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# Character education for public leadership: The continuing relevance of Martin Buber's 'Hebrew humanism'

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The need for character education for those in public leadership is of unquestionable importance. Professor Christoph Stückelberger (University of Basel, founder of Globethics) has recently argued that 'structural ethics' (constitutions, policies and standards) have their merits, and that 'there are no virtuous institutions, there are only virtuous people'. Stückelberger calls for the cultivation of virtues, especially the virtue of integrity. In recent decades, character education has received new attention. Those who call for character education most often draw from Greek traditions, especially from Aristotle. This article will explore a different source for the discussion of virtues and character. About 80 years ago, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber proposed character education, based on what he called 'Hebrew humanism', as the foundation of nation-building. I will explore the continuing relevance of Buber's view of character and character formation, taking his famous Tel Aviv speech on 'The Education of Character' of 1939 as a point of departure.

**Keywords:** Public leadership; Education; Virtues and character; Character formation; Martin Buber.

## Introduction: The call for character formation

Freedom, community, global justice, equality, responsibility, participation, peace, sharing, solidarity, trust, tolerance and sustainability are all values outlined in a book entitled *Global Ethics for Leadership* (eds. Stückelberger, Fust & Ike 2016). This book was published in 2016 by Globethics. net, a 'worldwide ethics network' with the aim 'to ensure that people in all regions of the world are empowered to reflect and act on ethical issues' (Globethics.net n.d.a:n.p.). Furthermore (Globethics.net n.d.b):

> Globethics.net offers institutions the opportunity to set their ethical standards and structures to strengthen ethics not only by focusing on individual behaviour but also on institutional mechanisms used to incorporate ethics within the organization. (n.p.)

From this, it follows that special emphasis is given to senior leaders in the public sphere, in global enterprises, in non-government organisations and in higher education. The aforementioned book not only outlines core values for institutions but also identifies 'virtues in leadership', such as honesty, respect, listening, courage, vision, reliability, compassion, gratitude, modesty, patience and integrity.

Christoph Stückelberger, a Swiss reformed theologian, founder and long-time executive director of Globethics.net, contributes a chapter on integrity to the book. It is based on a speech he had delivered in December 2015 at the Protestant University of the Congo in connection with the project 'Training on Integrity in Responsible Elections' in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Stückelberger 2016c:149–165). Later he presented a slightly revised version as his farewell lecture at the Theology Department of the University of Basel (Switzerland), where he served as Professor of Ethics (Stückelberger 2016b).

I use this speech by this renowned expert in leadership and ethics in the public sphere as a point of departure because he identifies a particular, often neglected or even ignored, issue, namely, the formation of virtues and character for those in leadership responsibilities.

Stückelberger (2016b) states:

> People and organisations make decisions based on motivations which derive from various factors such as power, greed, opportunities, emotions, faith – or values and virtues. *Values are reference points and ethical*

*principles on which decisions and actions are taken.* They help to answer questions such as 'What shall I do? How shall I decide?' *Virtues are attitudes or behaviours of individuals.* Through self-control, education and regular training, an individual can become and remain an ethical person. Interpreting and giving priority to virtues over values may bring change in a person's life, as well as to a society or a culture. (p. 312)

In other words, *values* are external; they can stimulate or enforce ethical behaviour extrinsically. *Virtues* are internal; they shape a person's being so that he or she acts ethically. Stückelberger argues that we need to give priority to the formation of virtues over the definition of values. He emphasises 'structural ethics' (Stückelberger 2016b:324), but concludes that good constitutions, policies and codes of values – important though they are – remain extrinsic motivations and do not have the power to transform people.[1] He argues that '[t]here are no virtuous institutions, there are only virtuous people' (Stückelberger 2016a:2). This leads him to his urgent call for the formation of virtues and character.

Stückelberger's call is not new. Throughout the centuries, philosophers and theologians have pointed to the foundational significance of character formation. In this study, I turn to the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) and his remarkable contribution to education. I am convinced that his insights into the formation of human beings are of timeless significance.

In 1938, Buber was forced to leave Germany and he moved to Palestine in order to contribute to the establishment of a Jewish nation. In this context, he gave his remarkable speech on 'The education of character' (Buber 1947d:104–117). Buber was deeply convinced that the Jewish nation could never be built solely on a piece of land, on national ideas, on political structures and on military power, but ultimately only on character formation rooted in the Jewish faith. It was this conviction that distinguished him already at the beginning of the 20th century from Theodor Herzl and the nationalist Zionist movement (Buber 2002a, 2002b, 2002e; cf. Kohn 1961:40–47; Kuschel 2015:56–60).

This lecture by Martin Buber on the formation of character in the context of nation-building caught my attention many years ago. It was something like an invitation to look more carefully into Buber's writings, searching for a deeper understanding of his contribution to character formation.

This leads to the question to be dealt with in this article: what are the potential and the continuing relevance of Buber's view of character and character formation for today, especially in relation to public leadership and nation-building? After a short introduction to Buber's life and work, I will identify several key components of his contribution to the formation of character. At the end, I will challenge recent developments in higher education in light of Buber's call to character education.

1.This is stated even more explicitly in the German version of the lecture (Stückelberger 2016a:1–2).

# The framework of Hebrew humanism

The intention and the significance of Buber's Tel-Aviv lecture of 1939 can only be captured if we first introduce the concept of 'Hebrew humanism'. Buber points out that he used the term 'Hebrew humanism' already in 1913 (Buber 2002d:158). Later, in 1933 – still living in Germany – Buber addressed the young generation of Jews confronted with National Socialism when he delivered a speech titled 'Biblical humanism' (Buber 2002c). And in 1941, at that time already living in Palestine, he spoke explicitly on the topic of Hebrew humanism (Buber 2002d). Finally, when Buber received the Erasmus Prize 1963 in Amsterdam, he titled his speech of thanks as 'Believing humanism' (Buber 1967). The three terms may not carry exactly the same meaning, but they all point to a foundational frame of reference of Buber's thinking (cf. Volkmann 2005).

By using the term 'humanism', Buber positions himself within the European discourse on renaissance, enlightenment and humanism. At the same time, the qualifying adjectives 'biblical', 'Hebrew' and 'believing' put his worldview in critical distance from all forms of anthropocentric post-enlightenment humanism. In contrast to European humanism, Buber is not referring back to the classical Greek and Roman antiquity, but rather to the ancient writings of the Hebrew Bible (Volkmann 2005:181–182).

In his 1933 speech, he defines 'Biblical humanism' as follows (Buber 2002c):

> Biblical humanism is concerned with a 'concrete transformation' of our total – and not alone our inner – lives. This concrete transformation can only follow upon a rebirth of the normative primal forces that distinguish right from wrong, true from false, and to which life submits itself. The primal forces are transmitted to us in the word – the biblical word. (p. 47)

And in his address of 1941 on 'Hebrew humanism', he looks back and comments (Buber 2002d):

> When Adolf Hitler stepped into power in Germany, and I was faced with the task of strengthening the spirituality of our youth to bear up against his nonspirituality, I called the speech in which I developed my program, 'Biblical humanism', to make the first half of my concept still clearer. The tide indicated that in this task of ours, the Bible – the great document of our own antiquity – must be assigned the decisive role that in European humanism was played by the writings of classical antiquity. (p. 159)

This provides a frame of reference for all of Buber's philosophical and educational writings. He moves beyond unworldly and even escapist piety, on the one hand, and a godless, purely immanent humanisation, on the other hand. His pedagogy was characterised by putting humans in relationship to the world *and* to God (Ventur 2003:199–208). This is summarised in some of Buber's key statements, such as 'God wishes man whom He has created to become man in the truest sense of the word' (Buber 2002d:164; cf. Ventur 2003:197).

Over against European humanism, which refers to Greek and Roman antiquity as a resource for renewal and renaissance, Buber points to the more holistic anthropology of the Hebrew tradition. He states (Buber 2002d):

> [*We*] must reach for a farther goal than European humanism. The concrete transformation of our whole inner life is not sufficient for us. We must strive for nothing less than the concrete transformation of our life as a whole. The process of transforming our inner lives must be expressed in the transformation of our outer life – of the life of the individual as well as that of the community. (p. 161)

Buber argues that European humanism focuses too much on the transformation of the mind, the intellect, the inner life. In contrast, Hebrew humanism views humans in their totality, including the mind and body, thinking and acting.

From this point of view, he also criticised the separation of the private and the public sphere, which he observed in many societies – not least in the political programme of Jewish Zionism in his time. From the point of view of Hebrew humanism, he argues (Buber 2002d):

> What it [*Hebrew humanism*] does have to tell us, and what no other voice in the world can teach us with such simple power, is that there is truth and there are lies and that human life cannot persist or have meaning save in the decision on behalf of truth and against lies; that there is right and wrong and that the salvation of man depends on choosing what is right and rejecting what is wrong; and that it spells the destruction of our existence to divide our life up into areas in which the discrimination between truth and lies and right and wrong holds, and others in which it does not hold, so that in private life, for example, we feel obligated to be truthful but can permit ourselves lies in public, or that we act justly in man-to-man relationships but can and even should practice injustice in national relationships. (p. 161)

For Buber, the Hebrew faith is not a religion for the inner life, the spiritual sphere in a compartmentalised world. It is a way of life rooted in the truth revealed by God in the Bible, a way of life that comprises the entire life and affects all spheres of life, individual and communal, private and public. This is the reason why the formation of character became so central in Buber's educational engagement. This leads us to his lectures on education.

## The education of character

Buber began his lecture on 'The education of character' with the following statement (Buber 1947d):

> Education worthy of the name is essentially education of character. For the genuine educator does not merely consider individual functions of his pupil, as one intending to teach him only to know or to be capable of certain definite things; but his concern is always the person as a whole, both in the actuality in which he lives before you now and in his possibilities, what he can become. (p. 104)

Education that only focusses on 'individual functions' of the person, on knowledge or skills, is – according to Buber – not worthy to be called education. Genuine education views the 'person as a whole' and focuses on his or her entire being; it 'is essentially education of character'.

For Buber, character is what an individual *is* – far beyond what he or she knows (knowledge) and what he or she does (skills). Out of a person's very being flow his or her 'actions and attitudes' (Buber 1947d:104). Buber does not use the term 'integrity' but this is what he is actually speaking about: the congruence of being, speaking and doing.

More precisely, he defines character with two terms 'actuality' and 'possibilities', or in other words, 'reality' and 'potentiality' (Buber 1947d:104). As we will see later, these are two foundational concepts in Buber's definition of character. The first term ('actuality' or 'reality') refers to a person's ability and willingness to perceive and accept his or her actual reality in the here-and-now of his or her life. The second concept ('possibilities' or 'potentiality') focuses on a person's responsibility to realise life according to his or her potential and the demands of the situation. Buber speaks about the 'personal responsibility for life and world' and 'the courage to shoulder life' (Buber 1947d:115).

This leads to the term 'responsibility', another key concept in Buber's understanding of character. By relating the term 'responsibility' to 'response', Buber gets at the heart of his understanding of responsibility. He says, '[a]n individual's responsibility exists only where there is real responding' (Buber 1947a:16), and in another speech on education, he says (Buber 1947c):

> The fragile life between birth and death can nevertheless be a fulfilment – if it is a dialogue. In our life and experience we are addressed; by thought and speech and action, by producing and by influencing we are able to answer [*or 'respond'*]. For the most part we do not listen to the address, or we break into it with chatter. But if the word comes to us and the answer [*or 'response'*] proceeds from us then human life exists, though brokenly, in the world. The kindling of the response in that 'spark' of the soul, the blazing up of the response, which occurs time and again, to the unexpectedly approaching speech, we term responsibility. (p. 92)

For Buber, 'responding' is an essential dimension of true human existence. Therefore, he emphasises the significance of 'responsibility' (in the literal sense of the term) for the realisation of true humanity. Character means that a person perceives reality as a call and that he or she responds in a 'responsible' way.

One of the most passionate and challenging definitions of education and the role of the educator can be found in 'Education and world-view'. Buber (1957) states:

> The education I mean is a guiding toward reality and realization. That man alone is qualified to teach who knows how to distinguish between appearance and reality, between seeming realization and genuine realization, who rejects appearance and chooses and grasps reality. (p. 105)

Again, reality and realisation are at the heart of the educational goal. However, now Buber sharpens his argument by pointing to the difference between appearance and reality, between pretended realities and real realities. Persons with character are educated to distinguish between pretence and reality – and to choose reality. In 'Elements of the interhuman', Buber deals with the same issue under the title 'Being and Seeming', arguing that a mature person recognises his or her pretensions ('what one wishes to seem') and accepts and reveals what he or she 'really is' (Buber 1982:339). This again is a dimension of integrity.

In all of this, we have to take note that reality and realisation, response and responsibility have two dimensions in Buber's thinking: human beings have to respond to the realities of this world and they have to act in a responsible way (this is what Buber calls 'realisation'). However, reality should not be limited to the scope of what science (empirical reality) and philosophy (cognitive reality) can offer; it needs to be open to the transcendent (and yet immanent) reality of God.

Buber concludes his Tel-Aviv lecture with the statement (Buber 1947d:117), '[t]he educator who helps to bring man back to his own unity will help to put him again face to face with God'.

It is evident that for Buber becoming truly human includes the oneness of the person (integrity) 'face to face' with God. The relationship with the world and the relationship with God are fully intertwined. As we will see later in his essay 'The way of man', responding to the voice of God and responding to the demands of earthly realities constitute a holistic and character-forming education.

This has significant implications for the education of character. Buber argues that it is the educator's task to help individuals to a 'rebirth of personal unity, unity of being, unity of action – unity of being, life and action together' (Buber 1947d:116). As mentioned earlier, he adds at the end of his lecture on character education that, in order to reach this 'rebirth', a person needs to be put 'face to face with God'.

Furthermore, he argues that it is not sufficient to 'talk about' virtues and character in a distant and theoretical way (in Buber's terms *I-It*-talk). It does not help to explain what good and bad is because such cognitive knowledge does not necessarily shape character (Buber 1947d:105–106; cf. Ventur 2003:170). The educator has to 'address' the learner in such a way that a response is provoked (*I-Thou*-talk) – ultimately a response in the form of action, of appropriate realisation – in proper relation to God and his world. This, according to Buber, is only possible in an 'atmosphere of confidence' (Buber 1947d:107). In other words, character education requires person-to-person relationships.

In his essays 'The way of man' (1948/1964) and 'Elements of the interhuman' (1953/1982), Buber further develops the framework for a pedagogy that facilitates character formation.

## The way of man

Buber understands human existence as a journey towards full humanity. This implies that life must be conducted, shaped and formed. In 'The Way of Man' (1964), Buber outlines this life-shaping journey in six steps:

1. Heart-searching: the journey begins with a person being addressed by God ('Where are you, Adam?'). We have to respond to three foundational questions: 'consider three things. Know whence you came, whither you are going, and to whom you will have to render accounts'.
2. The particular way: we should not copy others but find and realise our personal calling.
3. Resolution: we need to unify our soul – body and spirit – so that we think and act purposefully, firmly and congruently.
4. Begin with oneself: we should not blame others if it is our responsibility to take the first step.
5. Avoid preoccupation with oneself: we should not remain focused on ourselves but approach the needs of the world in the realm of our responsibility.
6. Here where one stands: it is our responsibility to realise our personal calling here and now, at the place where we are. We should not always escape into day-dreaming about other, perhaps better places to realise life.

In this essay, Buber did not explicitly talk about character formation. Nevertheless, his reflections point to the heart of the education of character in the framework of Hebrew humanism. Again, the journey towards the realisation of true human existence begins with the encounter of the eternal Thou – with responding to the 'voice' of the creator. And again, the journey towards full humanity is a journey towards greater integrity, facing the realities of one's personal life and of the surrounding world, and responding with one's entire being to the demands of the situation in a responsible way.

However, how can such a character be formed? The most specific pedagogical suggestion we can find in Buber's writing is connected to the term 'dialogue'.

## Genuine dialogue

Buber is a storyteller and we best approach his pedagogical teachings by listening to one of his examples in 'On the education of character' (Buber 1947d):

> The teacher who is for the first time approached by a boy with somewhat defiant bearing, but with trembling hands, visibly opened-up and fired by a daring hope, who asks him what is the right thing in a certain situation – for instance, whether in learning that a friend has betrayed a secret entrusted to him one should call him to account or be content with entrusting no more secrets to him – the teacher to whom this happens realizes that this is the moment to make the first conscious step towards education of character; he has to answer, to answer under a responsibility, to give an answer which will probably lead beyond the alternatives of the question by showing a third possibility which is the right one. To dictate what is good and evil in general is not his business. His business is to answer a concrete question, to answer what is right and wrong in a given

situation. This, as I have said, can only happen in an atmosphere of confidence. Confidence, of course, is not won by the strenuous endeavour to win it, but by direct and ingenuous participation in the life of the people one is dealing with – in this case in the life of one's pupils – and by assuming the responsibility which arises from such participation. It is not the educational intention, but it is the meeting which is educationally fruitful. A soul suffering from the contradictions of the world of human society, and of its own physical existence, approaches me with a question. By trying to answer it to the best of my knowledge and conscience, I help it to become a character that actively overcomes the contradictions. (pp. 106–107)

From all we have seen so far it follows that the 'interhuman' – what happens between persons – is central in Buber's anthropology and pedagogy. Buber calls it 'the between'. In his address 'Elements of the interhuman', he identifies five aspects (Buber 1982):

1. The 'social' and the 'interhuman' should not be confused: the 'social' refers to all sorts of communal realities in which the individual can remain isolated and *I-It* relations may dominate. The 'interhuman' refers exclusively to what Buber calls *I-Thou* relationships.

2. Being and seeming: a person reveals to another his real being and not what he or she likes the other to perceive as his or her real being.

3. Personal making present: a person turns to another, is aware of the other person, affirms the other person in his or her being (not necessarily in all his or her thoughts and actions) and makes himself or herself accessible – in short, one is fully present with the other person.

4. Imposition and unfolding: a person does not impose 'himself, his opinion and his attitude towards life' on another person (forming copies through propaganda), but rather facilitates the becoming of the unique being of the creature face to face with the creator (growing originals through education).

5. In summary, there are six marks of genuine dialogue:

   • The turning of the being – turning my full existence to the full existence of the other.
   • Receiving the other by affirming him as a person – even if I disagree with him.
   • Bringing myself to the other – opening up and saying what needs to be said.
   • Overcoming semblance – moving from 'seeming' to 'being'.
   • The 'memorable communal fruitfulness' – expecting, seeking and rejoicing what happens in the 'between', which is unique and could not be experienced by each one individually.
   • Being silent – it is not always necessary to speak in order to facilitate genuine dialogue; be silent if appropriate.

According to Buber, it follows that any person who wants to provide the space for the development of character has to understand the sphere of the interhuman and acquire the competences of authentic dialogue. Such persons must be able to engage in deep-level relationships (cf. Buber 1982:332–348; Keim 1990:59–104).

## Conclusion

It is time to sum up and return to the foundational question provoked by Stückelberger at the beginning of this study: what are the potential and the continuing relevance of Buber's view of character and character formation for today, especially in relation to public leadership and nation-building?

In the context of threatened Jewish identity in the diaspora and the establishment of a Jewish nation in Palestine, Buber fervently fights for character formation as the ultimate and only solid ground for any society.

Buber does not use classical Greek or Roman definitions of virtues and character. He even points to the insufficiency of such classical definitions as 'absolute values', 'voluntary obedience to maxims' or 'the interpenetration of habits' (Buber 1947d:108–111). With statements such as 'personal responsibility for life and the world' and 'the courage to shoulder life', he points the way. What this precisely means is specified in all the aforementioned aspects and can be summarised as follows:

• Character and the education of character must be seen in the framework of 'Hebrew humanism', an anthropology that is shaped by the Hebrew Bible.
• It follows from such an anthropology that inter-relatedness is not just a sociological reality or a pedagogical method, but rather the essence of humanity.
• A person with character responds to God and the demands of life in a responsible way. He or she perceives reality and realises life with his or her entire being.
• All educational efforts have to lead beyond *I-It* relations toward *I-Thou* relationships.
• Becoming fully human (developing character) is a journey – Buber outlines the steps and stations of that journey (the way of man).
• Genuine dialogue is the pedagogical centrepiece of character education.
• Such dialogue is characterised by *I-Thou* relationships, provoking existential responses to existential questions.
• At the heart of such an understanding of the task of character education is the *I-Thou* encounter with God.

As theologians and leaders of the church, we have to respond to the question, 'what is our task and our mission in any given context, in any society?' Quite often in history and in the present time, Christian ministries and missions have been focusing on inner and private piety in view of some sort of eternal life after death and/or on social actions as a contribution to peace and justice in society. For some this used to be an either … or …, while others have tried to be holistic by emphasising both. It seems to me that Buber's Hebrew humanism points to a third dimension of Christian responsibility in the world: the education of character as the formation of personal integrity and communal

responsibility – helping men and women to become truly human, by responding to the call of the Creator and to the demands of life in the here-and-now. That is, in the words of Buber, assuming 'personal responsibility for life and the world' and developing 'the courage to shoulder life' by a life lived 'in the face of God'.

Birgit Ventur accurately concludes her doctoral dissertation with the statement that the centre and the original contribution of Buber's view of education is the 'all-inclusive reference to God and the world' (Ventur 2003:199).[2] We can learn a lot from this Hebrew humanism of a Jewish wise person.

In conclusion, I want to relate the findings of this research to the role and responsibility of the university and some recent development in higher education. It is the task of the university to train the elite of a given society, especially those in public leadership. At least this used to be the legacy of the European university from its founding in the 11th and 12th centuries (Bologna, Paris and Oxford) up to the modern university in the 19th century (Berlin). Building on the foundation of 'general studies' [*studiumgenerale*], theologians, lawyers and medical doctors received the education needed for their role in public leadership. Of course, the world became more complex, theology lost its significance and more leadership roles of public relevance developed in areas such as education, economy, industry, technology, media and others. However, the task of the university remains essentially the same: to educate those who will lead a society, a nation in the future and into the future.

If we follow Martin Buber's argument, the education of character must be at the centre of our educational efforts, as the primary nation-building force.

In the last 20 years, we have observed a dramatic shift in higher education – and it drives us away from the ideals of Buber and many other advocates of classical education. More and more we are doing exactly what Buber tells us is insufficient. We focus on partial knowledge and certain skills; in short, we concentrate on 'individual functions' required to fit into the economic system, and by doing so we lose sight of 'the person as a whole'. We have invented impressive new terms like 'fitness for purpose', 'output-orientation' and 'competences' at the cost of earlier values such as virtues, character and wisdom.

Martin Buber outlines the parameters for education that forms the 'the person as a whole', which helps human beings to become fully human. This can happen in the sphere of a true encounter between professors and students characterised by *I-Thou* relationships. It requires mutual trust that creates a space free of fear. This facilitates true dialogue and enables students and teachers to face reality – realty about their own lives and the world. In turn, these realities will be perceived as a call to respond in a responsible way. In short and in the

words of Buber, such education will enable a next generation 'to shoulder life' in 'personal responsibility for life and world'.

Buber's Hebrew humanism even points to the very specific and essential task of faith-based education of character. 'The way of man', the journey towards the wholeness of life begins with the encounter with God, the Creator. It is, therefore, the task of the educator 'to bring man back to his own unity' by putting him 'again face to face with God'.

Above all, this requires presence, personal encounter, true dialogue and trust. Unfortunately, the main currents of higher education drive us in a different direction. The fragmentation and modularisation of curricula, the credit accumulation system and the constant reduction of contact hours undermine personal encounter, deep dialogue and the integration of the whole of life. The proliferation of regulations, policymaking, assessment, reporting and accreditation, requiring immense administrative efforts, draws faculty and student services away from being present with students and forces them to sit behind their computers reading the most recent versions of policies and writing reports. The shift from the 'community-model' to the 'client-model' of education promotes an institutional culture which is characterised more by *I-It* than by *I-Thou* relationships. However, exactly such deep inter-personal relationships are the hotbed of genuine education.

It is short-sighted to make economic success and global competition the main purpose of education and to focus all educational efforts on making students fit for that purpose. In his time, Buber called education back to the essential responsibility of character formation as the only reliable foundation of any community, any society and any nation. I am convinced that this is a timeless call, worthy to be heard in our times.

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2.Translation by Bernhard Ott. Original text in German: 'Dieses Eigentliche ist in dem umfassenden Gottes- und Weltbezug zu sehen, der Bubers Erziehungsdenken prägt'.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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