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Article in World Journal of English Language · June 2024

DOI: 10.5430/wjel.v14n5p271

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# Reframing "Literature as Equipment for Living:" Kenneth Burke's Theory and the Social Function of Literature

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Received: March 17, 2024

Accepted: May 2, 2024

Online Published: June 3, 2024

doi:10.5430/wjel.v14n5p271

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n5p271>

## Abstract

This article delves into Kenneth Burke's seminal essay, "Literature as Equipment for Living," presenting a fresh perspective on literary criticism that underscores the pragmatic, societal, and political roles of literature. Burke posits that literature functions as an active agent, offering viable courses of action in response to worldly matters. Departing from traditional analyses of form and structure, Burke advocates for classifying works based on shared strategies for addressing situations. He contends that literature acts as a navigational tool, aiding in comprehension and interpretation of the world while urging readers to engage with texts for insights and inspiration in confronting life's challenges. Burke's viewpoint underscores the subjective nature of language, reflecting our individual experiences and perspectives on the world. His critical methodology advocates for a comprehensive and nuanced approach to literary critique, expanding the horizons of scholarly considerations.

**Key words:** Kenneth Burke, linguistic acts, naming, literature and life

## 1. Introduction: Kenneth Burke

In the vast landscape of humanities scholarship, Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) stands out as a towering figure whose influence transcends disciplinary boundaries. Pioneering the concept of "dramatism," Burke dissected how language serves as a lens through which we comprehend human interaction. His prolific output extended across literature, culture, communication, and philosophy, leaving an indelible mark on each. A central tenet of his work involved the symbolic nature of language and its profound effect on shaping our worldview, a concept that resonated deeply with postmodern thought. Landmark works like *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966) remain testaments to his enduring legacy. Burke's profound impact continues to inspire scholars and thinkers across disciplines, solidifying his position as a cornerstone of contemporary scholarship.

Clarke Rountree (2007) provides a comprehensive survey of the scholarly endeavours dedicated to examining Kenneth Burke's oeuvre. Within this expansive overview, Rountree traces the evolving scholarly interest in Burke from the 1920s to the contemporary era of the 21st century. Highlighting a multitude of books, journal articles, dissertations, and related works, Rountree underscores the profound impact Burke has had across various academic disciplines. He describes these scholarly engagements as tapping into the rich veins of thought that Burke has left behind, which he aptly refers to as "Burke mines." These works continue to yield valuable insights across diverse fields (Rountree, 2007, para 3). Equally significant, Gregory Hansen (1996) draws a bold parallel between Kenneth Burke's influence and that of Aristotle, underscoring the profound impact Burke has had on academic discourse. Hansen particularly examines Burke's contributions within the field of the "Ethnography of Speaking," highlighting how Burke's insights laid a foundational framework for subsequent theories (Hansen, 1996, p. 2007). According to Hansen, Burke's pioneering work in this domain provided a cornerstone for scholars embarking on the exploration of language usage within social contexts, setting the stage for the development of diverse theoretical perspectives.

Kenneth Burke's influence extends far beyond the realm of literary criticism, garnering acclaim from a wide spectrum of scholars across various disciplines. Jessica Enoch (2004) underscores his multifaceted contributions, identifying him as a "writer, poet, essayist, translator, literary critic, art critic, social critic, rhetorical theorist, and historian" (Enoch, 2004, p. 274). She further emphasizes the enduring relevance of Burke's work, arguing that his "theory and practice add a rhetorical nuance to critical reflection" with ongoing significance for educators and scholars today (Enoch, 2004, p. 272). Similarly, Paul Jay (1989) recognizes Burke's engagement with diverse disciplines, including philosophy and rhetoric. He notes that Burke's "attempt to blend a proto-formalist Aristotelianism with Nietzschean perspectivism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and a grammatically and rhetorically oriented critique" positioned him as a maverick thinker whose approach now appears remarkably prescient (Jay, 1989, p. 535). Timothy Crusius (1998) reinforces this notion, crediting Burke as a pioneer of postmodern mindset, arguing that he "made the linguistic, social, and rhetorical turns, and made them in an integrated way with a full grasp of their implications for postmodern thought" (Crusius, 1989, p. 460).

Central to Burke's enduring impact is his interdisciplinary approach. He transcended disciplinary boundaries, drawing upon a rich tapestry of fields to illuminate the complexities of human communication and interaction. His contributions extend beyond literary criticism to encompass cultural and social criticism, as well as language theory and the role of language in human relations. William H. Rueckert's (1994) observation aptly captures the multifaceted nature of Burke's work. Rueckert elaborates on Burke's evolving impact, highlighting his pursuit of knowledge as a catalyst for effecting change:

His mind has seldom faltered: it wants to be understood; it wants to come to real knowledge; it wants to talk things out, to share knowledge, to set the record straight ... and by his actions he constantly renews our often-faltering belief in the power of mind, the powers of the critical word, the ability of the intellectual to affect the course of human events (Rueckert, 1994, p. 46)

Rueckert's observation underscores the breadth of Burke's intellectual pursuits – an interdisciplinary and intellectually rigorous approach that remained a hallmark throughout his work, including his contributions to social and cultural criticism.

Unlike traditional approaches to literary criticism, Burke views literature not as a passive experience but as a dynamic tool for active application. He posits that literary works function as strategic instruments, crafted within specific contexts and informed by prevailing attitudes, to grapple with recurring human challenges. This perspective is central to his collection of critical essays, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), wherein he asserts that the paramount objective of criticism is to comprehensively explore all facets of a literary work. In essence, Burke argues for a comprehensive approach to literary analysis, one that incorporates the author's background, the social context, stylistic choices, and even broader influences like politics, history, and psychology, to enrich our understanding of the text. Ultimately, Burke contends that literature transcends mere entertainment; it serves as a valuable resource for navigating real-life situations. He proposes that literary works offer stylized and strategic solutions to the perennial problems we face, functioning as "answers to questions posed by the situations in which they arose" (Burke, 1941, p. 1).

This intricate role of literature as an interactive tool for navigating life's challenges is the central concept explored by Kenneth Burke in his seminal essay, "Literature as Equipment for Living," included within *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941). This paper delves into Burke's argument by first providing a concise overview of the essay's core tenets. Following this, a detailed examination of Burke's theoretical framework, as expounded upon in the essay, will be undertaken. To enrich the understanding of Burke's perspective, the paper will incorporate references to other relevant works by Burke that further elucidate his theory, fostering a more comprehensive analysis. Finally, the paper will conclude by reflecting on the enduring significance of Burke's theory and its lasting impact on the field of literary criticism.

## 2. The Social Function of Literature

### 2.1 An Overview of Burke's Essay

Kenneth Burke's essay, "Literature as Equipment for Living," stands as a landmark contribution to literary criticism, fundamentally reshaping the understanding of literature's role in society. Its core proposition lies in the concept of literature as a practical tool for navigating life's complexities. Burke argues that literature empowers readers by offering crucial instruments and perspectives for comprehending the human condition. Literary works, according to Burke, provide profound insights into our everyday challenges, equipping readers with strategies to confront them with resilience and understanding. This perspective elevates literature beyond mere entertainment or intellectual exercise; it becomes a vital resource for individuals seeking to make sense of their experiences and navigate life's complexities.

Burke's essay emphasizes a crucial shift away from viewing literature as solely a form of entertainment or intellectual exercise. Instead, he presents it as a practical tool for living, with the potential to foster deeper self-understanding, empathy for others, and a stronger connection to real-life situations. This aligns with Burke's broader theory of the symbolic action of language, as explored in his work *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966). This theory posits that language is not merely a passive reflection of reality, but an active instrument for shaping our interactions with the world around us. Burke argues that literary language, in particular, embodies the author's response to specific social contexts, and in turn, invites an active response from the reader. He contends that this dynamic interaction between text and reader plays a crucial role in promoting social awareness, engagement, and ultimately, social change. By portraying the multifaceted human experience, literary works empower readers to recognize and address societal problems, ultimately leading to a richer understanding of both literature and the human condition itself.

### 2.2 Analysis

Central to Kenneth Burke's essay is a novel perspective that transcends traditional sociological criticism. He emphasizes a dynamic interplay between writers and the social contexts they navigate. In this view, literature is not merely a reflection of societal circumstances, but rather a situated response, shaped by the specific conditions of its creation. Each literary work, Burke argues, becomes embedded within a particular social milieu, offering a unique lens through which readers can comprehend the surrounding world. By emphasizing this situatedness, Burke expands the scope of literary criticism, fostering a more interactive relationship between literature and society. This approach ultimately paves the way for literature to function as a practical tool for navigating life's complexities, a concept Burke explores in greater detail throughout the essay.

To delve deeper into Burke's concept, it is crucial to examine it through the lens of his theory of the symbolic action of language. As

previously established, this theory moves beyond the notion of language simply mirroring reality. Language, for Burke, is an active response to life situations, a mechanism through which we "name" these situations to gain a sense of control (Burke, 1966, p. 47). In the context of literature, Burke extends this idea by asserting the writer's role in defining situations with such clarity that readers are empowered to take action. Literary works, then, become a form of "equipment for living" (Burke, 1941, p. 293), enabling readers to navigate the complexities of the world around them with a newfound understanding and practical tools. This perspective underscores the pragmatic and utilitarian function Burke assigns to literature, elevating it from mere entertainment to a resource for navigating the intricacies of human existence.

To further illustrate the concept of "naming" within his theory, Burke delves into the realm of folk criticism, slang, and proverbs (Burke, 1941, p. 293). He argues that these forms of expression function essentially as labels assigned to specific situations that people encounter and seek to manage. The emergence of new slang terms, for instance, reflects the need to "name" novel situations as they arise in our social interactions. Similarly, proverbs serve the purpose of naming "typical, recurrent situations" (Burke, 1941, p. 293) that necessitate specific strategies or attitudes for effective navigation. Burke emphasizes that proverbs transcend mere entertainment; they offer practical tools and strategic approaches for dealing with recurring human challenges, ultimately contributing to our collective well-being. Through these examples, Burke underscores the active role language plays in shaping, not merely reflecting, reality. Language becomes an instrument for individuals to navigate life's complexities by equipping them with the necessary "names" and strategies to confront challenging situations.

Crucially, Burke argues that the act of "naming" transcends mere passive reflection; it is a dynamic process imbued with action (Burke, 1941, p. 143). This active quality stems from the direct engagement with the situations being labeled. For instance, proverbs arise because people grapple with recurring situations, necessitating strategies for description, adaptation, and response. The very act of naming, Burke contends, involves making choices and selecting from diverse options – a fundamental aspect of taking action. By naming a situation, individuals not only define it but also implicitly suggest potential courses of action.

Building upon his concept of "naming" as action, Burke extends this perspective to the realm of literature. He argues that the very act of creating a literary work constitutes the strategic "naming" of a specific situation encountered in our social lives (Burke, 1941, p. 300). In essence, literary works function as elaborately constructed designations for these situations. Similar to the way slang terms enrich the English language, literature broadens our understanding of the world by offering unique names and definitions for novel situations. However, Burke emphasizes that literary works transcend mere language tools. They provide not only labels, but also strategic approaches for navigating the complexities we encounter. This elevated role is why Burke views the most accomplished works of art as "proverbs writ large" (Burke, 1941, p. 296). Proverbs, after all, offer compact yet potent strategies for dealing with recurring human challenges. Burke even suggests that literature can be considered akin to philosophy, as it does not necessarily depict isolated situations. Instead, literary works can represent actions that transcend specific historical contexts, existing as "timeless," "nonhistorical," and "contemporaneous" (Burke, 1941, p. 302). Through this lens, literature offers insights applicable across cultures and historical periods.

As previously established, Burke's concept of "naming" as strategic action extends beyond everyday language to encompass literature, both being forms of linguistic acts. Building on this premise, Burke's central project is "to codify the various strategies which artists have developed in relation to the naming of situations" (Burke, 1941, p. 301). In essence, he proposes a new method for classifying linguistic acts based on their capacity to respond to and potentially transform social situations. This approach marks a significant departure from traditional aesthetic criticism, which prioritizes the aesthetic qualities of a work. Instead, Burke's classification system groups linguistic acts based on their strategic functionalities within the social sphere. As he asserts, his method offers "classification with reference to *strategies*" employed in the social realm (Burke, 1941, p. 303). This framework allows Burke to categorize linguistic acts based on their potential to achieve various social goals, such as "selecting enemies and allies," "socializing losses," or promoting "purification, propitiation, and desanctification" (Burke, 1941, p. 304). He further expands this categorization to encompass functions like "consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation" (Burke, 1941, p. 304). Ultimately, Burke's method transcends the traditional focus on aesthetics, providing a valuable framework for understanding the social functions of both language and literature.

Building upon his proposed framework, Burke dismantles the traditional boundaries between disciplines by classifying literary works alongside elements from various fields. His rationale lies in the universality of his theory, which he argues applies "both to works of art and to social situations outside of art" (Burke, 1941, p. 303). Consequently, literature finds itself categorized alongside philosophy, sermons, even tragedy, potentially sharing space with a seemingly incongruous element – jokes. The key factor for such groupings, according to Burke, lies in their connection to the same "situation" and the "range of possible particularizations" they offer (Burke, 1941, p. 302). This unconventional approach underscores Burke's core belief, succinctly expressed in his contention that "there is no 'pure' literature ... Everything is 'medicine'" (Burke, 1941, p. 293). By employing the metaphor of "medicine," Burke emphasizes the therapeutic potential of literature, suggesting that it offers practical lessons and valuable insights applicable to our daily lives. This emphasis on the interdisciplinary nature of literary criticism aligns with Burke's later work, "Kinds of Criticism" (1946). In this text, Burke argues that criticism should not just analyze literature itself but use it as a springboard to gain deeper insights into the world around it. This broader perspective allows literary criticism to illuminate not just the literary realm, but also the broader social context in which it exists.

Anticipating potential criticism for his unorthodox approach, Burke acknowledges that his framework challenges established disciplinary boundaries and deviates from "the way in which God himself divided up the universe" (Burke, 1941, p. 303). This irreverent tone underscores the potential disruption his classification system might cause. Despite this, Burke remains confident in its utility for technical

criticism, arguing that it can facilitate the organization of literary works within a social framework (Burke, 1941, p. 296). This framework, he suggests, expands the boundaries of literature by integrating it into a broader "sociological" context. Furthermore, his approach blurs the lines between literature and other disciplines, enabling a more nuanced exploration of how literary works are organized and revealing their profound connection to everyday practices. Literary works, he argues, become strategic tools for organizing and directing our thoughts, ultimately equipping us to navigate life's challenges. As Burke aptly states, even "the most highly alembicated and sophisticated work of art" can be viewed as a tool designed to "organize and command the army of one's thoughts ..." (Burke, 1941, p. 298). In essence, Burke positions literature as a form of mental armor, fortifying our capacity to confront complexities.

Burke's embrace of an interdisciplinary perspective stems from his core belief that no single approach can provide definitive solutions to all situations. He posits the necessity for a collective effort, drawing insights from various disciplines to arrive at a comprehensive social cure. This conviction finds further elaboration in his work, *Attitudes Toward History* (1961), where he introduces the concept of "discounting" (Burke, 1961 p. 244). For Burke, discounting signifies the strategic application of multiple critical methods to analyze a text and identify its embedded strategies. This implies that through the judicious application of various critical lenses, even seemingly disparate sources can yield valuable knowledge. In essence, Burke's "discounting" method advocates for the strategic application of diverse critical lenses to extract the richest insights from literary works. This emphasis on multiplicity empowers us to transcend the limitations inherent in any single disciplinary approach. This approach not only broadens the scope of literary criticism but also elevates the practical significance of literature in everyday life. Ultimately, Burke's emphasis on interdisciplinarity underscores the necessity for drawing upon various fields of knowledge to unlock literature's full potential for enriching our lives.

To illustrate the practical application of his classification system, Burke examines the concept of realism in literature and its effectiveness in equipping readers for life's challenges. He contends that some works, particularly those categorized as "inspirational literature," fall short in this regard (Burke, 1941, p. 298). While they may offer solace through consolation, Burke argues that they lack concrete strategies for navigating difficulties. Similarly, he critiques the "naturalistic" approach of some writers who prioritize an unfiltered portrayal of reality, potentially leading to the presentation of an "ill-digested philosophy of science" (Burke, 1941, p. 299). This approach, Burke argues, misconstrues the relentless pursuit of naturalistic "truthfulness" as an end in itself. Readers might be left with the impression that simply mirroring harsh realities is an adequate literary strategy. In Burke's view, such writing becomes trapped in a competition of realism, ultimately proving to be "as inaccurate as the inspirational strategy, though on the opposite extreme" (Burke, 1941, p. 300).

In stark contrast to the previously discussed categories, Burke champions works that achieve a more nuanced realism, offering practical strategies for confronting life's challenges. These works, categorized as "active" by Burke, transcend mere reflection of reality. They engage in a dynamic dialogue with real-life situations, equipping readers with tools to navigate complexities. Burke emphasizes that the value of realism lies not in simply mirroring life, but rather in its capacity to be directed towards action. Consequently, literary forms like tragedy, comedy, and satire become, in his view, "equipments for living" (Burke, 1941, p. 304). By providing frameworks for understanding and responding to various situations, these genres enhance our comprehension of the practical role literature can play in our daily lives.

Burke reinforces this concept of active realism throughout his writings. In his essay, "The Hope in Tragedy" (1954), he highlights tragic narratives as prime examples of "active" works. These narratives, he argues, possess the transformative ability to channel human sadness into a source of power, thereby turning adversity into opportunity. (Burke, 1954, p. 471). Similarly, in "Delight and Tears" (1924), Burke emphasizes the importance of reader engagement that goes beyond mere enjoyment. Readers, he argues, should actively utilize the work's portrayal of complex emotions and ideological issues relevant to their own lives (Burke, 1924, p. 381). In both these works, his approach stands in stark contrast to the simplistic, feel-good platitudes offered by inspirational literature (Burke, 1941, p. 298). By emphasizing active engagement with the complexities presented, Burke elevates literature to a tool for navigating the emotional and ideological realities of human existence.

As discussed earlier, Burke's notion of literature as "equipment for living" is inextricably linked to his theory of language as a symbolic action. This theory posits that language is not merely a passive reflection of reality, but rather an active force that shapes it. Extending this concept to literature, Burke suggests that the language employed within a literary work represents a deliberate action undertaken by the author in response to a specific life situation. As Burke argues, the author "seeks to 'direct the larger movements and operations' in one's campaign of living" through literary creation (Burke, 1941, p. 298). Consequently, literature becomes a strategic method for authors to utilize language and grapple with recurring situations encountered in their lives. In this context, Burke underscores the significance of conflicting ideas residing within the author's mind. He acknowledges that there can be multiple realistic and accurate ways to portray a situation in literature. This very plurality, Burke argues, is valuable because it empowers authors to explore various possibilities and compare their potential outcomes within their texts. Through this process of literary creation, authors can make informed decisions by reflecting on the consequences presented in their narratives.

As Burke champions the role of literature in serving our lives through both writing and reading, he departs from purely aesthetic considerations. The literary work's value lies in its practical utility and its ability to provide tools to navigate life's challenges. Literature disconnected from real-world application holds little merit in his view. However, Burke cautions against a strictly formulaic approach to using literature as "equipment for living." Instead, he suggests that literature functions as a subconscious guide, subtly equipping us with tools and strategies to navigate life's complexities. In this way, literature becomes an integral element of our daily lives, shaping our

worldview and influencing our interactions with the world around us. Ultimately, Burke argues, literature contributes significantly to our personal growth and development.

However, although Burke prioritizes literature's pragmatic nature in equipping readers for life's challenges, he cautions against sacrificing the aesthetic dimension. He argues that overly didactic works, solely focused on imparting lessons, are better suited to overtly instructional forms like political pamphlets (Burke, 1941, p.189). In his book, *Counter-Statement* (1968), Burke underscores the inherent value of literature precisely because of its aesthetic appeal. He emphasizes that the perceived opposition between practicality and aesthetics can be transcended. In essence, Burke argues for a seamless integration of the practical and aesthetic in literature. The ideal literary work should be both beautiful and useful, shaping language that not only reflects but also enriches the human experience. Expanding on this concept in his essay "A New Poetics" (1925), Burke suggests that the aesthetic dimension plays a crucial role in how readers subconsciously absorb the practical strategies embedded within a work. He argues that art can indirectly shape moral standards by influencing readers' desires and offering implicit guidance (Burke, 1925, p. 241). This absorption proves to be particularly effective, according to Burke. Literature, therefore, has the unique ability to seamlessly blend the practical with the aesthetic. By creating powerful symbols that resonate with readers, it can reflect the complexities of society while simultaneously offering new ways of seeing and navigating those complexities. In essence, literary works can distill a pattern of experience, providing readers with a "word for it" and the necessary "attitude towards it" (Burke, 1941, p. 244).

Overall, Burke's theory broadens the scope of literary criticism beyond mere textual analysis. Effective criticism, he argues, necessitates an examination of the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts that inform a work. Consequently, Burke emphasizes that reading should extend beyond mere entertainment; it should be approached as a practical pursuit that equips us with strategies for navigating life's challenges. Literary works, in this view, are not simply passive reflections of reality, but rather, they are deliberately crafted tools designed to address recurring situations. By highlighting the active role of language in shaping our interactions and experiences within the world, Burke compels us to consider the power of language and its potential to influence our realities. Ultimately, his theory underscores the invaluable role of literature in enriching our understanding of the world and in guiding us towards a more meaningful and harmonious existence.

### 3. Conclusion

Kenneth Burke's theory of literature as "equipment for living" offers a refreshing perspective on the interplay between language, literature, and society. Grounded in the principle of language as action, Burke argues that naming a situation reflects our engagement with it and shapes our responses. Literature, then, becomes a training ground for navigating life's complexities. By presenting a range of situations and potential strategies for action, literary works equip readers with a framework for understanding and responding to the world. This approach significantly recasts the role of literature and literary criticism. Rather than a detached object of study, literature becomes a dynamic force embedded in its social and cultural context. This perspective allows us to see literature as a mirror and a shaper of our evolving understanding of the world. By emphasizing the pragmatic dimension of literature, Burke invites us to consider how literary works influence our actions and relationships.

Furthermore, Burke's concept departs from traditional literary criticism that views literature as a passive reflection of the world. Instead, he presents literature as an active force, illuminating possibilities for action and shaping our understanding of human experience. In this vein, literary criticism must extend beyond textual analysis to examine the impact of literature on our lives and interactions with the world. By exploring the interplay between writers, readers, and the social and historical contexts in which they exist, Burke's approach offers a nuanced and insightful perspective on the role of literature in shaping our lives and collective understanding. This expanded scope of literary criticism extends beyond form and aesthetics. Burke advocates for analyzing literature's practical applications and its usefulness in navigating the complexities of daily life. He proposes that classifying literary works based on their strategies for responding to situations offers a more meaningful approach than solely focusing on aesthetic features. This perspective reinforces the notion of literature as a tool for comprehending and engaging with the world, firmly placing it within the realm of everyday practices.

In conclusion, Burke's groundbreaking theory of "literature as equipment for living" elevates the role of literary criticism by acknowledging its social dimensions. It compels recognition of the critical role literature plays in shaping human experience and culture. By highlighting the utilitarian value of literature in our everyday lives, Burke encourages readers to engage with literary works as a means of gaining insight and inspiration to confront life's challenges. Furthermore, his theory underscores the subjective and non-neutral nature of language selection, reflecting our unique experiences and shaping our interactions with the world. In a nutshell, Burke's lasting contribution lies in urging us to re-evaluate the central role of literature in our lives and promoting a broader and deeper understanding of literary criticism.

### Acknowledgments

Not applicable

### Authors contributions

Dr. Nadia Mohamad and Dr. Majid Mgamis contributed equally to the study. Both authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

### Funding

Not applicable

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Informed consent

Obtained.

### Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

### Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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