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## METAPHORICAL PERCEPTIONS OF COACHES REGARDING THEIR ATHLETES

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research is to reveal the metaphorical perceptions of handball coaches regarding the concept of "athlete." The study group of the research consists of a total of 186 handball coaches, including 140 males and 46 females (Mean Age: 38.37 ± 10.61). Coaches who voluntarily participated in the research were asked to complete the sentence "An athlete is like a/an ..... because ....." in order to uncover the metaphors they have about the concept of "athlete." In the findings of the study, the metaphors developed by handball coaches regarding the "athlete" concept were categorized into 67 metaphors under 5 categories. These categories are "Athlete as a valuable entity," "Athlete as a moldable raw material," "Athlete as a reflector," "Athlete as a mysterious individual requiring effort to understand," and "Athlete as a passive recipient." As a result of the research, it can be observed that handball coaches view their athletes as children and evaluate them as valuable entities. In this process, healthy communication and harmony between athletes and coaches are crucial. On the other hand, not all coach-athlete communications may progress smoothly. An ego battle can arise between coach and athlete during the course of their interaction. Particularly, athletes who have reached a certain level might not heed the coach's directions and act according to their own beliefs. This situation can lead to conflicts and, at the same time, result in failure. Especially concerning this matter and scope, increasing studies could be recommended, including obtaining the perspectives of both coaches and athletes in the same study through quantitative or mixed-methods research conducted by researchers. Furthermore, in order to eliminate conflicts, educational seminars where coaches and athletes can participate together and both groups can practice empathy could be provided.

**Keywords:** Coach, metaphor, athlete

## INTRODUCTION

Performance athletes aim to succeed and continuously improve in their respective sports, striving to surpass their previous achievements (Baumann, 1994). The success of athletes is influenced by a combination of inherent physical, cognitive, behavioral, and psychological characteristics. Coaches play a significant role in shaping athletes' attributes, providing guidance, and contributing to their success in varying degrees (Amman et al., 2000).

The concept of coaching has existed for many years and refers to a relationship where one person educates or guides another person towards a particular outcome, enhanced skill, or performance (Lepre-Nolan & Houde, 2023). Coaches teach athletes the rules and tactics of their sport, share their knowledge and experience, and prepare athletes both physically and psychologically for competitions (Dolaşır, 2006). Coaches focus on positively influencing and enhancing athletes' learning and performance (Gençoğlu, 2019). The scope of coaching ranges from teaching basic rules to beginners to aiding the physical and mental preparation of elite athletes for competition, requiring extensive knowledge and experience (Amman et al., 2000).

The term "metaphor" originates from the Greek words "meta" (change) and "pherein" (carry), derived from "metapherein" (Levine, 2005), and it generally refers to expressing a concept or idea in terms of more familiar terms (Arslan, 2006). Metaphors are used and debated in various fields of scientific research. Metaphors are linked by the common element of analogy (Akyol, 2021). Aydın (2006), defines a metaphor as "using an analogy to relate a concept, word, term, to another meaning of a word, in order to explain a phenomenon more effectively and powerfully."

It's noted that a large part of an individual's everyday conceptual system and conventional language is structured primarily with metaphorical terms. Therefore, metaphors are widespread not only in language but also in thought and action. It's argued that our ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a). Cognitive metaphor theory has been developed in recent years, building on the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980a, 1980b). According to this theory, metaphors are cognitive structures that shape people's thoughts about the world and reality. Metaphors serve as powerful mental models that allow individuals to understand complex phenomena by relating them to previously experienced and concrete concepts, thereby shifting one's perception from one mode of understanding to another (Saban et al., 2006).

In the field of sports psychology, studies have focused on the coach-athlete relationship (Ada et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2015; Ferrar et al., 2018; Jowett et al., 2023; Turnnidge & Côté, 2017; Taşğın et al., 2022), athlete-coach communication (Akyüz, 2020; Selağzı & Çepikkurt, 2015; Tepeköylü Öztürk et al., 2021; Tepeköylü Öztürk & Soytürk, 2019), perceived coach behaviors by athletes (Çebi et al., 2019; Gök & Okan, 2020; Üzüm & Aycan, 2019; Yapar & Serbes, 2020), coach leadership traits (Altıntaş, 2017; Nacar & Kak, 2019; Tapşın et al., 2020), and coaches' self-efficacy levels (Akyüz, 2020; Koçak, 2019) using both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

In the literature of physical education and sports, the concept of metaphor is also studied in relation to terms like "physical education, physical education teacher, sports science student, sports, athlete, and coach perception" (Cudd, 2007; Kesić & Muhić, 2013; Çeyiz et al., 2021; Erul & Günay, 2020; Güler & Şavran Cengiz, 2018; Gür & Taşkın, 2022; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Karagün, 2021; Karaşahinoğlu & İlhan, 2019; Kayğusuz et al., 2021; Koç et al., 2015; Koç & Yeniçeri, 2020; Namlı et al., 2016; Pirsl & Pirsl, 2012; Sevinç & Ergenç, 2017; Yetim & Kalfa, 2019).

However, in the literature, there is a gap regarding studies that explore coaches' perceptions of the athlete concept through metaphors. The coach-athlete relationship is essential in coaching as it likely determines athletes' satisfaction, confidence, and performance achievements (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Therefore, revealing coaches' metaphors related to the athlete concept can contribute to understanding athletes' perceptions within this relationship. In this context, the study aims to uncover handball coaches' perceptions of athletes through metaphors and contribute to the literature. To achieve this, the following questions are addressed:

1. What are the metaphorical perceptions of handball coaches regarding the athlete concept?
2. Under which conceptual categories can the metaphors used by handball coaches for the athlete concept be grouped based on common characteristics?

## **METHOD**

### **Research Model**

The study was conducted with the approval of the Amasya University Social Sciences Ethics Committee under the approval number E-30640013-108.01-77737 dated 14.06.2022.

The research design employed in this study is a qualitative research design known as the case study design. Case study (phenomenology) design focuses on exploring phenomena that we are aware of but do not possess an in-depth and detailed understanding of. Additionally, phenomenology provides a suitable research framework for investigating phenomena that are not entirely unfamiliar to us but still lack a complete comprehension (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008).

### **Research Group**

The study group consists of a total of 186 handball coaches, including 46 females and 140 males. The ages of the coaches range from 23 to 67 (Mean Age: 38.37 ± 10.61). The research sample was determined using the convenience sampling technique. Convenience sampling, which is one of the non-probability sampling techniques, is employed to select easily accessible cases from the population, providing cost and time savings (Dawson & Trapp, 2001). Demographic information about the participating coaches is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Information About the Coaches

Variables		Number	%
Gender	Female	46	24.7
	Male	140	75.3
Coach Level	I. Level	25	13.4
	II. Level	60	32.3
	III. Level	73	39.2
	IV. Level	6	3.2
	V. Level	2	1.1
	Master Coach	20	10.8
Active Coaching Status	Yes	161	86.6
	No	25	13.4

According to Table 1, among the coaches participating in the study, 24.7% are female, and 75.3% are male coaches. Regarding coaching levels, 13.4% have a Level I certification, 32.3% have a Level II certification, 39.2% have a Level III certification, 3.2% have a Level IV certification, 1.1% have a Level V certification, and 10.8% have a Master Coach certification. Additionally, 86.6% of the coaches are actively coaching, while 13.4% are not actively coaching.

#### Data Collecting Toll and Analysis

The data for the study were collected face-to-face from handball coaches who voluntarily participated in the license renewal and coach development seminars organized by the Turkish Handball Federation for the 2022-2023 season. In order to uncover the metaphors that coaches had about the concept of "athlete," the coaches were asked to complete the sentence "An athlete is like a/an ..... because ....." with a single metaphor they focused on. The coaches were asked to write down their thoughts in alignment with this metaphor. Through this sentence, coaches were expected to explain the metaphor topic and source using the word "like" and to describe the relationship between the source and the metaphor using the word "because." The coaches were given approximately 15 minutes to write down their metaphors related to the "athlete" concept.

The analysis of the metaphors developed by the participating coaches was conducted in five stages. These stages are 1. Coding and extraction, 2. Compilation of sample metaphor images, 3. Category development, 4. Ensuring validity and reliability, and 5. Transferring the data to a computer environment.

In the first stage, coding and extraction, the metaphors expressed by each handball coach were coded (e.g., child, airplane, dough, precious metal, etc.). Subsequently, metaphors were grouped based on common characteristics, and categories were formed considering metaphors with multiple frequencies.

In the second stage, compilation of sample metaphor images, these metaphors were listed in alphabetical order, and an example metaphor expression representing each metaphor was selected from coach statements. Accordingly, an "example metaphor list" was created by compiling the best-representing example metaphor expressions for each metaphor. This list was established to (a) serve as a reference source for grouping metaphors under specific categories and (b) validate the data analysis process and interpretations of this research.

In the third stage, category development, the metaphor images developed by handball coaches were examined in terms of shared characteristics for the concept of "athlete." Based on the "example metaphor list" created in the previous stage, researchers examined how the concept of "athlete" was conceptualized. Then, each metaphor image was associated with a theme related to the "athlete" concept, leading to the formation of a total of 5 conceptual categories. For example: "Athlete as a Valuable Entity," "Athlete as a Precious Being," "Athlete as a Reflector," and so on.

In the stage of ensuring validity and reliability, in order to confirm whether the metaphors given under the 5 conceptual categories accurately represented those categories, two lists were provided to experts who were experienced in metaphor studies and also worked as expert coaches in handball. These lists included (a) a list of 67 example metaphors arranged in alphabetical order, and (b) a list containing the names and characteristics of the 5 different conceptual categories. Experts were asked to match the example metaphor list from the first list with the 5 conceptual categories from the second list. Then, the comparisons made by the experts regarding the categories and metaphors were compared with the researcher's own categories. The reliability of the research was calculated using Miles and Huberman's (1994), formula (Reliability = Agreement / Agreement + Disagreement), where agreement and disagreement counts were determined in the comparisons. In qualitative studies, a desired level of reliability is achieved when the agreement between expert and researcher evaluations is 90% or higher (Saban, 2009; Saban et al., 2006). This research achieved a reliability rate of 95% in the reliability study. Finally, after all data were transferred to a computer environment, the number (f) and percentage (%) of participants were calculated.

**FINDINGS**

In this section, the findings regarding the metaphors related to the "athlete" concept, as obtained from the participating coaches, have been presented in the form of tables and interpreted under subheadings according to the research questions.

**Table 2.** Metaphors Developed for the Concept of "Athlete"

Metaphor Code	Metaphor Name	f	%	Metaphor Code	Metaphor Name	f	%
1	Child	19	10.2	35	Life	1	0.5
2	Value	13	7.0	36	International Mediator and Balance	1	0.5
3	Mirror	11	5.9	37	Uncharted Sea	1	0.5
4	Family Member	10	5.4	38	Blank Canvas	1	0.5
5	My Child	8	4.9	39	Purpose of Sports	1	0.5
6	Seed	6	3.2	40	Developing Machine	1	0.5
7	Experience	6	3.2	41	Magic Lamp	1	0.5
8	Flower	6	3.2	42	Unprocessed Gem	1	0.5
9	Companion on the Journey	5	2.7	43	My Body	1	0.5
10	Precious Ore	5	2.7	44	Partner	1	0.5
11	Dough	5	2.7	45	Model	1	0.5
12	Diamond	5	2.7	46	Platform	1	0.5
13	Unprocessed Fabric	4	2.2	47	Journey into the Unknown	1	0.5
14	Unprocessed Ore	3	1.6	48	Guiding	1	0.5
15	Shining Light	3	1.6	49	Barren Land	1	0.5
16	Unprocessed Gold	3	1.6	50	Human	1	0.5

17	Puzzle	3	1.6	51	Footprints Left in the Snow	1	0.5
18	Teacher	3	1.6	52	Forest	1	0.5
19	Future	3	1.6	53	Self-Improvement	1	0.5
20	Key	3	1.6	54	Kite I'm Steering	1	0.5
21	To Be Shown as an Example	3	1.6	55	Touch	1	0.5
22	Ethical	3	1.6	56	Breath	1	0.5
23	Playdough	3	1.6	57	Holding a Sword	1	0.5
24	Effort	2	1.1	58	Unripe Fruit	1	0.5
25	Ore to Be Processed	2	1.1	59	Airplane	1	0.5
26	Raw Material to Be Processed	2	1.1	60	Water	1	0.5
27	Medal	2	1.1	61	Hungry Traveler at a Rest Stop	1	0.5
28	Undiscovered Ore	2	1.1	62	Educator of the Future	1	0.5
29	Colleague	2	1.1	63	Picture	1	0.5
30	Fruit-Bearing Tree	2	1.1	64	Customer	1	0.5
31	Soil to Be Processed	2	1.1	65	Bee	1	0.5
32	Building Blocks of Future Periods	2	1.1	66	Car	1	0.5
33	Blank Sheet of Paper	2	1.1	67	Octopus	1	0.5
34	Remote Control	1	0.5		TOTAL	186	100

When Table 2 is analysed, it is seen that handball coaches have developed 67 metaphors related to the concept of "athlete". It is seen that these metaphors mostly consist of the metaphor of "child" with a frequency of 19. In addition, 34 metaphors occurred with the same frequency.

**Table 3.** Categories Formed by Metaphors for the Concept of "Athlete"

Categories	Metaphors	Metaphor Frequency	Number of Metaphors
Athlete as a Precious Being	Child (19), Value (13), Family Member (10), My Child (8), Travel Companion (5), Role Model (3), Work Colleague (2), Moral (3), Partner (1), Human (1), My Body (1), Effort (2), Purpose of Sports (1)	69	13
Athlete as a Malleable Material	Flower (6), Precious Metal (5), Dough, (5), Unprocessed Fabric (4), Unprocessed Ore, (3), Untapped Mine (2), Medal (2), Untapped Mine (2), Fruit-Bearing Tree (2), Unprocessed Gold (3), Puzzle(3), Raw Material to be Processed (2) , Playdough (3), Unprocessed Gem (1), Unexplored Sea (1), Model (1), Soil to be Cultivated (2), Platform (1), Kite I'm Guiding (1), Touch (1), Giving Direction (1), Barren Land(1) Forest, (1), Ore to be Processed (2), Octopus (1), Car (1), Machine Open to Development (1), Unripe Fruit (1), Remote Control (1), Airplane (1)	66	31
Athlete as a Mysterious and Effort-Requiring Individual to Understand	Mirror (11), Experience (6) Teacher (3) Footprint I Left in Snow (1), Self-Improvement (1) Water (1), Breath (1), Painting (1)	25	8
Athlete as a Reflective Entity	Shining Light (3), Key (3), Diamond (5), Magic Lamp (1), Journey into the Unknown (1), Life (1)	14	6
Athlete as a Mysterious and Effort-Requiring Individual to Understand	Blank Sheet of Paper (2), Blank Slate (1), International Mediator Balance (1), Holding a Sword (1), AHungry Passenger Arriving at a Rest Area (1), Customer (1)	7	6
Athlete as a Passive Receiver	Future (3), Building Block of Future Periods (1), Educator of the Future (1)	5	3
TOTAL		186	67

When examining Table 3, it can be observed that metaphors are categorized under the themes of "Athlete as a Valuable Entity," "Athlete as a Moldable Raw Material," "Athlete as Reflective," "Athlete as Mysterious and Requiring Effort to Understand," and "Athlete as a Passive Recipient."

### Conceptual Categories

1. Athlete as a Valuable Entity: This category is represented by 69 coaches and 13 metaphors. In this category, metaphors such as "Child (19)," "Value (13)," "Family Member (10)," "My Child (8)," "Companion (5)," "To Be Shown as an Example (3)," "Colleague (2)," "Ethical (3)," "Partner (1)," "Human (1)," "My Body (1)," "Effort (2)," and "Purpose of Sports (1)" are found. Below, examples related to the athlete concept from coaches in this category are presented:

- "An athlete is like a family bond. Because, without a family, there is no team."
- "An athlete is like a family member. Because the athlete carries something from me." "An athlete is like a child. Because they must learn right from wrong. It's not just sports, it's a whole."
- "An athlete is like my child. Because they spend more time with me than with their family."
- "An athlete is a valuable entity. Because, while working with them, I develop both them and myself."
- "An athlete is like my child. Because I take pride in seeing them grow and achieve something."
- "An athlete is like a companion. Because to be a team, individuals must focus on the same goal, all parts as athletes and coaches must come together, believe in each other, and trust each other."
- "An athlete is like a partner to me. Because the more successful the athlete is, the more successful the coach will be."
- "An athlete is like a human. Because, above all, we are all human."

2. As a Mouldable Material: This category is represented by 66 coaches and 31 metaphors. Metaphors include "Seed (6)," "Flower (6)," "Precious Metal (5)," "Dough (5)," "Unprocessed Fabric (4)," "Unprocessed Metal (3)," "Unexplored Mine (2)," "Medal (2)," "Fruit-Bearing Tree (2)," "Unprocessed Gold (3)," "Puzzle (3)," "Material to Be Processed (2)," "Play Dough (3)," "Unprocessed Jewel (1)," "Unexplored Sea (1)," "Model (1)," "Unprocessed Soil (2)," "Platform (1)," "Kite I Directed (1)," "Touch (1)," "Direction (1)," "Barren Land (1)," "Forest (1)," "Unprocessed Ore (2)," "Octopus (1)," "Car (1)," "Open for Development Machine (1)," "Unripe Fruit (1)," "Bee (1)," "Remote Control (1)," "Airplane (1)." Here are examples related to the athlete concept from coaches in this category.

3. Reflective Athlete: This category is represented by 25 handball coaches and 8 metaphors. The categories are "Mirror (11)," "Experience (6)," "Teacher (3)," "Mark I Left in the Snow (1)," "Self-Improvement (1)," "Water (1)," "Breath (1)," "Painting (1)." Here are examples related to the athlete concept from coaches in this category.

4. Mysterious and Requires Effort to Understand: This category is represented by 14 handball coaches and 6 metaphors related to the athlete concept. The categories are "Shining Light (3)," "Key (3)," "Diamond (5)," "Magic Lamp (1)," "Journey into the Unknown (1)," "Life (1)." Here are examples related to the athlete concept from coaches in this category.

5. A Person Who Will Shape the Future: This category is represented by 5 handball coaches and 3 metaphors related to the athlete concept. The categories are "Future (3)," "Building Block of Future Periods (1)," "Educator of the Future (1)."

### **CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION**

The objective of this study is to uncover the metaphorical perceptions of handball coaches regarding the concept of an "athlete." In pursuit of this objective, coaches were asked to complete the sentence "An athlete is like... because...". As a result of the Handball Research, it is observed that handball coaches have developed 67 metaphors related to the concept of an "athlete." Among these metaphors, the "child" metaphor is the most frequent, occurring 19 times. Furthermore, these metaphors are categorized into five distinct categories: "Athlete as a valuable entity," "Athlete as a moldable material," "Athlete as reflective," "Athlete as a mysterious and effort-requiring individual," and "Athlete as a passive receptor."

Upon analyzing the categories, the "Athlete as a valuable entity" category is represented by 69 coaches and 13 metaphors. This category encompasses metaphors such as "child" (19), "value" (13), "family member" (10), "my child" (8), "companion on the road" (5), "to be showcased as an example" (3), "colleague" (2), "moral" (3), "partner" (1), "human" (1), "my body" (1), "effort" (2), "purpose of sports" (1), and more. Coaches not only guide athletes in terms of physical development but also play a crucial role in shaping their character. Consequently, this study underscores that coaches prioritize values as much as physical development. In other words, coaches don't view athletes merely as a part of their job but instead value, embrace, and hold them in as high regard as their family. This further highlights the importance of communication between athletes and coaches. For instance, the study found that the level of communication between coaches and athletes increases parallel to the duration of their collaboration (Abakay, 2010). Another study emphasizes the necessity for coaches and athletes to respect and make each other feel valued (Sabah et al., 2022).

The "Athlete as a moldable material" category is represented by 66 coaches and 31 metaphors. This category includes metaphors such as "seed" (6), "flower" (6), "precious mineral" (5), "dough" (5), "unprocessed fabric" (4), "unprocessed mineral" (3), "discovered mineral" (2), "medal" (2), "fruit-bearing tree" (2), "unprocessed gold" (3), "puzzle" (3), "material to be processed" (2), "playdough" (3), "unprocessed gem" (1), "unexplored sea" (1), "model" (1), "soil to be processed" (2), "platform" (1), "kite I guide" (1), "touch" (1), "to guide" (1), "barren land" (1), "forest" (1), "ore to be processed" (2), "octopus" (1), "car" (1), "developable machine" (1), "immature fruit" (1), "bee" (1), "remote control" (1), "airplane" (1). Coaches identify athletes, recognize their talents, and direct them toward suitable disciplines. Therefore, coaches might use these terms to describe athletes based on these roles. In other words, developments are observed in athletes in line with the planning, implementation, and guidance conducted throughout the process. With proper collaboration, the athlete's potential is realized, they mature, and they take shape. This underscores the need for coordinated action between coaches and athletes. For instance, a study notes that conflicts may arise between coaches and athletes if healthy communication and collaboration are not maintained (Wachsmuth et al., 2018).

**Reflective Athlete:** This category is represented by 25 handball coaches and features 8 metaphors. The categories within this group are "Mirror" (11), "Experience" (6), "Teacher" (3), "Trace I Left in the Snow" (1), "Self-Improvement" (1), "Water" (1), "Breath" (1), and "Painting" (1). The profession of coaching is closely intertwined with experience. In other words, coaches transmit their knowledge and accumulated experiences to athletes. Moreover, as indicated by the descriptions obtained, the aim here is not solely limited to sporting achievement. It can also be interpreted as being an exemplary individual in society, leaving positive traces, recognizing one's weaknesses and strengths, constantly setting and achieving goals for self-improvement. For instance, in a study, it was stated that the duration of collaboration with a coach has an impact on the athlete's development (Selağzı & Çepikkurt, 2015). Another study determined that maintaining healthy communication between coach and athlete not only positively affects performance but also influences self-confidence (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

**Mysterious and Effort-Required Individual Athlete:** This category is represented by 14 handball coaches and includes 6 metaphors related to the concept of the athlete. The categories are "Shining Light" (3), "Key" (3), "Diamond" (5), "Magic Lamp" (1), "Journey into the Unknown" (1), and "Life" (1). Each person's abilities differ from one another. While some individuals can easily perform a task, for others, performing the same task might take months or even years. It is during this process that coaches need to discover athletes' talents, bring out their potential, and tailor individual training plans to highlight their abilities. For instance, in a study, positive improvements were observed in athletes through the implementation of training methods by coaches (Vardağlı & Çankaya, 2021).

**Athlete as a Guide to the Future:** This category is represented by 5 handball coaches and features 3 metaphors related to the concept of the athlete. The categories are "Future" (3), "Building Blocks of Future Periods" (1), and "Educator of the Future" (1). As seen in the descriptions, athletes are perceived as individuals who will guide, direct, and educate others in the future. Athletes will pass on the knowledge they acquire from coaches to the generations to come. This knowledge doesn't only encompass the technical and tactical aspects of sports. In the future, athletes might be seen as educators who shape characters and provide guidance. A study found that when coaches and athletes maintain healthy communication, positive improvements were observed in athletes' social behaviours as well (Cairney et al., 2018).

## **SUGGESTIONS**

According to the results of the study, it has been determined that coaches value their athletes and see them as their own children. In this process, healthy communication and cooperation between athletes and coaches are crucial. However, it's worth noting that not every coach-athlete relationship progresses smoothly. In the course of their interaction, there might be an ego clash between the coach and the athlete. Especially when athletes reach a certain level of expertise, they might disregard the coach's guidance and act according to their own beliefs. This situation not only leads to conflicts but can also result in failure. Therefore, it's recommended to increase the number of studies in this area, where the opinions of both coaches and athletes are taken into

account within the same study. Researchers could also conduct quantitative or mixed-methods studies. Moreover, to eliminate conflicts, joint training seminars where coaches and athletes participate together and both groups can practice empathy could be organized.

#### ETHICAL TEXT

The rules of journal writing, publication guidelines, research and publication ethics, and journal ethical standards have been adhered to in this article. Any potential violation related to the article is the responsibility of the author(s)."

To conduct the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Amasya University Social Sciences Ethics Committee on June 14, 2022, with approval number E-30640013-108.01-77737.

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