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Enhancing Mental Skills for Freelance Dance Artists: A Qualitative Study Protocol

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Abstract

Freelance dance artists face a range of challenges that might negatively impact their mental well-being. To address these issues, research indicates that mental skills training (MST) could be beneficial for freelance dance artists, but no recognised manualised programme currently exists for this group. Prior to developing a MST programme, more knowledge is required on freelance artists' use of mental skills. This protocol outlines a qualitative interview study to investigate: a) what mental techniques, skills and qualities freelance dance artists perceive to be beneficial in negotiating challenges and enhancing their wellbeing; b) gain insight into mechanisms underpinning the process of MST; and c) determine crucial characteristics (e.g., duration, teaching techniques) essential to a feasible and meaningful MST programme for freelance dance artists. Embedded in a person-based approach (PBA) to intervention development and underpinned by a pragmatic stance, the study will employ snowball sampling to recruit 8 freelance dance artists and 8 psychologically informed practitioners for semi-structured interviews. Data will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis and findings will be disseminated through a peer-reviewed publication in a scientific journal.

Keywords

mental skills training, mental skills, dance, mental health, qualitative study protocol, person-based approach

Background

Freelance dance artists are highly educated and skilled individuals that seem generally attracted to the autonomy, freedom and the artistic and personal development that their freelance career offers (Aujla & Farrer, 2015, 2016). However, it is also a challenging profession that encompasses job insecurity, financial challenges, lack of structure and fleeting connections and friendships (Aujla I. et al., 2019; Kolitsida et al., 2023; Sjölin, 2023). To exemplify, freelance dance artists often work on a series of short-term contracts interspersed with periods of unemployment or have more than one job, with one foot in the dance industry and the other in a different, unrelated field (Ashton & Ashton, 2016; Aujla I. et al., 2019; Wood, 2021). Even if employed in a dance-related job, freelancers in the dance industry often take on a range of both formal and informal-formal roles as performers, teachers, managers, producers and researchers while also executing unpaid tasks like administrative work (e.g., budgeting, writing applications, networking, searching for job opportunities) on evenings and weekends (Aujla & Farrer, 2016; Kolitsida et al., 2023; Sjölin, 2023). Additionally, these artists report not to have steady opportunities for socialization which, in turn, leaves them feeling isolated (Aujla & Farrer, 2015; Kolitsida et al., 2023).

Research shows that these challenges can have a negative effect on freelance dance artists' mental health (Aujla & Farrer, 2015; Kolitsida et al., 2023; Pollitt & Hutt, 2021). For example, a study investigating the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of freelancers in the dance industry reported that factors such as job insecurity, financial instability, and the competitive and unregulated nature of the

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sector were exacerbated during the pandemic, which, in turn, negatively impacted these artists' mental health (Kolitsida et al., 2023). Other studies highlight that freelance dance artists' working conditions could result in feelings of anxiety and low self-confidence (Aujla & Farrer, 2015) and that, due to them being dependent on their ability to rehearse and perform, freelancers in the dance industry might experience intense psychological responses to injury (Pollitt & Hutt, 2021). Moreover, freelance dance artists have less access to dance-specific healthcare professionals and must often self-fund necessary mental health support (e.g., from a dance or sport psychologist) (Vassallo et al., 2018).

In response to these challenges, freelance dance artists have gradually developed a range of mental skills and psychological characteristics. For instance, a previous study reports that freelancers in the dance industry identified maintaining confidence, self-awareness and self-reflection as important mental skills that not only helped their self-belief, but also to successfully navigate challenges such as anxiety about future job prospects (Aujla & Farrer, 2015). The same study showed that freelance dance artists also developed psychological characteristics, like optimism, which helped them to appreciate new challenges and keep an optimistic outlook on their future (Aujla & Farrer, 2015). However, despite these intriguing findings little is known about mental skills in freelance dance artists and how related terms like psychological characteristics can be understood and conceptualised in dance.

In this regard, sport psychology literature offers valuable suggestions on how to define and differentiate between mental skills, mental qualities, mental techniques and mental skills training (Holland et al., 2010, 2017; Vealey, 2007). Mental qualities can be viewed as positive intrapersonal and/or interpersonal psychological characteristics displayed by or within an individual (e.g., self-awareness) that facilitate optimal performance and mental well-being (Cumming et al., 2024; Holland et al., 2017; Vealey, 2007). These mental qualities are achieved through use of mental skills, which are seen as the capacity to intentionally self-regulate thoughts, emotions and behaviours (e.g., focusing attention, handling pressure, self-awareness, self-control) and enables athletes to manage their cognitive, affective and behavioural states and maintain mental qualities (Cumming et al., 2024; Holland et al., 2010, 2017; Sharp et al., 2013). Mental techniques are cognitive or behavioural techniques, methods or procedures (e.g., imagery, self-talk, goal-setting) that athletes engage in to build mental skills or mental qualities (Cumming et al., 2024; Holland et al., 2017; Vealey, 1988). Finally, mental skills training (MST) is a multi-faceted and multi-method process which describes the learning and strategic implementation of mental techniques that assist the development of mental skills to achieve performance success and well-being (Duda et al., 2005; Vealey, 2007). The MST Process model brings together these definitions (see Figure 1) to depict relationships between the antecedents (i.e., the person's personal characteristics, the environment they are embedded in, and the person/environment interaction), the MST process (i.e., mental techniques → mental skills → mental qualities), the desired outcomes, and the role of metacognition (e.g., evaluation of thoughts and feelings) processes underpinning MST mechanisms (Cumming et al., 2024; Holland et al., 2010, 2017). Most importantly, Holland et al. (2010) demonstrate in their study within sport that mental techniques, skills and qualities are part of a process that is still under-explored. Hence, differentiating between mental techniques, skills, qualities and MST might be not only be useful to avoid crossover in the use of MST related terms in dance, but also to obtain a better understanding of MST and the mechanisms underpinning to inform intervention development for freelance dance artists.

While existing dance research confirms that a differentiation between these terms could be useful (Aujla & Farrer, 2015), it also corroborates that a more systematic and strategic approach, like MST, could be beneficial for dancers to address existing barriers (Aujla & Farrer, 2015, 2016). To exemplify, a 12 week-long MST intervention trained 45 ballet students in mental techniques (e.g. self-talk, imagery and relaxation techniques) which significantly increased certain mental skills (e.g. their self-regulation of their thoughts, maintaining focus and confidence) and enhanced mental qualities like optimal motivation that improved the participants' injury rates (Noh et al., 2007). Another psychoeducational intervention with a young, male dancer took a broader cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) approach to systematically teach and develop mental techniques (e.g., self-talk and imagery) that helped the dancer to successfully enhance mental skills (e.g. self-regulation of emotions and thoughts) and increase mental qualities (e.g. optimal confidence) essential to his mental well-being, personal development and performance (Andersen, 2009). While these limited examples show the promising benefit of MST, these have so far targeted dance students (Klockare, 2014; Noh et al., 2007; Skvarla & Clement, 2019) or dance teachers (Carattini, 2020) and were not specifically developed for freelance dance artists.

Despite recommendations to actively involve targeted participants and key stakeholders in the formative work of intervention development (Muller et al., 2019; Yardley, Morrison, et al., 2015), the few MST interventions for dance were developed by researchers with little or no input from the intended of the programmes (Klockare, 2014; Moyle, 2016; Noh et al., 2007; Skvarla & Clement, 2019). Several studies appear to have based their intervention content on sparse, pre-existing dance literature but without prior consultation with the participating dancers or the deliverers perspectives regarding MST, despite health research indicating that consultation work is a recommended step in intervention development (Gerena, 2015; Klockare, 2014; Skivington et al., 2021; Skvarla & Clement, 2019). A study to increase injured dancers' coping skills acknowledged that their dance intervention could have been more effective had they sought the participants' input prior to developing their programme (Skvarla & Clement, 2019). Hence, including

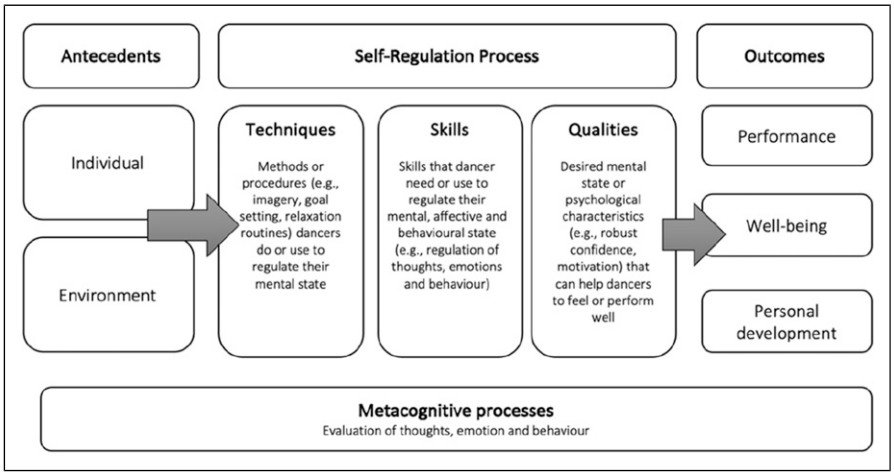

Figure 1. MST process model after Cumming et al. (2024).

dancers and gatekeepers (e.g., dance teachers, artistic directors) in the development process of programmes could not only increase intervention efficiency but also make programmes more meaningful and relevant to target audiences (Petts & McGill, 2024).

These insights are in line with a person-based approach (PBA) that uses qualitative and mixed methods research to ensure that the process of intervention development considers the beliefs, attitudes, needs and context of the particular user group the intervention is designed to target (Ferrey et al., 2018). Central to the PBA is the integration of participatory approaches (e.g., Patient and Public Involvement) in which representatives of a target group (e.g., freelance dance artists and psychologically informed practitioners like dance educators, dance psychologists and dance psychology researchers delivering psychoeducational workshops to dancers) are seen as experts with in-depth and lived experience, offering valuable insights beyond researchers' knowledge and understanding (Muller et al., 2019). Accordingly, freelancers in the dance industry and psychologically informed practitioners should not be merely considered participants in studies using a PBA, but as expert contributors with in-depth and lived experience that are valuable assets to a research project (Muller et al., 2019). Past research adopting the PBA demonstrated that formative, qualitative research which elicits and addresses the needs and perspectives of the intended intervention user has not only been perceived as more meaningful, but also resulted in more relevant, efficient and impactful programmes than those designed by researchers alone (Ferrey et al., 2018; MacNeil et al., 2023; Muller et al., 2019; Yardley, Morrison, et al., 2015).

Research Goals and Objectives

Considering the challenges faced by freelance dance artists and the existing gaps regarding MST and intervention development in dance literature, this study will focus on the following, two key objectives:

First, it is essential to elicit more knowledge about what mental techniques and mental skills freelance dance artists regard as beneficial, what mental qualities they identify as essential to navigating their versatile careers and what mechanisms are underpinning freelance dance artists' MST process. With the aim to initiate rich and detailed discussions with freelancers in the dance industry, educators and psychologically informed practitioners about this topic, the researchers will use prompts such as photo/video elicitation and visual cueing in the interviews. This will not only help the contributors to make sense of their experiences but also provide in-depth insights into mechanisms that underpin their MST process.

Second, this study will seek input and insights from freelancers in the dance industry (i.e. the beneficiaries of the program) and psychologically informed practitioners working with dancers (i.e. the potential deliverers of the program) to inform the content of a MST program that incorporates the needs and perspectives of its target users and deliverers. By utilizing multiple perspectives from an advisory group for the larger project and other freelance dance artists and psychologically informed practitioners, the study will determine crucial characteristics (e.g., duration, teaching techniques) essential to a meaningful and feasible MST programme for freelance dance artists and address existing gaps regarding intervention development in dance literature.

These objectives will be informed by the following research questions:

1. What are the beneficial mental techniques, mental skills and mental qualities for addressing challenges experience by freelance dance artists?
2. How do freelance dance artists and psychologically informed practitioners explain how MST works?

3. What characteristics should be incorporated into a MST program for freelance dance artists?

Explanation and Justification of Method

This study will be positioned within pragmatism, which entails that the researchers focus their attention on a real-world issue and use a combination of relevant approaches available to understand the problem and inform future practice (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 11; Saunders et al., 2019, p. 153). By bringing together the perspectives and insights of freelance dance artists and psychologically informed practitioners to inform intervention development, a pragmatic stance heightens the researchers interest in what connects us in striving to change a real world-issue, curiosity about individuals' background and experiences that can inform the action to be undertaken, and bringing together people because of, rather than despite, their different strengths, views and perspectives (Morgan, 2007). Therefore, by positioning this study within pragmatism, the researchers aim to address a real-life issue with the help of freelance dance artists and psychologically informed practitioners and, with their collaboration, strive to find a solution to the set problem (e.g. develop a MST program for freelancers in the dance industry) (Evans, 2000).

In line with pragmatism, this study will be embedded in a PBA to intervention development (Ferrey et al., 2018). PBA is an iterative, systematic intervention development framework that can be divided into three stages: (1) intervention planning; (2) intervention design; and (3) intervention development of acceptability and feasibility (Yardley, Ainsworth, et al., 2015; Yardley, Morrison, et al., 2015). Each of these phases enables researchers to use collected data to inform, design, adapt and optimise their intervention and ensure that all intervention components are meaningful, feasible and engages all users (Morrison et al., 2018; Muller et al., 2019). Qualitative research is crucial to the PBA as it enables input from target users and deliverers at multiple stages of intervention development (Muller et al., 2019). Hence, this qualitative study is an essential part of the first intervention planning phase of the PBA. It will help us to specify what the intervention must do to address the needs of the freelance dance artists and identify intervention features that will support achievement of the programme's objectives (e.g., behaviour change techniques, broader aspects of intervention delivery) (Morrison et al., 2018; Yardley, Morrison, et al., 2015). Moreover, the study will also inform the proposed mechanism through which MST works, and therefore guide the selection of primary and secondary outcomes and the content of the program's process evaluation.

Sampling/Recruitment

Considering the study's aims, objectives, pragmatic stance and its theoretical underpinning by the PBA, the study's sample size should not only enable information richness but also equally reflect the stances and perspectives of freelance dance artists and psychologically informed practitioners (Braun & Clarke, 2021). While developing the first steps towards the greater project, the researchers established an advisory group consisting of 4 freelance dance artists and 3 psychologically informed practitioners (1 dance educator and 3 dance psychology researchers/ practitioners delivering psychoeducational workshops to dancers) that were involved and consulted during the creation of this study's topic guide and recruitment. Following a first advisory group meeting in September 2024, these 8 advisory group members were recruited with a snowball sampling strategy (Patton, 2014, p. 284). Reflecting the study's pragmatic stance, involving advisory group members will grant the researchers the opportunity to access in-depth knowledge that could not be obtained in advisory group meetings and can critically inform the development of the MST programme (Morgan, 2007; Petts & McGill, 2024). However, advisory group members have been involved from the start and are, therefore, familiar with the study and the project as a whole. Therefore, an additional sample of 4 freelance dance artists and 4 psychologically informed practitioners will be recruited via snowball sampling (either by advisory group members or by the researchers) to offer a fresh perspective to the study content (Muller et al., 2019; Patton, 2014, p. 298)

To be included, freelance dance artists must be over 18 years old and dance on a regular, professional, self-employed basis in the UK. Psychologically informed practitioners must be over 18 years old and have a dance/sport psychology background and in-depth knowledge about the freelance dance industry, freelance dance artists' psychological needs and/or applied knowledge on delivering psychoeducational and/or educational workshops to dancers.

Data Collection Method

The researchers will use an explorative, semi-structured interview approach to collect the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 132). All interviews will be conducted by the first author who is trained in interviewing. Depending on the preference and availability of the collaborators, conversations will be held either face to face in a quiet and private location or an online platform (e.g., Zoom) (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 466, 478)

Two interview guides (one for freelance dance artists and one for psychologically informed practitioners) will be developed and piloted prior to the interviews commencing and formulated questions will be used as a framework to navigate the conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 156). To facilitate rich discussions and exchange of ideas, support the contributors in making sense of their experiences and gain in-depth insights into mechanisms underpinning MST, the researchers will use video/photo elicitation (e.g., contributors providing a video and/or photo of a performance or workshop that went well or a challenge they have overcome) or visual

cueing (e.g., asking the contributors to close their eyes and think back to a distinct memory) during the conversation (Glegg, 2019). Additionally, the researchers will utilize whiteboards (on Zoom) or sticky notes/ paper (in person) to capture the participants' experiences with MST processes. However, the provision of a picture/video is voluntary. The researchers will verbally cue those collaborators that might not wish to share a picture/video.

Handling of Data

All conversations will be held on the online platform Zoom, video and audio recorded and transcribed automatically via AI and checked for accuracy. All transcripts will be anonymised by randomly allocating number 1–16 to each collaborator, encrypted and stored on password protected computers. Aligning with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), after 10 years (or a time after 10 years when the researchers no longer require this data), the researchers will delete the data from the computer, and destroy the recordings (European Union Agency for Fundamental, 2019).

Analysis

The researchers will use reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). RTA is a method that enables researchers to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative data and can be applied across a range of theoretical frameworks and research paradigms (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In line with this study's aims, it can provide analyses of individuals' experiences regarding an issue (e.g. challenges freelance dance artists encounter), the processes that underpin a particular phenomenon (e.g. MST) or investigate the views and perspectives on a certain topic (Braun et al., 2016; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Moreover, by placing the researcher's role in knowledge production at the heart of the method, RTA focuses on the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Consequently, RTA encourages researchers to consistently and coherently enact philosophical and theoretical assumptions throughout its process and knowingly make and engage with decisions made (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This view reflects this study's pragmatic stance which not only seeks to inform actions to be undertaken to address a real-life issue, but also to engage with contributors' and other researchers' multiple perspectives and their consequences (Morgan, 2007). Hence, RTA not only enables researchers to collect and make sense of different viewpoints, but also to raise awareness of their own limitations, assumptions and reflections while engaging with the data and analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

While RTA is not about doing "things by the book", it facilitates the researcher to systematically code data to develop themes that can be evolved, analysed and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 38). In this respect, themes are not passively waiting to be discovered but are produced by the researchers and influenced by their theoretical assumptions, analytical resources and skill (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Hence, coding is seen as part of a six phased process in which researchers need to question and reflect on assumptions being made while interpreting the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021, p. 40):

(1) dataset familiarisation; (2) data coding; (3) initial theme generation; (4) theme development and review; (5) theme refining, defining and naming; and (6) writing up.

Accordingly, the first author will read through the transcripts to familiarise herself with the data and produce written reflections about each interview. She will also consult any visual aids (e.g., whiteboards, pictures of drawings) created during the interviews to inform her understanding of the transcripts. Then, she will import the transcripts into NVIVO, a computerized program that is helpful for sorting, organizing, analysing qualitative data and is offering tools and features to organize and structure codes and themes (Dhakal, 2022). The first author will manually code each interview on this platform by marking phrases and words from the participants' narratives, consult the created visual aids and write memos reflecting her thoughts and impressions (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Once larger patterns across the dataset are detected, she will group the codes into themes, and see if the created visual aids can be incorporated to further understanding of these themes. Next, she will discuss these themes, visual aids and the memos produced during this period in critical friend meetings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based on these conversations, the first author will develop these themes further and eventually refine, define and name them. Then, the first author will write up the results and present them to the second, third and fourth author. Their feedback and/or suggestions from a wider research audience will help to clarify and tweak the communication of the findings.

Ethics

Contributors will be provided with an information sheet, a consent form and a demographic survey to complete and return to the first author (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 67). The information sheet will provide details about the study to be conducted, potential outputs of the research findings (e.g., peer-reviewed article) and the right to withdraw. The consent form will ask contributors to provide their name, age and profession/ role and ensure that they understand the nature of the study, what their contribution entails and where to direct questions they might have (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 264). The demographic survey will inquire about the contributors' gender, ethnic background and dance/ psychological experience.

The contributors will be informed in the information sheet, on the consent form and verbally before the interview starts that they are able to withdraw at any stage up until the deadline stated on the information sheet without explanation. There are

no known risks to individuals from engaging in semi-structured interviews where all results are confidential.

Rigor

In line with its pragmatic philosophical underpinning, the researchers will undertake member reflections as a part of the study's rigor (Cavallerio et al., 2020). Member reflections are seen as an opportunity to not only present research findings to collaborators but to invite them to a "reflexive elaboration" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 285) that can generate additional data and insight (Cavallerio et al., 2020; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Hence, member reflections are a co-participatory process that can acknowledge and explore contradictions and differences in knowing and thus fruitfully inform the further actions to be undertaken in the development of a MST program for dancers (Smith & McGannon, 2018). To facilitate such an exchange, all contributors will be invited to a follow-up meeting (i.e. online or face to face) once all interviews have been completed and a preliminary results structure has been developed. During these conversations, research findings will be discussed and explored and additional data emerging from these meetings integrated in the result and/or discussion section of the study.

To further enhance this study's rigor, the first author will write memos (e.g. notes that record thoughts, assumptions and the researchers' thought trail) during the analysis process (Birks et al., 2008; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Memos are not only a tool to record the researcher's perspective for later critical review or confirmation but also helps the researcher to examine and reflect on feelings, assumptions and impressions upon engagement with data (Birks et al., 2008; Tufford & Newman, 2012). In that regard, memos can help to document and acknowledge preconceptions and enable researchers to immerse themselves in the data in a way that would otherwise be difficult to achieve (Birks et al., 2008). Moreover, memoing is seen as an effective strategy in maintaining communication and interconnectedness with other researchers and can support the researcher in conveying and discussing rough ideas, codes or themes with peers which, in turn, can enhance the quality of the research undertaken (Birks et al., 2008; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Discussion

With the aim to inform the development of a MST program for freelancers in the dance industry, this study will examine what mental techniques, skills and qualities freelance dance artists utilize and need to overcome and/or navigate challenges in their versatile careers.

Using a qualitative, explorative research design embedded in a PBA framework for intervention development, the researchers will seek input and advice from freelancers in the dance industry and psychologically informed practitioners working with dancers to identify essential characteristics to be integrated in a MST programme.

Considering that dance literature on MST and consultation of dancers and practitioners is sparse, this study will contribute to addressing these gaps in two ways. First, this study will not only explore the beneficial mental techniques, mental skills and mental qualities for addressing challenges experience by freelance dance artists but also investigate *how* contributors in this study explain mechanisms underpinning MST. Accordingly, the researchers aim to dig deeper into freelance dance artists' MST processes which will contribute significantly to both dance and sport research on MST. Second, while interest in researching views of psychologists and medical professionals working with athletes has increased in sport (Sharp et al., 2015; Weinberg et al., 2018), dance research has yet to understand and acknowledge psychologically informed practitioners' contribution to dancers' mental well-being and personal development. By investigating the psychologically informed practitioners' experiences regarding working with dancers and delivering psychoeducational workshops, this study will fill a considerable gap in dance literature.

While this is the first study using PBA to inform a psychoeducational intervention in dance, there are also a number of limitations to this endeavour. First, the nature of freelance dance artists' work might challenge the recruitment and exploration of a diverse and representative sample. Second, the integration of participatory approaches in this study is a welcome departure from top down approaches in dance research but can also be more time consuming and demanding than traditional research approaches (Morrison et al., 2018; Muller et al., 2019). However, the authors believe that integrating freelancers in the dance industry and psychologically informed practitioners in the intervention development process, will not only make the MST programme more meaningful, interesting and feasible but will also help address research gaps in existing dance literature.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Committee (approval no. ERN_21-1690AP8) on July 25th, 2024.

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