A global experience-sampling method study of well-being during times of crisis: The CoCo project

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A global experience-sampling method study of well-being during times of crisis: The CoCo project

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Abstract

We present a global experience-sampling method (ESM) study aimed at describing, predicting, and understanding individual differences in well-being during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This international ESM study is a collaborative effort of over 60 interdisciplinary researchers from around the world in the "Coping with Corona" (CoCo) project. The study comprises trait-, state-, and daily-level data of 7490 participants from over 20 countries (total ESM measurements = 207,263; total daily measurements = 73,295) collected between October 2021 and August 2022. We provide a brief overview of the theoretical background and aims of the study, present the applied methods (including a description of the study design, data collection procedures, data cleaning, and final sample), and discuss exemplary research questions to which these data can be applied. We end by inviting collaborations on the CoCo dataset.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, experience-sampling, interdisciplinary, well-being, worldwide

1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic not only challenged our physical health but also affected many areas of psychological functioning. People were encouraged to physically distance themselves from others (Morina et al., 2021), work transitioned into a remote context (Rudolph et al., 2021), and countries temporarily closed their borders (Linka et al., 2020). From the onset of the pandemic, it was anticipated that individuals' experience of and reactions to the challenges posed by the crisis would vary. Along these lines, researchers have explored differences in individuals' responses to the pandemic regarding the effects of various personality traits (Anglim & Horwood, 2021; Kroencke et al., 2020; Kroencke et al., in press; Modersitzki et al., 2021; Rammstedt et al., 2022), sociodemographic characteristics (Berkessel et al., 2022; Buecker et al., 2020; Drefahl et al., 2020), cultural aspects (Lu, 2023; Lu et al., 2021), and political views (Collins et al., 2021; Willroth et al., 2022). To preserve and promote well-being during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is vital to (1) describe, (2) predict, and (3) understand such individual differences (cf. Mõttus et al., 2020). The "Coping with Corona" project (CoCo) is a global collaboration of over 60 interdisciplinary researchers established to address these three aims.

Here, we showcase data from the first major subproject of the CoCo project, which is a global study utilizing the *experience–sampling method* (ESM; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987). We provide a brief overview of the aims

and theoretical background of the project, present the applied methods (including the study design, data collection procedures, data cleaning, and final sample), and discuss the potential use of these data. Based on this presentation, we end by inviting collaborations on the dataset.

1.1 | Three aims of the CoCo project

The CoCo project has three central aims: First, we aim to *describe* individual differences in "Coping with Corona." Studies of the impact of the pandemic on overall mental well-being have found mixed results. For instance, one meta-analysis indicated no effects of lockdowns on well-being (Prati & Mancini, 2021), while reviews focusing on clinical outcomes reported increases in mental health problems (Salari et al., 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). Importantly, such general effects may hide differences in how people cope with crises. Moreover, considering only trait-level well-being will not detect between-person differences in within-person variability (e.g., greater fluctuation in well-being states), contingencies (e.g., stronger affective reactions to isolation), and trajectories of well-being (e.g., Müller et al., 2023). With CoCo, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of individual differences in well-being (both between and within persons) and link them to individual characteristics and environmental influences.

Second, we aim to *predict* differences in well-being. One prerequisite for developing interventions to improve well-being during times of crisis is developing predictive, cross-validated models that counteract overfitting (i.e., models achieving high predictive performance on the training but not the test data), thereby increasing generalizability (Yarkoni & Westfall, 2017). For example, state-level data obtained with ESM studies may be used to develop idiosyncratic machine-learning models that individually predict which contexts, interactions, and activities are most beneficial for each person's well-being. However, training such models requires large state-level datasets that have not hitherto been available, especially on an international scale. Thus, one of the central aims of this study is to provide a dataset that is sufficiently large for the development of models that predict individual differences in well-being.

Third, we aim to *understand* these individual differences. One potential driver of such differences may be different environmental challenges during the pandemic, or different responses to such challenges. In that regard, social interaction processes seem particularly relevant, because restrictions during the pandemic mainly concerned our social lives (e.g., see Buecker & Horstmann, 2021). To gain insights into why some people were thriving, while others were struggling, it is important to consider these differences in social interaction processes (Back, 2021; Back et al., 2023).

In the CoCo project, we focus on three aspects of social interactions: First, we investigate social situation selection. The kinds of social interactions in which people engage influence their well-being (Kroencke et al., 2023), so changes regarding the quantity and quality of interactions are expected to directly influence individuals' emotional lives (Krämer et al., 2022). Second, we investigate interpersonal perception. For instance, how positively we perceive others (Rau et al., 2021), how much we think that others like and accept us (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), and how much we perceive ourselves to share the same thoughts and feelings as others (Echterhoff et al., 2009) can be expected to influence well-being. Third, we explore effects of co-regulation, that is, how interaction partners support and mimic each other. This can include beneficial processes like emotional support, but also detrimental processes like co-rumination, that are expected to have diverging effects on individuals' well-being (Butler & Randall, 2013; van Zalk et al., 2011). Figure 1 illustrates how these aspects of social interactions can be influenced by and interact with environmental and individual characteristics to explain differences in well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding these dynamics may provide important insights as to why individuals differ in coping with the pandemic.

1.2 | The present study

Given the aims of the CoCo project, two requirements naturally arise: First, describing, predicting, and understanding both intra- and interindividual differences in well-being demands capturing the experiences and behaviors of

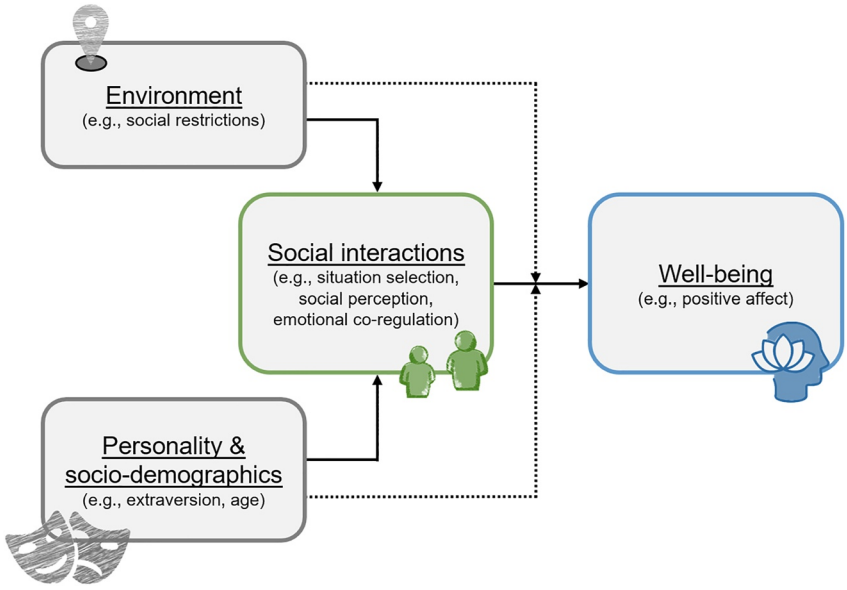

FIGURE 1 Overarching theoretical framework of the CoCo project. Solid arrows illustrate how individual and environmental characteristics can directly influence social interactions (e.g., environmental stressors specific to the pandemic, such as more virtual interactions because of social restrictions), resulting in well-being changes. Dotted arrows illustrate how these factors can alter the effects of social interactions on well-being (e.g., stronger reactions in well-being to positive interpersonal perceptions of individuals high in neuroticism).

individuals in the moment. For this purpose, we applied an ESM design which has become a common method for capturing everyday feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in psychological research over the recent decades (Wrzus & Neubauer, 2022). In this ESM design, participants completed multiple, randomly timed state surveys every day over four weeks. These samples of the participants' everyday experiences approximate everyday perceptions and behavior on the state level, allowing us to capture individual differences regarding both average tendencies (e.g., social interaction frequencies) and dynamics (e.g., well-being levels contingent on characteristics of social interactions).

Second, a pandemic is a global event, with the potential to influence everyone around the world. However, countries were affected to varying degrees locally and over time and governments and citizens differed in the pace and extent of measures taken to inhibit the spread of the virus (e.g., vaccinations, travel policies, social restrictions). For this reason, we collected ESM data in more than 20 countries on all populated[1] continents. While other studies have collected COVID-related data on a global scale (Han et al., 2023; Rathod et al., 2020; van Bavel et al., 2022), they did not capture state-level data and were mostly cross-sectional. The CoCo study provides the first global ESM study that permits researchers to investigate processes underlying effects on well-being and to differentiate how these processes played out differently across several countries.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Study design and measures

Figure 2 visualizes the basic study design and Table 1 provides an overview of the administered scales. An extensive description is provided in the codebook (see osf.io/dhmpy/). The data collection consisted of a pre-survey, a 4-week ESM period, and a post-survey. The study was conducted online via the software *formr* (Arslan et al., 2020) version v0.18.3. During the pre-survey, participants' email addresses were collected, which were used throughout the study for survey invitations, reminders, and weekly feedback. The first participant entered the study on 12 October 2021, and

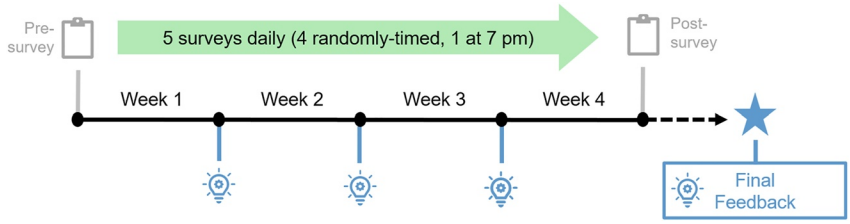

FIGURE 2 Design of the international ESM study.

the last participant completed the study on 15 August 2022. Thus, whereas the data collection period did not cover the onset of the pandemic in 2020, it covered the phase with the highest number of infections worldwide from December 2021 to March 2022 (excluding the spike of infections in the Western Pacific region in December 2022; WHO, 2020).

The pre- and post-survey were largely identical in content and assessed trait-level information regarding participants' personality, well-being, political and COVID-related attitudes, and more. The four-week ESM period began on the first day after completing the pre-survey. During this period, four short ("state") surveys were sent at random times between 9 AM and 6 PM every day, assessing individuals' momentary emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. The individual daily sampling plan was created by splitting the survey window (9 AM to 6 PM) into four equally large blocks and drawing a random timepoint out of each block, respectively, while making sure that two successive state surveys were a minimum of 60 min apart. Upon receiving the invitation to the state survey, participants had 45 min to start the survey, after which the invitation link expired. If participants did not respond within 20 min of receiving the invitation via email, we sent a reminder. These state surveys focused on situational information, momentary well-being, and the last social interaction or individual activity (if no social interaction had occurred within the last hour). Furthermore, a daily survey was sent each day at 7 PM, which participants could fill out until midnight. These daily surveys focused on COVID-related questions and attitudes towards minoritized groups. Lastly, participants received weekly feedback, which became increasingly comprehensive each week but did not contain variables related to the central research questions of the study (see Section 1.1. of the codebook for a more detailed description: osf.io/dhmpy/).

2.2 | Data-collection procedures

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling strategy with the help of more than 60 collaborators worldwide. The core team of the project developed the initial survey in English which was then translated by professional translators. The collaborators who were native speakers in the respective languages revised the translations to ensure that the content of the survey was identical to the English version. One survey with a unique URL was set up for each language. Participants could choose their preferred language at the beginning of the survey.

All researchers involved in the project disseminated the language-specific links in their countries through various marketing channels including social media, local and digital blackboards, mailing lists, university classes, recruitment panels, and local press releases. In addition, worldwide marketing through online forums (e.g., Reddit) and targeted ads (e.g., via Facebook) was administered. In addition to receiving personalized feedback throughout and after the data collection, participants could take part in a raffle of 10,000€ (prizes ranged from 20€ to 2500€) and, in some cases, received student course credits. Furthermore, we donated 1€ per participant to one of three charity organizations, which participants could select.

The data collection was hosted on a server at the University of Münster in Germany. Ethical approval of the three German universities leading the study covered the complete international study. The data protection officers of these three universities approved the data collection and storage procedures, in accordance with German data security laws.

TABLE 1 Overview of assessed constructs in the international ESM study.

Data level	Variable groups	Assessed constructs	Items
Trait (pre/post)	Personality	Big Five	60
		Meta-traits (Stability & Plasticity)	10
		Grandiose narcissism	6
		Self-esteem	1
		Honesty-humility	10
	Well-being	Life satisfaction	5
		Positive & negative affect	6
		Eudaimonic well-being	18
		Loneliness	9
		Value fulfillment	11
	Political attitudes	General attitudes	14
		Threat perceptions	6
		Perceived societal marginalization	6
		Social dominance orientation	8
		Right-wing authoritarianism	9
		Conspiracy mentality (COVID-related)	5
	COVID-19	Brief COPE (COVID-related)	28
		Risk estimation	4
		Evaluation	9
		Exposure and media consumption	8
		Emotional & social impact	20
		Vaccination	9
		Getting back to normal	10
State (up to 112x)	Social interactions	Interaction medium, partner(s), topic(s), and evaluation	12
		Intergroup contact, co-rumination	5
	Last activities	Activity place, type, duration, and evaluation	18
	Well-being	State affect and self-esteem	7
		Social inclusion, value fulfillment, energy level	7
	Personality	Personality states	6
Daily (up to 28x)	COVID-19	Infection, symptoms, vaccination, quarantine	6
		Concerns, optimism, political evaluations	5
		Home-office	2
	Attitudes towards minoritized groups	Prejudices	2
		Threat perceptions	2
		Similarity perceptions	2

Note: This table presents an overview of the assessed constructs in the international ESM study. Some items and constructs are not included for conciseness (e.g., items regarding the outbreak of war in Ukraine). For a complete overview, see the codebook: osf.io/dhmpy/.

2.3 | Data cleaning and quality checks

To counteract careless responding of participants, we flagged suspicious data records to allow researchers working with the data to decide which data inclusion criteria are best suited for their specific research questions. Still, we encourage researchers to remove the suspicious data records to enhance the data quality or to transparently compare results pertaining to the reduced and non-reduced datasets. Our approach followed the recommendations by Curran (2016), Meade and Craig (2012), and Geeraerts and Kuppens (2020). That is, we flagged trait, state, and daily entries based on criteria associated with carelessness, inconsistency, highly unrealistic answers, and response times. An exact overview of the criteria (see Table A1 in the supplementary materials) and the code used for identifying suspicious respondents can be found in the OSF project (see osf.io/dhmpy/). Our approach resulted in 9.5% of the trait, 2.8% of the state, and 3.9% of the daily entries flagged with respect to at least one criterion.

2.4 | Sample characteristics

Figure 3 illustrates the total number of state measurements in each country worldwide. In addition, Table 2 provides more in-depth information on the data obtained in countries in which at least five participants contributed more than five ESM measurements (for conciseness). An analogous table for all countries (without the cutoff) is included in the supplementary materials (Table A2).

As can be seen in Table 2, the international ESM study of the CoCo project contains trait-level data of around 7,500 participants from countries across all populated continents. Over 4,000 participants provided more than five ESM questionnaires and an average of 37 state and 14 daily assessments, allowing researchers to investigate numerous research questions with complex statistical models in a well-powered, international sample. More than 3,000 participants completed the whole four-week study including the post-survey, which overall results in more than 200,000 ESM measurements and close to 75,000 daily measurements across countries.

The sample includes individuals across the whole adult age range (*Min* = 18, *Max* = 91, *M* = 30). In most countries, samples have more female than male participants, with females making up 72% of the overall sample. At the point of entering the study, about half of the participants had completed at least some university education (48%) and most were either students (48%) or working full- or part-time (35%). A substantial proportion of the participants indicated having an immigrant background (14%). In general, the sample includes participants from all populated continents, even though response rates tended to be higher in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010) countries.

3 | POTENTIAL USES OF DATA

The international dataset presented here is well-suited for describing, predicting, and understanding individual differences in well-being during times of crisis. First, the large sample permits descriptive studies of basic patterns of trait- and state-level well-being with good statistical power. Such effects can be compared across countries with different cultural backgrounds to gain a better understanding of global patterns and the robustness of effects. Moreover, the longitudinal data allow researchers to examine trajectories of variables over time. While our data do not alone permit comparisons of well-being levels observed during versus before the pandemic, such comparisons might be possible by combining our data with ESM data collected elsewhere in the preceding years. Moreover, the longitudinal nature of this data collection project allows researchers to incorporate indices of the severity of the pandemic (e.g., infection numbers or the University of Oxford's stringency index; Hale et al., 2021) to investigate its influence on well-being levels over time, or to consider specific events and acute crises. For example, we have used the data of the CoCo project to explore individuals' well-being around the outbreak of war in Ukraine across countries, investigating the

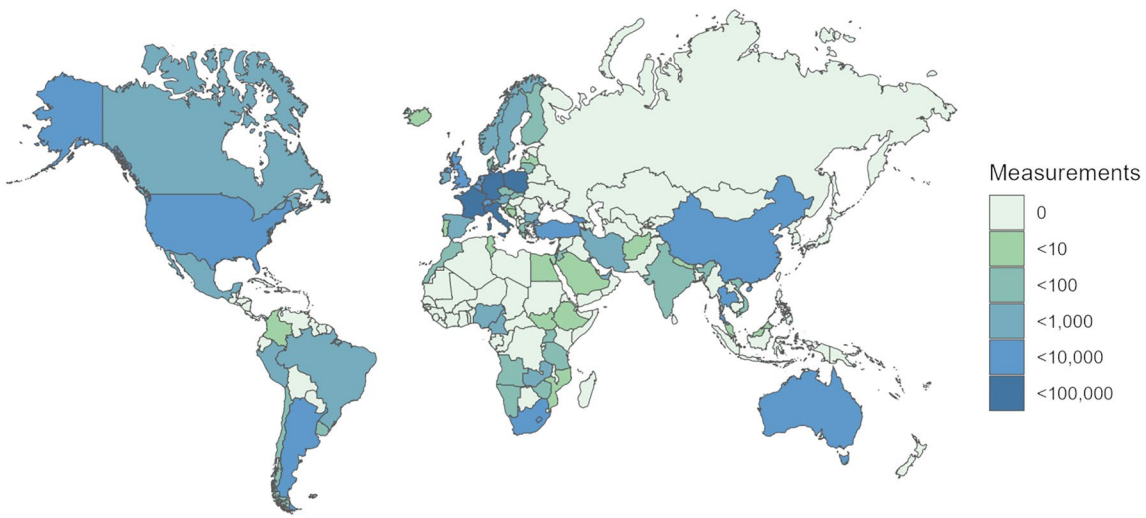

FIGURE 3 Number of ESM measurements per country.

TABLE 2 Overall and country-specific descriptive and summary statistics (with cutoff).

Country	N Pre	N ESM > 5	N Post	ESM 25%	ESM 75%	% female	Age mean	Age min	Age max	M daily	Mean M daily	M ESM	Mean M ESM
Total	**7490**	**4326**	**3102**	**2021-12-24**	**2022-04-27**	**71.5**	**30**	**18**	**91**	**73,295**	**14.4**	**207,263**	**37**
Argentina	70	43	25	2022-02-06	2022-02-25	74.3	29.7	18	58	574	11.7	1500	28.6
Australia	118	62	36	2022-02-10	2022-04-08	72.9	32.6	18	75	834	10.7	2438	26.5
Austria	10	8	6	2021-11-26	2022-05-12	90	31.1	19	61	160	17.8	389	43.3
Belgium	50	27	21	2022-04-07	2022-04-29	64	30.7	18	65	513	16	1555	42.2
Brazil	37	19	13	2022-02-02	2022-02-21	64.9	38.2	19	79	337	13.5	919	30.9
Canada	21	11	3	2022-05-14	2022-06-20	76.2	32.1	19	72	113	9.4	351	19.6
China	86	58	38	2022-04-27	2022-05-13	62.8	22.8	18	53	909	13.6	3243	46
France	855	497	305	2022-04-08	2022-05-09	74.4	26.8	18	83	7507	13	21,668	33.5
Georgia	337	194	120	2022-04-04	2022-04-23	84.9	26.2	18	66	2817	12	8048	31.5
Germany	1507	1182	981	2021-11-10	2022-01-04	81.7	32.4	18	91	24,121	18.7	70,557	52.4
Iran	45	15	10	2022-05-07	2022-05-23	75.6	36.9	18	55	179	9.9	352	17.1
Israel	46	30	26	2022-06-30	2022-07-17	78.3	33.1	20	72	470	12.7	1259	32.7
Italy	760	640	544	2022-03-16	2022-03-31	77	23	18	76	10,959	16.1	32,617	46.7
Mexico	14	10	4	2022-02-19	2022-03-15	57.1	38.8	18	68	138	12.5	350	29.7
Netherlands	36	23	14	2022-02-17	2022-03-08	75	33.5	18	72	424	16.3	1137	38.5
Poland	999	507	350	2022-05-09	2022-05-27	64.8	39.5	18	83	8763	12.9	19,410	27.1
South Africa	400	177	91	2022-03-07	2022-05-08	75.8	31.9	18	78	2254	10.2	6628	22.3
Spain	10	8	4	2021-11-29	2022-04-03	80	27.7	20	45	110	12.2	206	23.2
Switzerland	215	129	86	2022-04-12	2022-04-30	71.6	26.7	18	84	2301	14.8	6399	35.6
Thailand	538	123	43	2022-06-12	2022-07-02	38.1	21.6	18	69	1168	6.3	2972	12.6
Turkey	783	248	131	2022-02-25	2022-06-06	71.8	27.4	18	62	3446	10.1	9879	24.1
United Kingdom	226	187	165	2022-02-03	2022-04-12	81	24.3	18	83	3114	16.1	9837	48.6
USA	202	64	51	2022-06-16	2022-07-06	50	47	18	82	1149	13.8	2963	27.2

Note: This table contains all countries in which at least 5 participants provided more than five ESM measurements. The first, bold row contains the overall descriptive and summary statistics across all countries. One ESM/daily measurement refers to one measurement occasion on which a participant provided responses to a subset/all of the items in the state/daily survey. "N Pre/ESM >5/Post" are the numbers of participants who provided the pre-survey, more than five ESM measurements, and the post-survey, respectively. "ESM 25%/75%" are the dates at which 25% and 75% of the completed ESM measurements had been provided in the respective country. "M daily/ESM" are the total numbers of daily and ESM measurements, respectively. "Mean M daily/ESM" are the mean numbers of provided daily and ESM surveys per participant, respectively. For an overview of the number of ESM measurements answered per participant, see Figure A1 in the supplementary materials.

hypothesis that individuals show different well-being trajectories depending on their trait Stability levels (Scharbert, Humberg, et al., 2023).

Second, the international ESM study provides the opportunity to develop predictive models of differences in well-being. Importantly, such models need to account for the nested data structure of the study presented here (i.e., measurements nested in persons). For example, to predict individual differences in trajectories of well-being, one could extract the interindividual differences in well-being trajectories via multilevel modeling (i.e., the random slopes) and then predict these differences using machine learning. To overcome this two-step approach, we are currently developing novel machine-learning methods that adequately incorporate the nested data structure in a one-step prediction of interindividual differences in well-being trajectories (Hätscher et al., 2023).

Third, our data allow researchers to investigate trait- and state-level variables in concert to understand processes underlying individual differences. For example, following the theoretical framework of the CoCo project illustrated in Figure 1, we have examined how social perception may help to understand the links between personality and well-being. Specifically, we have found results concordant with our hypotheses that specific personality traits are linked to individuals' overall tendency to perceive social interactions positively and that these traits are linked to individuals' reactivity in their well-being to such positive interpersonal perceptions (Scharbert, Kroencke, et al., 2023). Uncovering these mediation and moderation effects can shed new light on processes underlying differences in well-being.

All in all, the international ESM study of the CoCo project provides an important step toward describing, predicting, and understanding individual differences in well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and in general. There are many additional ways to use the data and numerous research questions to which they could be applied. Therefore, we encourage researchers to incorporate the CoCo data into their research. Interested researchers can find a standardized collaboration request form on the project's OSF-page: osf.io/dhmpy/. We welcome collaboration requests from all disciplines.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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[1] Whenever we refer to "all continents" in this paper, this excludes Antarctica.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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