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Exploring the Term “Resilience” in Arctic Health and Well-Being Using a Sharing Circle as a Community-Centered Approach: Insights from a Conference Workshop

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Abstract: In the field of Arctic health, “resilience” is a term and concept used to describe capacity to recover from difficulties. While the term is widely used in Arctic policy contexts, there is debate at the community level on whether “resilience” is an appropriate term to describe the human dimensions of health and wellness in the Arctic. Further, research methods used to investigate resilience have largely been limited to Western science research methodologies, which emphasize empirical quantitative studies and may not mirror the perspective of the Arctic communities under study. To explore conceptions of resilience in Arctic communities, a Sharing Circle was facilitated at the International Congress on Circumpolar Health in 2018. With participants engaging from seven of the eight Arctic countries, participants shared critiques of the term “resilience,” and their perspectives on key components of thriving communities. Upon reflection, this use of a Sharing Circle suggests that it may be a useful tool for deeper investigations into health-related issues affecting Arctic Peoples. The Sharing Circle may serve as a meaningful methodology for engaging communities using resonant research strategies to decolonize concepts of resilience and highlight new dimensions for promoting thriving communities in Arctic populations.

Keywords: Indigenous methodologies; decolonizing methodologies; qualitative; Arctic; resilience

1. Introduction

In the field of Arctic health, “resilience” is a term and concept used in the English language to describe the capacity to recover from, or adapt to, difficulties. It is widely used in the Arctic policy context to describe ecosystems, communities, and climate change (Furberg et al. 2011). The use of

“resiliency” originates in the literature from a seminal ecological paper by [Holling \(1973\)](#). More recently, the Arctic Resilience Report, a science-based assessment of the integrated impacts of change in the Arctic, explored social-ecological interactions in order to “build resilience” among Arctic communities to prepare for changes to come ([Arctic Council 2016](#)). The Arctic Resilience Interim Report ([Arctic Council 2013](#)) defined resilience in the Arctic as follows:

“Resilience is a property of social-ecological systems that relates to the capacity of the system to cope with disturbance and recover in such a way as to maintain its core function and identity, whilst also maintaining the ability to learn from and adapt to changing conditions, and when necessary to transform.”

The use of the term has been expanded to discussions of mental health and wellness and the human dimensions of resilience, particularly in psychology literature ([Luthar et al. 2000](#); [Rutter 1993](#)). [Kirmayer et al. \(2009\)](#) state that;

“Resilience is a broad and flexible concept, encompassing processes of risk and vulnerability, growth and transformation, culture and community, social structure and personality, and power and agency. Resilience brings together a wide array of interacting factors that are best understood in relation to each other.”

However, as empirical research on resilience has grown, critiques have generally focused on three main arguments: (1) ambiguities in definitions and central terminology ([Mohaupt 2009](#)); (2) heterogeneity in risks experienced and competence achieved by individuals viewed as resilient ([Luthar and Cushing 2002](#)); and (3) concerns regarding the usefulness of resilience as a theoretical construct ([MacKinnon and Derickson 2013](#)).

Concepts of resiliency have not been adequately explored from Arctic community members’ perspectives with regards to what it means to be resilient. At its core, resiliency fundamentally addresses ideas about survival of species through adaptations in nature, including concepts of survival of the strongest and healthiest of a species. From an Indigenous perspective, this biologically grounded notion of resilience may be diametrically opposed to beliefs about ancestors, the spirit world and the passing down of knowledge through generations ([Lavallee and Clearsky 2006](#)). From community members’ perspectives, it may be that resilience is more about self-determination and overcoming historical and present day situations of structural violence and colonialism than it is about “survival”. Furthermore, standard measures of resiliency that have been used with Arctic communities have not resonated with actual individual perceptions of resilience, highlighting the disconnect between Western science concepts of resiliency (including access to health care, levels of education, and prevalence of disease or psychological distress) and Northern beliefs about what it means to be resilient ([Payne et al. 2018](#)). Thus we find that there is a lack of ontological coherence when it comes to understanding resiliency within Arctic communities because past research with Northern communities has addressed resiliency from a Western definition of what adversity is and what it means to survive in the face of adversity, without giving voice to peoples’ perspectives on what makes them vulnerable to changes in their cultural beliefs, practices and ways of living and knowing ([Schott 2013](#); [Thomas et al. 2016](#)).

In the context of Arctic health research, the term “resilience” has largely emerged in the English literature in response to the search for pathways to address high rates of substance abuse and suicide in Arctic Indigenous communities ([Arctic Council, Sustainable Development Working Group SDWG; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Bals et al. 2011](#)). For example, the main focus of the report on the Hope and Resilience seminar held in Nuuk, Greenland in 2009 was to emphasize group discussions that highlighted the importance of strengthening resilience and hope in the prevention of suicide in Arctic Indigenous communities ([Arctic Council, Sustainable Development Working Group SDWG; Viskum Lytken Larsen et al. 2010](#)).

Currently, there is debate at the community-level as to whether resilience is an appropriate term to use to describe the human dimensions of mental health and wellness in Arctic communities.

Discussions of the application of the resilience concept to the individual and to communities have been noted in the literature (Kirmayer et al. 2009). Furthermore, the research methods employed to investigate resilience in Arctic communities have largely been limited to quantitative, social-ecological studies using Westernized research methodologies that originate from a research paradigm that does not necessarily mirror the perspective of either the community(ies) under study, or the holistic health and wellness perspectives of peoples living in the Arctic (Arctic Council 2013).

This manuscript describes the implementation of a Sharing Circle methodology to explore perspectives on resilience among residents of the circumpolar north. Our primary question in this process was: “Is the Sharing Circle a useful methodology for deeper investigations into health-related issues affecting Arctic Peoples in Northern research contexts, such as resilience?”

2. Materials and Methods

Significant advances have been made to engage Arctic communities in research, however there remains a need for research models that are borne from community perspectives on research, particularly Indigenous and rural/remote communities. We are a group of Northern researchers and community members, and include individuals from Alaska, Sapmi, Nunavut, Denmark, northern Russia, and northern Finland. These approaches should include the full scope of research, from the underlying assumptions, to the research questions, to the ways used to find the answers to those questions (Kovach 2009; Prior 2007; Wilson 2008). This particular exploration was anchored in a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014). While this inquiry was not conducted as research, our approach retained most of the defined characteristics of “classic” grounded theory, but takes a more subjective and reflexive stance that is more aligned with Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing (Chilisa 2012; Kovach 2009; Wilson 2008). Originally presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the intent of using a grounded theory approach is to generate or discover a theory inductively from the understandings or meanings explored in the data collection (Creswell 2013).

The Sharing Circle method was selected because the authors identified it is a common approach/technique used in a geographically diverse set of Arctic communities for community engagement, and the authors were familiar with its application. It was implemented to explore resilience and thriving Arctic communities with a diverse group of participants from differing Arctic nations at an international Circumpolar gathering (the 17th International Congress on Circumpolar Health, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in August 2018). The International Congress on Circumpolar Health (ICCH) is a gathering held every 3 years that brings together health workers, community members, medical personnel, and academic researchers from around the Arctic.

Sharing Circles, and a related method called a talking circle, originate from processes used in Indigenous communities for the past several millennia for discussing important issues, seeking resolution, problem-solving, and as a pedagogical approach for teaching and sharing generational wisdom (Haozous et al. 2010; First Nations Pedagogy 2009). The Sharing Circle is considered a sacred space in which to share experiences and knowledge. The structure of the Sharing Circle places value on every individual in the circle and the story they share within the sacredness of that space. Following Indigenous protocol, a Sharing Circle could also be opened with a prayer or a ceremony.

Within a contemporary context for the purpose of community engagement with researchers, key stakeholders, and policy makers, the Sharing Circle may be a unique approach to stimulate multicultural awareness while fostering respect for individual similarities and differences and facilitating group cohesion (Running Wolf and Rickard 2003). Sharing Circles could be used in the context of Community Based Participatory Action Research, but are a separate methodology that stems from Indigenous traditions. Usually, a Sharing Circle begins with all participants introducing themselves. The facilitator presents the topic and the reason for the gathering and reminds participants of the ethics of Sharing Circles: that information shared within the circle is not to be discussed outside of the circle unless permission is given through a consent process. Participants are then prompted to

share experiences and perspectives on certain topics. The Sharing Circle ends with a discussion of next steps and expressions of gratitude.

The group sat in a circle, facing each other. The authors introduced the topic, themselves, their home communities, and the reason for the Sharing Circle: to openly share perspectives on home countries and regions, as well as thoughts on and reactions to the concept of “resilience” and its use in the Arctic policy context. In addition, participants were invited to share insights gathered from working with Arctic residents on their perceptions of, and reactions to the term “resilience”. The authors also asked participants for permission to take notes, and consent was obtained through verbal consensus. All participating authors took notes during the Sharing Circle. The activity was not undertaken as research, but has, upon reflection, applications that may be informative to research contexts.

Talking, or sharing, circles are usually gathered or convened for a purpose. To that end, there is usually an appointed lead who poses the questions and nurtures the discussion. This is what is meant by “facilitation”. One of the authors took the lead in this capacity and the remaining authors participated as equal members of the circle. The Sharing Circle begun by each member of the circle introducing themselves in the order they were seated in the circle. Four revolutions of the circle took place in the amount of time allotted for the discussion. A new question was posed in the first three rounds, and in the fourth round, closing remarks were shared with expressions of gratitude. The three questions were:

- What does resilience mean to you, your community, or in your language?
- What makes your community a great (thriving) place to live?
- Solutions and strengths moving forward—vision for the future?

One author took a lead role in beginning the circle and posed the questions to the participants at each revolution. All individuals were given space and time to share their thoughts during their turn of the Sharing Circle. Authors and participants were not treated differently during their turn, although the facilitating author that began the circle would state the next prompt once all individuals in the circle had taken their turn. Gender, age, and community role of all participants was not asked, nor recorded, during the Sharing Circle. Comments that emerged from the Sharing Circle were categorized and summarized by the authors, and all participants gave verbal consent to share and use the findings.

After the Sharing Circle the authors shared their immediate reactions and analyses, and agreed to compile their notes in a joint electronic document. This discussion among the authors included reflection upon intentions in undertaking the circle, the process of doing so, and relationships identified by the participants with their communities, the land, and their holistic worldviews. This discussion ensured accuracy of included topics and remarks in the dataset and methodological coherence. The impressions from the Sharing Circle experience(s) and the compilation of notes were then subjected to thematic analysis, from which the findings emerged. This approach followed the Piliriqatigiinniq Research Model which privileged the stories provided by the participants and analytical processes rooted in Arctic communities (Healy and Sr 2014).

Participants were provided with the option of being re-contacted for member-checking, but none of them opted to be re-contacted. However, one participant followed up on the Sharing Circle by emailing four of the authors with the call for papers for this special issue of *Social Sciences*, prompting the drafting of this manuscript.

3. Results

In total, seven individuals and four of the authors participated in the Sharing Circle held during the 2018 ICCH in Copenhagen, Denmark. The session was included as a break-out option for conference participants, and lasted for 1.5 h. The session was listed in the conference program as a workshop. Conference participants were encouraged to attend through paper flyers posted throughout the conference venue, the conference program, and announcements via social media. Participants self-selected to participate in the Sharing Circle, and represented a multitude of lived experiences

from seven of the eight Arctic countries, including Denmark and Greenland, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Alaska and United States, and Canada. Participants shared a diversity of experiences as individuals who were (1) lifelong residents of the circumpolar north; (2) individuals who had migrated between communities in the Arctic; and (3) individuals who moved between urban and rural settings within Arctic and subarctic regions/communities. All participants had some connection to Arctic health and wellness as researchers, policy-makers, writers, and/or care providers. Participants drew from their own family stories and experiences when reflecting on the questions posed in the Sharing Circle. Both critical and positive reactions to “resilience,” and key aspects of thriving communities emerged as themes during the Sharing Circle. These reactions are discussed below:

3.1. Critical Reactions to “Resilience”

Some participants described negative reactions to the word “resilience,” including that “[The word] makes me feel tense in my body” and that “The lens is ‘outside’ not ‘inside’. It is someone from outside the Arctic looking in to the Arctic and talking about resilient peoples in the Arctic—almost as an object for investigation.” Participants noted how “resilience” can be construed as celebrating and glorifying the presence of adversity. A participant shared “Do you have to recognize adversity to be resilient? Can you be resilient without adversity? What is it that we are trying to describe—past, present, future states?” Another described how in Denmark, they felt that “[. . .] the word has been abused in Danish, it is used to ‘squeeze every drop out of someone in the work place’.”

Participants noted the different applications of the word in different geographic spaces. For example, it was noted that there may be an increased need for recognizing adversity experienced by Sami people, which lent some credence to the use of the term “resilience” in that context. However, other participants noted a need to recognize that English is also a language bound to its cultural context, and that there are not always equivalent translations of the words in other cultural contexts. Participants shared that an exact translation of “resilience” did not exist in Russian, Finnish, Swedish, Kalaallisut (Greenlandic), Inuktitut, or Danish. One participant stated,

“If there is no common language—and maybe that is ok—maybe that is the point[. . .] We [Arctic Peoples] share a common philosophy, heart, spirit—and family. Is that what we want to talk about, not resilience?”

A visual representation of a heart-spirit-family concept of thriving Arctic communities is presented in Figure 1.

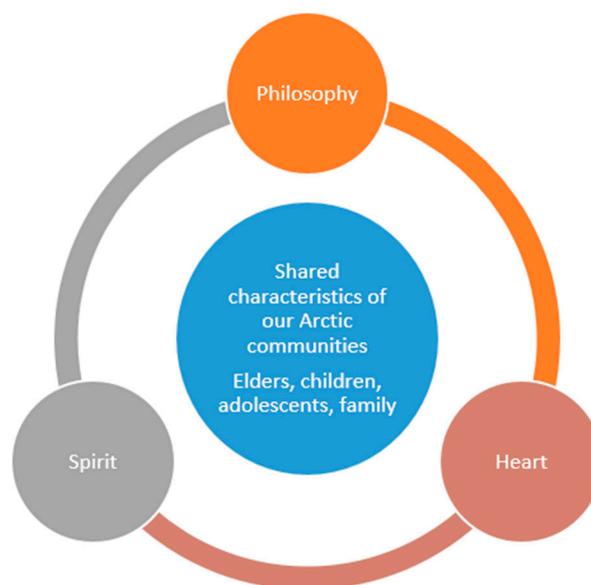


Figure 1. Shared characteristics of Arctic communities as discussed in the Sharing Circle.

Several participants shared that alternative terms and concepts may be more resonant with communities in the north, with one participant describing how they might examine the appropriateness of a term by thinking; “I ask myself, does it resonate with my family?” Alternative concepts that could be used instead of “resilience” were offered, including “sisu” in Finnish, and the English words “strength,” “wellness,” “perseverance,” or “grit.” A participant shared the German word “geist,” which would be used in Sweden to mean “show some (fighting) spirit.” A participant offered the word “sila” in Greenlandic, as a reference to how the weather/environment, but also your mind, are both interconnected. The phrase “*Sila naalagaavoq*” in Kallaalisut, meaning “the weather determines the outcome,” is an often-used phrase that indicates that what happens depends on the interaction between the mind/body and what surrounds us. In Nunavut, this term also references the weather/environment in Inuktitut, and regard for the power that they hold over us. Participants also talked about ways they’ve needed to modify the term “resilience” to resonate with communities; a participant described how the term “resilience” was discarded for a project promoting mental wellness among youth and school children in Greenland, and the term “Think iNuk” was used instead, signifying “Think in ways that make us healthy.” A participant shared in written communication after the session that the Russian scientific literature (mostly on psychology, social adaptation, and recent history), does not have an exact translation for the term “resilience,” but that similar concepts are expressed in words such as “неуязвимость”, “(жизне)стойкость”, “устойчивость”, or “резистентность” (Magomed-Eminov 2009; Magomed-Eminova 2015; Gushchina et al. 2016; Pivneva 2015; Markova et al. 2016; Vinokurova 2018; Suleymanov 2017).

3.2. Key Aspects of Thriving Communities

“Thriving communities” emerged as an alternative framework for approaching holistic wellness in Arctic communities. Participants identified several aspects of thriving Arctic communities, which have been summarized by the authors as Figure 2, highlighting diversity, health, the land and harvesting, the positive contribution of individuals to the community, people, and kindness.



Figure 2. Elements of thriving Arctic communities.

Participants discussed that the strength of bonds within thriving Northern communities fostered a sense of accountability, humility, reflection, and love that allowed children and others to be honored within their communities. Participants identified that their lived experiences of thriving Northern communities included open-mindedness about diversity, what it means to be healthy, and recognizing

and celebrating diverse ways of living and being. This acknowledgement also highlighted the role of small communities and connection to the land and animals as facilitating interdependence; which supported residents to be kind, humble, contribute and take care of each other, as well as tolerate diversity.

Several participants echoed that connections to nature and the rhythm of the seasons promoted resilience. For example, one participant noted that when discussing the concept of resilience in a Sami setting, community members would talk about being with other Sami high up in the mountains, where a (literal and psychological) flood would not be able to reach them. Participants felt that helping people get access to nature may be a way to support thriving communities.

Participants discussed the centrality of people, particularly elders, to promoting “resilience”. An individual discussed building resilience through informal institutions such as foster families for older people in Russia who are otherwise alone. Another participant shared that older people in Greenland were able to better articulate aspects of resilience, including family, nature, and sharing food. Participants also described that if older people are well-connected in the local community, aspects of resilience such as family, nature, and food, are often talked about as important; whereas if an older person is less socially connected, then their isolation may rise in importance. For participants, this sharing highlighted a need to pay careful attention to those who are not integrated in communities where they live and consequently may not benefit from sharing (as a form of community resilience) that otherwise happens within small close-knit Arctic communities.

4. Discussion

Our manuscript describes the implementation of a Sharing Circle methodology to examine the concept and term of “resilience” among a diverse group of individuals from the circumpolar north. While this activity was undertaken as an exploratory inquiry, the process illuminated the effectiveness of a Sharing Circle to explore concepts of health and wellness relevant to Northern communities. Interestingly, across a diversity of lived experiences, a small group of participants from the Arctic articulated a consensus that the term “resilience” did not resonate within their communities. Their perspectives were largely critical of the term and its usage, and they identified alternative conceptualizations based on what they identified as facets of thriving communities. These facets included celebrating diversity, health, access to nature, making positive contributions to community, people, and showing kindness/humility. Our qualitative process highlighted differing perceptions and conceptualizations of the term “resilience” among Northern community members, a finding which resonates with other studies examining the use of the term and its diverse application and meanings in the circumpolar north ([Arctic Council, Sustainable Development Working Group SDWG; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Arctic Council 2016; Kral et al. 2011](#)). Findings suggest that concepts of thriving Arctic communities may be grounded in connection to place (such as being in the mountains), connection to others (through activities like sharing food), and connection to self and what it means to be a human being (i.e., “Think iNuk”). These findings appear to be quite different than measures more commonly quantified in Western paradigms when determining health and resilience; such as access to health care, levels of education, and prevalence of disease or psychological distress. Further research could be useful in determining if this methodology of exploring and understanding thriving communities is useful, and the findings consistent, among other groups of residents in the circumpolar north.

Implementing strategies, such as a Sharing Circle, that decolonize terminology, perceptions, and research methodologies are needed when engaging in community-based work with communities in the Arctic, which are often largely composed of Indigenous peoples. Discussing concepts that are applied to communities, such as “resilience,” must be undertaken with community members to assess their perspectives on these terms. Our manuscript highlights that there may be alternative terms and concepts that Northern community members identify more strongly with, which can be used to

respectfully and accurately drive the field of health and wellness studies forward in accordance with community priorities and Indigenous epistemologies.

4.1. Lessons Learned

Our implementation of the Sharing Circle method allowed for deeper meaning and understanding on the complex concept of resilience within an Arctic health and wellness context. For community members, researchers, and public health practitioners who would like to implement a Sharing Circle in their work, we include the following suggestions that merge Indigenous research methodological concepts of inclusivity, respect and storytelling, with Western research methodologies of informed consent, documenting the discussion, and confidentiality.

- First, it is very important to cultivate a safe and understanding sharing space, by explaining motivations for gathering for the circle, providing meaningful introductions, and by facilitating a welcoming, kind, and respectful environment.
- Second, when implementing a Sharing Circle, if a topic guide is used, it should primarily focus on open-ended questions in accordance with Indigenous data collection concepts and the story-telling nature common in Northern communities ([Running Wolf and Rickard 2003](#); [First Nations Pedagogy 2009](#); [Cueva et al. 2006](#)).
- Third, to allow rich, in-depth sharing that will capture the stories and experiences of the participants, storytelling should be embraced without limitations or interruptions ([Wilson 2008](#)).
- Fourth, if the methodology is used for research purposes, and the facilitator wants to ensure accuracy through taking notes during the Sharing Circle, consent must be obtained, and preferences should be discussed for whether quotes be anonymized or attributed to specific individuals or groups. Participants may want their identities protected, or may want to be publicly recognized for their contributions of knowledge, particularly when working in disadvantaged and colonized Indigenous contexts. Such practices might serve to empower participants living in contexts where Indigenous knowledge has been treated like a resource to extract.

4.2. Considerations and Limitations

This manuscript was written about an exploratory inquiry into using a Sharing Circle as a methodology to learn about perceptions of resilience. As this activity was not conceived of as a systematic investigation, nor was it designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge, it does not meet the criteria for research outlined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This manuscript was conceived of only after one of the participants in the Sharing Circle suggested it. Despite the fact that the activity was not developed as research, the authors attained consent from all participants to record and summarize the comments made during the Sharing Circle, and all participants were emailed a draft of this manuscript, invited to review and co-author the article, and asked for their consent to submit this text for publication.

[Mays and Pope \(1995\)](#) recommend a series of steps to ensure reliability and validity of qualitative research findings. These suggestions include providing details of the sampling strategy, providing an account of the data collection and analysis protocols, and describing the interpretation and presentation of the findings ([Mays and Pope 1995](#)). Researcher responsiveness and openness ([Morse et al. 2002](#)), methodological coherence ([Meadows et al. 2003](#); [Morse et al. 2002](#)), and reflection upon intentions, process, and relationships ([Eakin and Mykhalovskiy 2003](#); [Kovach 2009](#); [Meadows et al. 2003](#); [Mays and Pope 2000](#)) are all aspects of rigor and accountability, which were followed for this study ([Healy and Sr 2014](#)).

In this study, the research questions, the methods, and the authors came from communities in the circumpolar north, and consequently these findings are presented through the lens of Northerners. There may be other results or interpretations of this Sharing Circle, but we view this data through our

implicit lenses; analyzing in ways that we feel are respectful and mindful of the communities in which we both reside and work.

The fact that we are from Arctic communities ourselves may have permitted the participants to share more of their stories with us, because they understood that our motivation for this study was to benefit our shared communities. In addition, our genuine interest in participants' words, and great respect for the role of story in our communities, may have provided participants with assurance that we would not take the story away or misuse it, as previous researchers have done in the past.

The findings in this study are not representative of the entire Arctic population on the topic of resilience. Given the historical and geographical differences between communities, there are a number of stories and perspectives on resilience in the Arctic that could be explored in future research.

Author Positioning: G.H.A. was born and raised in Iqaluit, NU where she continues to live and work with her Nunvummiut family; K.C. was born and raised in Alaska where she continues to live and work, she is of Chicana, Canadian, British, and German heritage, has Inupiat family, and is a public health practitioner of community-based participatory action research with Indigenous peoples; J.P.A.S. is Sami and Swedish, born and raised in Kiruna and Laevas reindeer herding community in Arctic Sweden. He continues to live and work in Sapmi; C.V.L.L. is from Denmark, lived in Greenland, and has Greenlandic children and family; ER comes from a long line of farmers and coal miners of German, Russian, and Canadian descent, and currently is on the faculty at Montana State University, conducting community-based research with Indigenous communities in Montana, Greenland and Finland; NK is Inupiat from Utqiagvik, Alaska, where she continues to live and work; AE was born and raised in Arkhangelsk, North-West Russia, and five years ago she moved to live and work in Oulu, Northern Finland, as a researcher in Arctic population health; V.Y.H. is American Indian, has an Aleut family, and is based in Anchorage where she conducts community-based research with Indigenous communities of Alaska.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.H.A., N.K., and C.V.L.L.; methodology, G.H.A., J.P.A.S., C.V.L.L., and K.C.; data curation, J.P.A.S., C.V.L.L., K.C., and G.H.A.; writing—original draft preparation, G.H.A.; writing—review and editing, K.C., G.H.A., J.P.A.S., C.V.L.L., A.E., V.Y.H., and E.R.

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