drew on a professional discourse that helped them to mitigate their vulnerability by emphasising bureaucratic ethos, professionalism, and emotion regulation. By constructing boundaries, managers produced coping mechanisms that to some extent distanced them from their clients. On the other hand, managers refuted strict professional norms through a temporal discourse of

disconformity, which allowed them to find temporal space within the bureaucratic rules of their organisation and to develop relationships through empathy.

We discuss these findings by first presenting how managers construct their vulnerability and then move on to analyse the two discursive responses used to navigate experiences of vulnerability, namely professional discourse and temporal disconformity discourse. Although we present these two discourses separately, it is important to emphasise that the managers reproduced both discourses, the occurrences of which were situated and tied to specific events, situations, and cases. Therefore, the two discourses were not competing but coexisted as managers navigated their work (Hosking, 2011).

## The Vulnerable Manager

A close reading of our data unveiled how the key ethical dilemmas revolved around the issue of residence permits and the arduous position of the managers. The managers felt vulnerable because at times they lacked confidence in their institutions, doubting the capacity of the Finnish Immigration Service to handle asylum seekers' cases in just and humane ways. For example, Allison felt mistrust towards the Finnish Immigration Service, as the decisions had been "quite odd in recent years" and "it has gone illogical".

I wish they'll get things working there [the Finnish Immigration Service], and then I could confidently tell the clients and staff that Finland is a constitutional state, and every case will be inspected carefully. You don't have to worry if someone receives a [residence] permit or will be returned [to their home country]. Like people are not sent to die. At the same time, they are sent to die . . . Like, of course, there is contradiction, and contradiction results in mistrust [...] Per se, you should be able to trust that no one is sent to die. (Allison)

In this narrative, Allison expressed her disappointment with the immigration service. She hoped one could rely on the integrity of the Finnish legal system, but her trust in the system had been violated. She expressed her empathy for her clients, whom she saw as "dependent on the benevolence, competence and the judgemental capacity" of the one trusted (Sevenhuijsen, 2003, p. 185).

John had lost his trust for police officers when they came to the centre to collect for deportation an older asylum seeker with some medical concerns. He articulated his feelings as follows:

And I asked the police officers—I was well acquainted with them both— "You're taking this

Kurd grandpa with you, aren't you? [Police:] "No, we are just making sure . . .," . . . and it took only a few minutes, as one officer was walking this older man [to the car], did a security check in the back of the police car, and then crammed him into the car. I, as a polite man and a professional, stood there silently and listened as one of the officers briefed the patrol and the patrol left [...] We had discussed earlier that if there were a possible detention situation [asylum seeker taken to a detention unit before deportation], please let us know, so we have time to check documents, medications, etc., a day before [...] And I said to the police officer that I got a feeling that you lied to me [...] I thought about it for a couple of sleepless nights and pondered —[what] the hell, have we failed in what we are doing?

. . . We had planned it in a certain way [deportations] and negotiated it with the police officers, and then the rug is pulled [John was not informed in beforehand of the detention of his client] . . . and you think to yourself: 'Wait a minute, you [the police] are on the right side of the law . . . , but God dammit, you cannot do it as you wish.' We are talking about human beings here who have sought asylum; human beings are in question, they are not criminals straight away. (John)

John expressed his frustration over the process, which he interpreted as failing to appreciate the immigrants' humanity. John also conveyed his disappointment over the stigmatised treatment of the deported asylum seeker. Expressing their doubts towards and disappointment in the institutional processes of immigration management in some of their client cases, both Allison and John raised the issue of *managerial unknowingness* (Hay, 2022), which exposed their vulnerability as part of the bureaucratic management. Raising the question of whether they had *failed* and having trouble sleeping after the incident, John experienced uncertainty, thus revealing the vulnerability of his own agency as part of the immigration management system as well as collective responsibility (Tronto, 2013). Similarly, Allison reflected on her vulnerability and powerlessness in front of asylum seekers (clients) and reception centre employees, as she could not promise that the asylum seekers would get just decisions and have their human rights ensured.

The stories Allison and John shared are illustrative of the manifestations of managerial vulnerability in situations where managers feel torn between the ethical complexities of client cases and the positional requirements of immigration management. Although the managers were in a position where neutrality and objectivity are key job determinants, many could not escape the intersubjective affective dynamics. Vulnerability arose from the acknowledgement of the system's flaws, which weakened

their sense of positional security. From their perspective, institutions, which should provide security and justice, produced vulnerabilities instead (see Gilodi et al., 2024).

The way in which the managers experienced and developed distrust towards security institutions was something they were perhaps not familiar with, as these institutions enjoy high trust in Finland. However, this brought them closer to understanding the situations their clients encountered. Sometimes client relations are long term, and these emerged in our data as instances of extrapolated managerial vulnerability as some of our interviewees expressed how they had been personally affected and moulded by their encounters with long-term reception centre residents. Allison described her feelings over one asylum seeker's case as follows:

I have myself progressed in my career . . . and had holiday trips . . . , and a lot has happened in my own life during this time. And then you follow [his life] year after year: how he lives in a reception centre and at times is in a very bad condition [...] Somehow this case gnaws me inside. That it takes the Finnish state 10 years to run one person in this kind of roulette: being undocumented and B-permit [temporary residence permit] holder and being an asylum seeker, I think they should get a permit on that basis. That this bureaucracy is running one small person in its machinery, and you can't go backwards or forwards. He can't plan for any future; he can't do anything but wait all the time. [...] So in this situation [my] faith that the machinery works and the Immigration Office makes good decisions and no one is sent to die and so on, you kind of think how this can be possible. Somehow, you're just mad at this system, and this doesn't go [right] by any sense of justice. [You get] kind of hues when you return [to work] from a summer holiday. You have spent a good relaxing summer vacation, and then you think about his everyday life, like how it has been the same over these 10 years. [...] [It] feels bad, and humanely and emphatically thinking, it is a terrible situation. (Allison)

Allison's affectual relations with the client had lasted for more than a decade. It is through the paradoxical difference between her own life course and the stagnation of her client, that surfaces her affectual responses and vulnerability as she articulates their helplessness at the face of the immigration process. This revealed how managers practice their work through multiple selves (Hosking, 2011), where their managerial roles intersect with and are affected by their personal selves.

We have considered above the varieties of managerial situations that subject reception centre managers to



vulnerability. We will describe next how the managers navigated these experiences of vulnerability.

## Navigating Vulnerability

We identified two alternating but overlapping strategies by which managers navigated the vulnerability and ethical dilemmas in immigration management that emerged through their work. The discourses not only position managers differently in the organisational network or relationships, but also elaborate the vulnerability-care dilemma in the work of immigration managers.

### Professional Discourse: Manager on Duty

It was common in our data that managers produced themselves as professionals who obeyed laws and procedures and could not afford to be overly emotional or affected by the client cases. For example, Henry told how his work identity was becoming detached from his personal identity:

Of course, everyone who decides to enter this kind of regulated environment must ponder “Can I do it?” before the work begins. It has been relatively easy for me. I think I am that kind [of a person] that it does not feel bad to maintain this system and act by its rules. I do not agree with everything. I do have my own personal opinions, but if I am at that job, I play with its rules. In a way, I differentiate my work-self for that job. (Henry)

Henry constructs his managerial identity through professional and societal expectations. He accepts that his managerial role naturally entails a responsibility to implement policies, even those that go against his personal values and opinions (see Swinkels & Van Meijl, 2020). This has the connotation that in the context of immigration, and specifically when working in reception centres, it is necessary to act as a rational and law-abiding professional. In our interpretation, Henry refers to a psychological agreement to comply with the bureaucratic organisational context when he mentions the importance of considering one’s fit for the position “before the work begins”. Henry suggests that his success in maintaining distance is partly explained by his personal characteristics (“being that kind of a person”). His view implies that working in immigration management may be easier for certain types of people who can survive the “regulated environment” and perhaps have a natural ability to detach from their personal identities and emotions and maintain an impersonal behaviour in client relations. Such acts of differentiating work identity from personal identity have been metaphorically described in

previous literature as adopting a mask of invulnerability (e.g. Corlett et al., 2019, 2021; Hay, 2014).

However, practices of the ‘mask of invulnerability’ type may be a nuanced phenomenon and important for coping with emotional pressures. Some of our interviewees described how their arrival in the personal sphere allowed them to be open to feelings that may have been regulated while on duty. Andrew, for example, said: “I might think about it when I leave work for home”.

Another manager, Leo, stated the following:

I do not want to take a stance, whether the process is just or not. I trust that it is. Now I responded like a politician, but I mean that I just have to trust that process, although it feels weird. (Leo)

The way Leo compared his answer to that of a “politician” was ambiguous in terms of whether he was referring to his own interpretation of the situation or the possible external judgement of bureaucratic rule. It did, however, allow him to simultaneously recognise some of the weaknesses that may be included in the system, while naturalising its operating principles through the modality of having to “trust that process”: procedural fairness, equality, and detachment, which are all essential parts of the bureaucratic ethos (e.g. du Gay, 2008).

As part of their professional parlance, the managers viewed themselves as administrators who executed the law and managed the centre. Henry expressed his conviction as follows:

To execute the law is such a great value for me. [...] I cannot put myself above the law; my judgments and opinions must not be above the law. [...] It is a greater justice and virtue than my perception of justice related to a particular individual. They [laws] protect me from distress a lot. But then there are, of course, these cases that are in the weak spots of the legal system, and then I might get a feeling that this case could be managed differently. (Henry)

Just as Henry mentioned the “weak spots of the legal system”, the managers seemed to face an inner struggle or at least pondered the rightness of the immigration management procedures. Henry eventually seemed to accept that his work included ethical contradictions, but he detached himself from evaluating the morality of the system. Henry narrates here a version of professionalism discourse, where leaning on organisational norms, rules, and procedures helps construct and maintain a sense of security (see Gilson, 2018, p. 238 and Driver, 2023) as they relieve him from being held individually accountable for immigration management decisions. Reliance on the law is an often-cited mechanism of protection against

emotional and/or ethical burden in the immigration context (e.g. Swinkels & van Meijl, 2020; Wettergren, 2010).

The managers perceived professionalism discourse as a means of shielding themselves from vulnerability while also affording them the positioning to empower asylum seekers. In this way, professionalism discourse was also connected to practising care in such ways that supported asylum seekers' agency and empowerment rather than projecting them as passive recipients of reception centre services. Evelyn, for example, mentioned the necessity of being strong in order to provide assistance to asylum seekers during the processing of their applications:

It feels bad, but I have thought it through in a way that my job as a manager . . . is not to fall into that hole together with a client but lift them up and encourage them [to accept] that this is a binding decision and now you put yourself together and life goes on. (Evelyn)

Evelyn referred to her managerial responsibility by articulating her duty to help clients cope with the uncertain situations. Evelyn managed her own affect by suggesting that it would not be helpful to become overly involved in the client's situation. Rather, by suppressing her own negative emotional reactions ("not to fall into that hole") and promoting positivity ("lift them up and encourage them"), she could best fulfil the responsibilities of her position and encourage, empower, and support asylum seekers.

Evelyn's coping mechanisms can be interpreted as a natural response to the conflicting demands of her role, as bureaucrats tend to follow certain dispositions in order to navigate the plurality of their demands and choose paths that allow them to "marshal in practice" (Zacka, 2017, p. 12). For Evelyn, the practice of caring for her clients revolved around her task of explaining the bureaucratic process to them and helping them to cope (see Zacka, 2017), while at the same time suppressing her own negative emotions (Graham, 2002; Swinkels & van Meijl, 2020; Wettergren, 2010). Here, it appears that silencing personal negative emotions is a means of practising care with the managerial self—not only caring for the other but also equally caring for the self (Pettersen, 2012). Reception centre managers embraced professionalism as a central practice in shielding their subordinates' vulnerability also:

Then there is the pressure from clients; the desperation and all that, it really comes across to the staff very strongly. And I think that my role is to support and comfort the staff in that we must be able to trust the operations and decisions of the Immigration Office, although it is not always the way I feel [that they can be trusted to be ethically right]. (Allison)

Allison recognises the vulnerability of the reception centre staff—how they are affected by the desperation of the clients.

As a manager, she approaches affective relationships through a discourse of professionalism that seeks to reinforce staff members' belief in the ethics of organisational processes in order to find "comfort" in the challenging situation. Although she expresses the presence of doubt (she does not always feel that organisational procedures are "ethically right"), she still chooses to prioritise professionalism in order to protect her subordinates from negative emotions. Managers then adopted a professional position in which their own needs and struggles were dismissed, even by themselves.

We have illustrated above how reception centre managers cope with the multiple vulnerabilities that arise in their work. The vulnerabilities they experienced were largely related to the need to carry out certain practices and make decisions that sometimes went against their own sense of what was right. The discourse of professionalism allowed managers to distance themselves from the emotional pressures of client cases; the core responsibility was to maintain an impersonal relationship with clients and to uphold organisational norms. In this way, reliance on bureaucratic organisational procedures provided a sense of security. Importantly, our analysis shows that professionalism, rather than simply suppressing their emotions, serves as a ground for emotional labour that allows managers to resolve anxiety. Moreover, they see controlling their own emotions as a form of care that can empower their clients.

### Temporal Disconformity Discourse: Manoeuvring Within the Bureaucracy

Our findings also included aspects of an alternative discourse to professionalism, namely temporal disconformity. In what follows, we show how temporal disconformity offers a temporary escape from professional norms and allows managers to maintain a connection with their emotions—something they see as essential to their own wellbeing at work.

The discourse of temporal disconformity allowed managers to talk about their own vulnerability and to express that there is more to them than the mere professional identity they draw on in the work sphere (Driver, 2023). As one manager said, "It's important that humanity is acknowledged and accepted because we are [all] human. We also have feelings underneath the professional shell" (Leo). Positioning themselves within this discourse allowed managers to question immigration management processes and step out of their official role. More specifically, managers were sometimes affected by some client cases in a way that led them to cross the boundaries set by the discourse of professionalism. For example, in some cases, managers described situations in which they went the extra mile for asylum seekers. One such example was a situation where the reception services for asylum seekers had to be terminated

after a residence permit was refused. However, as in 2016, the system was not prepared to support asylum seekers who chose to stay in Finland illegally (without papers). Nevertheless, one manager expressed his willingness to help, although it was not his duty per se:

You had to do your own decisions, and I personally went to “municipality’s responsibility area.” I . . . developed municipality’s services for asylum seekers without papers. I stepped out of my [professional] role clearly. . . I saw this as the only solution by which I could foster this couple’s [asylum seeker couple that had multiple health issues] coping in the society, or outside the society in this case. (Luke)

Luke exercised discretion (Andreetta & Nakueira, 2022; Zacka, 2017) to navigate between the official rules and asylum seekers’ needs. Luke’s concern for asylum seekers’ well-being was difficult to disregard, and he talked about a strong contradiction between his professional ethics through his education and his professional ethics associated with being a centre manager. For Luke, the decision to seek alternative solutions required him to “step out” of his professional role, which we interpret as non-conformance to bureaucratic norms (Pascoe et al., 2023). This suggested that finding spaces to exercise agency at times required the managers to distance themselves from their professional roles.

The temporal disconformity discourse made visible the managers’ tensioned relation to the expectancy to follow the organisational processes. For example, termination of reception services after declined asylum applications sometimes resulted in ethical challenges. Often, asylum seekers could not forcibly be returned to their home countries, or they were unwilling to voluntarily return, so they stayed in Finland without residence permits. Oliver, for example, illustrated the difficult situations managers found themselves in when they were the ones ending asylum seekers’ reception services after a declined residence permit decision:

In that situation, you have to face the individual’s despair, disbelief, and dissatisfaction towards Finland, officials, and that way also towards us [reception centre], even though we do not have anything to do with it [the decisions]. [...] And then you kind of have to be a police officer, Finnish Immigration Service, and a lawyer in the same meeting [where the ending of the reception services is notified] when everything, that indisposition, is poured over the centre manager. It is their [asylum seekers’] place to get rid of the bad feelings. [...] but the whole system is frustrating. It is an official decision, and they [immigration officials] should tell them [asylum seekers] their decisions. A reception centre manager shouldn’t play God. (Oliver).

Oliver’s story exemplifies the psychological strain of the manager’s jobs in this context (Zacka, 2017). Oliver’s illustration depicted not only the frustration towards the “whole system” but also the unfairness of the divided responsibilities. In the temporal disconformity discourse, the managers engaged with emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) that laid bare their struggles, and expressed their negative experiences that were typically silenced in the professionalism discourse. Here, Oliver acknowledged the limits of his autonomy and independence and claimed his vulnerability (e.g. Corlett et al., 2019) in a situation where he felt it was not their place to break the bad news to clients.

The disconformity aroused particularly when the managers considered that asylum seekers, with whom they often had developed a relationship, may have been subjected to procedural injustices. Evelyn depicted a situation from before the (im)migration crisis of 2015, where an asylum seeker family had stayed in a reception centre for a long time, and the children had “become Finns”. The family then received a declined residence permit. The family was baffled and felt a strong sense of injustice when a family from the same village ended up receiving a residence permit. Evelyn stated, “you grieved together with the family and tried to prepare them [to believe] that life goes on”. Evelyn constructed herself as being affected by the clients’ situations, as she felt sorrow and emptiness due to the unfairness that asylum seekers experienced. Evelyn practised care with others through grieving with asylum seekers who were denied a residence permit.

Sorrow can be considered “a force that places people in a co-subjective circuit of feeling and sensation, rather than standing alone and independent” (Fotaki et al., 2017, p. 4). The managers then experienced sorrow interdependently and together. Our chosen excerpt demonstrates also how the managers navigated vulnerable situations by engaging with different forms of emotional labour. This is visible in how Evelyn shows her grief outwardly, an act of emotional labour that is typically muted in bureaucratic organisational processes, and how she then performs the process of preparing the refugees to deportation.

Managing vulnerability through temporal disconformity helped managers balance between the professional requirements of their job at reception centres and maintaining humanity in processes. We return to Allison’s long-term client case again to point this out:

But it affects my thoughts about clients and things in such a way that the case [client who has spent 10 years in the reception centre] is in my mind when I, for example consider other client situations with our work groups. So I often reflect other things through this case . . . [...] And over the course of a decade, I have experienced other such cases. And it is because of those

cases that I don't easily, for example, feel pity for the people or so. It's more so that I think that the clients are resourceful, and they are survivors. But this case does make you think, and [because of that case] for me there is always a glimpse of the clients' viewpoint in the back of my mind. After all, I've had conversations with this guy for hours over the past ten years, and I've called and met him many times, especially then when he was resident in the place where I was the assistant manager. (Allison)

Allison bridges her feelings towards the specific client case with her performance of her managerial position. She clarifies that this case, which had an impact on her, now serves as a crucial asset in her work. It acts as a constant reminder of the clients' point of view, helping her resolve other client cases. In other words, she believes that the case allows her to care also for those asylum seekers that she may not know very well or have a close personal relationship with.

Lastly, we address how the two discursive positionings were drawn in different situations and how they were related to professional managerial journeys in time. More specifically, our data also showed oscillation between professionalism and temporal disconformity:

And in a way I've come to accept it, I've accepted it from myself and I also accept it from the staff that it's wonderful if we sometimes feel something so that we don't end up cynical. But then I also emphasise that it's no use for the client if we all fall into the pit together. You must know how to demonstrate a positive approach in your work that helps you strengthen and encourage [the asylum seekers]. Sometimes, I've heard stories where people are just completely helpless and just cry together. So, it's obvious that it will lead nowhere and the client doesn't benefit from it at all. (Evelyn)

Evelyn's narrative illustrates how temporal disconformity helps to develop affectual relations with the clients. Simultaneously, our reading of Evelyn's story suggests that remaining cool helps to cope with the demands of the work. Evelyn's narrative is illustrative of how she shifts positions between discourses to protect herself and her clients from her own emotions that might be possibly harmful for the process. Here *caring with* emerges as practising care with the managerial self as well as with the clients.

At another point in the interview, Evelyn further described her professional journey as an illustration of a change that had happened over the years: "Today, you have got used to these [situations] and... those people who make decisions [on residence permits] certainly do their best, and many people check them [decisions] through". Evelyn's narrative then showed how she had learned to cope with the

contradictions of her work over time, as people "get used to" things. While such positioning signals a professional learning process, developing a professional identity against becoming overly emotionally attached to client cases, the narrative also highlights how time has made her less sensitive—she limited her sensitivity to be relationally affected to protect her own vulnerable self.

## Discussion

We have examined managerial vulnerability in the context of Finnish immigration reception centres for asylum seekers. Our starting point was that recognising one's own vulnerability influences interactions and practices with others, allowing one to develop affective relationships. Our findings show how managerial vulnerability, or strategies to avoid it, was an inherent part of managerial work in the immigration centres. Managers made sense of their vulnerability through two types of discursive positions, namely professionalism and temporal disconformity. These discourses constructed managerial vulnerability and care in different ways and provided opportunities to move between positions.

Our findings showed how managers balanced bureaucratic professional behaviour (du Gay, 2008) with their individual moral codes and sense of responsibility. In the discourse of professionalism, this meant setting aside personal negative feelings and moral reflection (for similar findings, see Wettergren, 2010; Swinkels & van Meijl, 2020). In effect, managers often hardened themselves by not taking on the emotional burden of often distressing client cases in order to implement immigration policies and laws. The discourse of professionalism foregrounds the restrictive management of managers' emotions as a central means of carrying out their managerial tasks in the context in question. Managers consciously suppressed negativity and hopelessness in order to enhance other emotions, mainly positivity and hopefulness, in order to protect themselves and their subordinates from psychological stress while empowering their clients to take control of their own lives. Our findings then extend previous literature on the role of emotions in bureaucracies (Gittell & Douglass, 2012; Martin et al., 1998) by showing how the managers carefully deployed different types of emotional labour to manage their vulnerability. Overall, managing one's negative emotions was seen as a form of caring for the managerial self, subordinates, and clients. However, we believe that one should be wary of the risks of caring becoming paternalistic or self-sacrificing.

Our findings also revealed temporal disconformity with professional norms, which included engaging in other forms of emotional labour. This discourse arose from managers' mistrust of the asylum system and its ability to fulfil its mission in a humane and human rights-respecting manner.



It emerged as a result of managers developing often quite close relationships with clients and thus becoming sensitive to the vulnerability of asylum seekers. This in turn led to managerial expressions of personal emotions of compassion and anger and the emergence of ethical agency (e.g. Johansson & Wickström, 2023) as they went beyond the call of duty to help their clients. Vulnerability was experienced relationally with asylum seekers, and managers practised microactivism within the limits of their constrained professional agency as they felt concern and compassion for their clients.

Caring then emerged as a temporal rather than a stable phenomenon in managerial work. Its emergence occurred when dealing with affective client relationships that had developed over time, and in cases where managers perceived procedural and systemic injustices that made them aware not only of clients but also of their own vulnerability. Although our context was extreme, that of immigration management where clientship is not voluntary, the ways in which managers' perceptions of vulnerability and care were linked offer important contributions to organisational research, which we discuss next.

Our main contribution is to recognise how experiences of vulnerability in managerial work enable managers to exercise agency and shape the boundaries of bureaucratic work. Our findings add to prior research that is starting to acknowledge how vulnerability can act as a strength in managerial work (Corlett et al., 2019, 2021; Grønbæk Pors, 2019). In our study, not only did managers normalise experiences of vulnerability (e.g. Corlett et al., 2019, 2021) but experienced vulnerability enabled them to manoeuvre within bureaucratic organisations. This suggests that various forms of microactivism may form an important part of managerial identity within bureaucratic organisations—a sense of agency and the ability to correct some of the injustices experienced may be important in situations where managerial authority and organisational practices are constrained by external governance. Although managers also sought to manage tensions through collective care with their clients and colleagues, this still required them to manoeuvre in a constrained environment. Accordingly, extreme environments (Hällgren et al., 2018) such as the work of reception centre managers offer us new perspectives on managerial care and experiences of vulnerability. Vulnerability, whether of oneself or others, creates motivation to take ethical action and sometimes treat clients differently.

Second, our research raises profound questions about the sustainability of managerial roles within theories of vulnerability and care. Within organisational contexts, the concept of care takes on a multifaceted dimension that requires conscious exploration and deliberation of its underlying goals and intentions, as highlighted by Tronto (2010). Our findings show how managers practice care that is conditional and

situational, based on their perceptions of the potential impact of care. We argue that managers adopt a dynamic stance, oscillating between two distinct positions in their quest to establish a sustainable basis for managing their inherent vulnerability. Without self-care, managers expose themselves to the risk of emotional exhaustion, which may reduce their ability to care for others when emotional strain exceeds their limits. On the other hand, without experienced relational vulnerability and related microactivism, managers might not see their caring work as meaningful, because for caring to be successful, care recipients need to respond to caregivers about the usefulness of their care (Tronto, 1993, 2013).

The relationships we have explored here differ from several previous studies that have conceptualised caring in high-value relationships, such as mentorships or within knowledge-intensive organisational teams (Gittell & Douglass, 2012; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). Relationships with clients sometimes culminate in official decisions that may not be in the best interests of refugees' livelihoods. The potential draining effect of care, or the anxieties associated with care per se, raised by Fotaki (2023), meant particularly those situationally embedded concern that the provision of care may not always lead to successful or sustainable outcomes for all parties involved (Tronto, 1993, 2013). Care relationships are based on the expectation and optimism that the acts of giving and receiving care will eventually balance out over time (Tronto, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to understand care as an inherently contextual and nuanced phenomenon that avoids universalism and abstraction.

Our findings open possibilities for examining the temporal development of care and professional identities. Some of the managers in our data shaped their relationship to care and management over time through specific forms of emotional labour. However, we believe that managers do not only learn to “get used to things” over time but may also learn to navigate between shifting positionalities and strategies to cope with multiple and multifaceted care demands and ethically sensitive situations that sometimes require particularistic caring actions and at other times self-care, for example.

Lastly, our study also showed how managerial sense of vulnerability was bounded to their conceptions of whether institutions are to be trusted. We suggest that examining managerial vulnerability from the perspective of institutional betrayal may offer further avenues (Smith & Freyd, 2014). For example, the way managers perceive feelings of treason or vulnerability that occur when an institution fails to prevent or respond appropriately can offer new avenues for acknowledging ethical tensions in organisations and managerial work.

Our study naturally features limitations. The Finnish context of our study offered a Nordic view into refugee crisis. The ethical challenges are manifold in other contexts, and managers' opportunities for agency may be determined by



the contextual issues. Our focus was on the managers' sense-making regarding their professional and personal selves and the possible incongruences between them. Consequently, the asylum seekers' voices were not heard, as this study included only interviews with the managers. That said, future research could examine how and if caring is experienced by asylum seekers in relational encounters.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to examine managerial vulnerability in the context of immigration management. By interviewing immigration managers about their ethically challenging situations, we sought to make sense of their experiences and working context by building on ethics of care. Our contribution lies in recognising that experiences of vulnerability empower managers to exercise agency and redefine the boundaries of bureaucratic work. This microactivism within bureaucratic settings is a means of addressing organisational injustices and responding to vulnerability, be it one's own vulnerability or that of others. Furthermore, our study raises questions about the sustainability of managerial roles within the framework of vulnerability and care. It underscores the multifaceted nature of care within organisational contexts and emphasises the importance of situational awareness and nuanced responses to care demands. In conclusion, our research dismantles traditional binaries surrounding managerial work, care, and vulnerability, highlighting the varied forms of care that managers practice and the specific contexts they encounter. It also suggests the need for further exploration of the managerial paradox of care and the relationship between managerial vulnerability and institutional trust, offering valuable avenues for future research in organisational ethics and management studies.

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**Data availability** The data that supports the findings of this study is not available due to the sensitive nature of the research and restricted participant consent with regards to sharing data.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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

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