

## Fears concerning own future and personal safety strategies of student-athletes

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### Abstract

**Background.** The research examines the fears about their future among students-athletes as a special category of students involved in two areas of professional training simultaneously: getting a profession not related to physical education and sports, and developing oneself as an athlete with the possibility of professional sports activity (dual career). **The aim of the study.** The research studies fears for the future as meaningful ideas of an individual about possible future undesirable influences or events that threaten personal safety and career management. **Materials and methods.** The research involved 184 students doing sports with different levels of intensity, including candidates for master of sports and masters of sports, performing at high-level competitions, as well as a control group of students who are not involved in sports. The study used authors' methods as a research methodology: a scale technique for assessing the formation of the image of the future, questionnaires for identifying threats to personal safety and preferred life strategies for ensuring personal safety. **Results.** The results indicate a number of significant features of the image of future and personal safety among students with different involvement in sports. Among the athletes with moderate involvement, the formation of both the image of the future and the system of fears is worse than that of those who do not go in for sports. With an increase in involvement in sports, the formation of the image of the future among students also increases, reaching the level of development among non-athletes, but the average group picture of fears remains blurred. With an increase in the level of involvement in sports activities among students-athletes, the indicators of such characteristics of their ideas about their professional and sports future as subjective clarity of their goals in sports, the idea of the connection between their work in the future with sports and clarity of understanding that they should combine studying at a university and playing sports also increase, which may indirectly indicate the likelihood of their a cause-and-effect relationship. **Conclusion.** The research concludes that sports activities of students are combined with significant changes in fears for their future and the image of the future in general. The research points out that the most optimal picture from the point of view of the formation of fears for their future and strategies for ensuring personal safety is observed in students with average involvement in sports activities.

**Key words:** dual career, fears, personal safety, student-athletes.

### Introduction

In recent decades, an increase in interest in the sphere of the future has been clearly manifested in psychology. The research on psychological time (Golovaka & Kronik, 2008), time perspective (Abulhanova, 2011, Nuttin, 1984), time characteristics (Zinchenko, 2011, Loginova, 2009, Yanitskiy, Sery & Balabashchuk, 2019) convince that the temporal trans-perspective is comprehended by an individual in the context of the future. It is the ideas about the future that determine life strategies and reveal the meaning of activity in the present (Bratus, 1997). The studies of the image of the future among the representatives of students applied to the problems of professional education are of particular relevance (Tomanek, Lis, 2020). Ideas about the future determine not only the choice of profession, but also the direction of educational trajectories, career strategies, and professional life path (Zeer, 2009, Klimov, 2004).

In this regard, it should be noted that traditionally psychology is interested, using the words of N.A. Bernstein, in “the needed future”, i.e. future desired by an individual, to achieve which he/she seeks. Therefore, the problem of the future in psychology is studied mainly in the context of a person revealing own potential, opportunities for self-realization, achieving goals, and implementing dreams.

At the same time, another direction is being formed, in which researchers pay attention to the problem of an undesirable future, anxiety and fear about the future, rightly noting that the future appears to an individual not only as hopes, but also as fears. This idea was elaborated in detail in the studies of “possible I”, which are variants of desirable and undesirable images of the “I” in the future, some of which an individual seeks and avoids others (Vasilevskaya & Molchanova, 2019; Ericson, 2007; Frazier & Hooker, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee &

Terry, 2006). The role of fears in the formation of ideas about oneself and about the world is paid attention to in the studies on identity; the concept of “boundaries of self” is proposed as an individual’s feeling concerning own limitations (Benson, 2003). Subjective fears and preferences for safe life strategies are studied in modern safety psychology, the subject of which has been significantly expanding recently, including a wide range of mental phenomena studied from the standpoint of an individual’s safety. In these studies, personal safety is understood as a special area of mental activity associated with an individual’s monitoring of dangers and threats in order to “self-sustain” safety (Krasnyanskaya & Tylets, 2015), prevention of dangers not only in extreme situations, but in everyday life (Fomenko, 2010). A tradition of research on “psychological safety” is developing; it is associated with the study of the characteristics of the social environment, which gives the sense of comfort and security (Baeva, 2002). The formation of ideas about personal safety among students in universities is also being explored (Ivanov & Yanitskiy, 2015; Kostousov, Utyuganov, Yanitskiy & Ivanov, 2017; Pabianek et al., 2020; Piepióra et al., 2020; Ivanov, 2019).

The problem of fears for their future is very relevant in relation to athletes, which is associated with the high riskiness of sports activities. In studies devoted to this problem, it is noted that the profession of an athlete does not guarantee constant employment and stable income, the problem of the transience of a sports career and the risks of its early termination is widely discussed (Kerr & Dacyszyn, 2000). In addition, unsuccessful performances, injuries, cancellations of competitions, and financial instability are noted as risks of high-level sports (MacNamara & Collins, 2010). *Moreover*, the unpredictable doping scandals can suddenly interrupt an athlete’s career and there are constantly emerging risks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, due to which many major competitions are canceled and others are held without spectators, which is a serious problem for professional sports. The problem of fears for the future takes a special meaning for students-athletes – young people who are receiving a profession that is not related to physical activities and sports, and, at the same time, are intensively involved in sports activities. A whole line of research has emerged on the so-called “dual career” of athletes, when sports activities are combined with education or work. Scientific studies note both the positive aspects of this phenomenon, such as athletes have more employment opportunities and are distinguished by a higher level of development of a number of personal and business qualities (Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard & Selanne, 2015), and significant problems – a high level of stress, emotional burnout, the occurrence of mental disorders (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013; Lis & Tomanek, 2021). *There are also studies on* identity problems in the athlete’s double career, and identity conflicts due to the combination of the role of a student and an athlete in the self-image (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Killeya-Jones, 2005). Researchers note a positive effect of sports on the effectiveness of training among cadets of a military university, where sports training is an obligatory component of training, but among students of civilian universities, there is a decrease in academic performance with an increase in involvement in sports activities (Kuznetsov & Utyuganov, 2018). Educational problems for such students are associated not only with the lack of time, but also with difficulties in coordinating their professional goals, building a consistent image of their future: getting an education in a non-physical profession is not easy to coordinate with the development of oneself as a professional athlete. These areas of development have different professional future defining options for the life path that are not easy to combine (Kuznetsov, 2009). The above-mentioned determines the high relevance of studying the image of the future among students-athletes from the standpoint of fears for their future, and, as a consequence, the problem of their choice of life strategies that are the safest from this point of view.

The purpose of this research is to reveal the fears for the future among students-athletes, depending on the level of involvement in sports activities, and in comparison with those who do not go in for sports, to reveal their relationship with the ideas about their future, and to define the preferences of life strategies for ensuring personal safety.

### **Materials and methods**

The research is based on the constructivism methodology and value-sense paradigm. It is assumed that the image of the world and, in particular, the image of the future is constructed in consciousness in the process of life and activity, and is represented to an individual in the form of a system of meanings, ideas and beliefs that acquire individual content in the form of a value-sense system. Fears for the future, in this connection, are understood as meaningful ideas about possible future undesirable influences or events that threaten personal safety. Fears complement the image of the future or create alternatives to it. Based on the image of the future, which contains fears, an individual constructs safe life strategies.

Structurally and meaningfully, the characteristics of personal safety studied in this research are understood in accordance with the author’s theoretical model described in our previous publications. (Ivanov, 2015). Within the framework of the general theory of the psychology of personal safety, the concept of “attitude to personal safety” was proposed, which is understood as a personality subsystem functioning in the unity of ideas about threats to personal safety (the cognitive component), anxieties and fears about these threats (the emotional component), and preferred strategies for ensuring personal safety (the behavioral component of attitudes towards personal safety). The attitude to personal safety includes the attitude to oneself as a safety subject (identity of the safety subject), attitude to local threats (individual safety) and global threats (collective safety). These components of the attitude to safety also form the structure of strategies for ensuring personal

safety. In their various manifestations, they can be divided into three possible types of strategies: adaptation (survival through one's own efforts), socialization (survival based on others, connections and influence) and individualization (creation of a safe environment) (Ivanov & Yanitskiy, 2015). In the empirical study, fears for the future were identified using an authors' methodology developed to study perceptions of threats to personal safety (Ivanov, 2015). This methodology allows identifying ideas about two components of fears: ideas about the sources of threats (who or what is threatening, for example, natural phenomena, strangers, etc.) and ideas about the consequences of the implementation of threats (what will happen if the threat is realized, for example, loss of funds for living, loss of loved ones, etc.). The methodology assumes a limited selection of the most dangerous, according to the respondent, threats from the proposed lists of common threats to personal safety (it was suggested to select no more than three threats from each list). Safe life strategies were identified using the authors' method of studying strategies for ensuring personal safety (Ivanov & Yanitskiy, 2015), which assumes the choice of the safest, in the opinion of the respondent, components of life strategies. The subjects are asked to choose no more than three strategies from the list, based on which it is determined to which type of strategies the subject's preferences belong – strategies of adaptation, socialization and individualization.

*Participants.* The study involved 184 university first-fifth year students in various fields of study not related to physical education and sports.

*Procedure / Test protocol / Skill test trial / Measure / Instruments.* Among the subjects 93% were males, 7% were females. The age was from 18 to 27 years old, the average age was 20.9 years. Among the subjects, 11% are not and have never been involved in sports, 36% with moderate involvement in sports activities (exercise less than 3 times a week, do not have a sports category, do not participate in competitions), 32% with average involvement in sports activities (train at least three times a week, have first-third level sports categories, participate in local competitions), 21% with high involvement in sports activities (train 5 or more times a week, have the title of a candidate for master of sports and above, actively participate in competitions at the regional level and above). Among the subjects involved in sports, 46% do not have a sports category, 5% have second or third level sports categories, 25% have the first level sports category, 21% have the title of a candidate for master of sports, 3% – master of sports of the Russian Federation; 34% go in for cyclic and speed-running sports, 31% – martial arts, 25% – game sports. Among students-athletes, 43% have competitive achievements of various levels: winners and prizewinners of competitions at the all-Russian level (10%), the level of the federal district (7%), the regional level (9%), city and district level (5%), university level (9%).

*Data collection and analysis / Statistical analysis.* Ideas about the future were identified using a questionnaire that presupposes a subjective assessment of the formation by respondents of ideas about their future, based on a scale technique with bipolar scaling of pairs of opposite statements. The statements are aimed at revealing the attitude towards the aspects of the future image related to the professional sphere that are most relevant in the context of this study, not in the traditional narrow sense, as ideas about the future profession, but in a broader sense – what to do in the future, how to make a living, how to settle in life. Student's *t*-test and Pearson's chi-squared test and Jonckheere-Terpstra trend test were used as methods of statistical processing. Processing was carried out using the program Statsoft Statistica 10.

## Results

The majority of the respondents demonstrated rather high indicators of the formation of ideas about their future. The table presents only those characteristics of the representations for which reliably significant differences were obtained (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of ideas about their future in subjects with different involvement in sports (7-point scale)

Characteristics of ideas about own future	Not involved in sports (n=21)	Moderate involvement in sports (n=67)	Average involvement in sports (n=58)	High involvement in sports (n=38)	Differences in pairs*	Differences in the compared groups**
	0	1	2	3		
Ideas about ways to make money in the future	6.19	5.76	6.49	6.39	1-2, 1-3	-
Ideas about the future occupation	6.38	5.70	6.44	6.24	1-2	-
Ideas about own future in the profession	6.35	5.87	6.42	6.42	1-2, 1-3	-
Ideas about a future career	6.43	5.69	6.25	6.34	0-1, 1-2, 1-3	-
Subjective clarity of own goals in sports	-	5.55	6.13	6.82	1-2, 1-3, 2-3	1-2-3
Ideas about the connection between a future job and sports	-	5.08	5.64	5.97	1-3	1-2-3
Clarity of understanding of the need to combine university studies and sports	-	6.16	6.69	6.79	1-2, 1-3	1-2-3

\* note: Only those pairs of compared groups are indicated, between which significant differences were found according to the Student's *t*-test ( $p < 0,05$ ).

\*\* note: Only those compared groups are indicated, between which significant differences were found according to the *J*-criterion of Jonckheere-Terpstra trend test ( $p < 0,05$ ).

Of all compared groups, a group of athletes with moderate involvement in sports is clearly distinguished. In this group, the indicators for a number of characteristics of ideas about their future are significantly lower than in the groups of both non-sportsmen and athletes with a higher involvement in sports. For example, subjects with moderate involvement in sports have a significantly worse idea of how they will make a living in the future ( $M=5.76$ ) than those who do not go in for sports ( $M=6.19$ ) and athletes with an average ( $M=6.49$ ) and high ( $M=6.39$ ) involvement in sports activities. A similar situation is concerning the formation of ideas about the future professional sphere, career, and oneself as a professional in the future.

The development of sportsmen's ideas about their sports future is expected to increase with an increase in their involvement in sports activities. Thus, athletes with high involvement in sports ( $M=6.82$ ) are most clearly aware of their goals in sports, athletes with average involvement ( $M=6.13$ ) are lower, and athletes with moderate involvement ( $M=5.55$ ) are significantly lower. Similar results were obtained concerning the development of ideas about the connection of one's future profession with sports and the clarity of understanding the need to combine training at a university with sports activities. Linear trends revealed among athletes in the intergroup context towards an increase in the level of formation of ideas about their future depending on the level of their involvement in sports activity can indirectly indicate the likelihood of the existence of a cause-and-effect relationship, in which the level of involvement in sports activity can act as a determining factor of influence on the development of the ideas about their sports future.

The data on the distribution of the choice of the most serious, in the opinion of the subjects, threats to personal safety, which determine fears for their future, are given below. The table presents only those threats, for which significant differences were found between groups of subjects with different involvement in sports activity (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of the choice of threats to personal safety among subjects with different involvement in sports (in %)

Threats to personal safety	Not involved in sports (n=21)	Moderate involvement in sports (n=67)	Average involvement in sports (n=58)	High involvement in sports (n=38)	Differences in pairs*
	0	1	2	3	
Sources of threats:					
Threats from social movements or political parties	19	13	14	0	0-3, 1-3, 2-3
Threats from strangers	38	19	14	13	0-2, 0-3
The consequences of the implementation of threats:					
Threats associated with the loss of income	10	12	2	3	1-2
Personal information leakage threats	0	10	7	0	1-3
Threats associated with psychological problems (loss of self-confidence, loss of desire to live, etc.)	38	15	10	13	0-1, 0-2, 0-3

\* note: Only those pairs of compared groups are indicated, between which a significant level of contingency was found according to Pearson's chi-squared test ( $p < 0,05$ ).

Analyzing the results presented in Table 2, it can be seen that the most significant differences between athletes and subjects who are not involved in sports are observed in two positions: from the list of sources of threats, subjects who are not involved in sports are significantly more likely to choose "strangers around them" (38% against 19%, 14% and 13% in groups of athletes with moderate, average and high involvement in sports, respectively), and from the list of the consequences of the implementation of threats, those who do not go in for sports are significantly more likely to choose threats associated with "psychological problems (loss of self-confidence, loss of desire to live, etc.)" (38% versus 15%, 10%, 13% in groups of athletes with moderate, average and high involvement in sports, respectively). There were no significant differences in the perceptions of threats to personal safety between the groups of athletes.

It should be noted that the presented results do not allow assessing which of the groups has more fears and which less. However, the group of people who do not go in for sports looks more homogeneous in terms of the structure of fears, because the representatives of this group more often choose the same threats as the most dangerous.

Table 3 shows data on the preferences of individual elements of personal safety strategies by subjects with different involvement in sports.

Table 3. Distribution of the choice of preferences for the elements of personal safety strategies by subjects with different involvement in sports (in %)

Elements of personal safety strategies	Not involved in sports (n=21)	Moderate involvement in sports (n=67)	Average involvement in sports (n=58)	High involvement in sports (n=38)	Differences in pairs*
	0	1	2	3	
To be smart, strong, healthy, have the knowledge and skills to ensure safety.	86	75	90	84	1-2
To be an authoritative person, have connections and influence.	14	18	22	24	-
To be a well-known person, who is useful and in demand, respected and appreciated in the society.	10	10	5	3	-
To have a well-protected home, protective equipment, material wealth necessary to ensure safety.	19	9	10	11	-
To surround oneself with people a person can trust (family, friends, neighbors, colleagues).	81	55	60	63	0-1
To be self-sufficient and mobile, not dependent on living conditions and constant social environment.	29	42	41	50	-
To live where civil order and stability are strictly ensured.	24	25	7	5	0-2, 0-3, 1-2, 1-3
To live in a society with a high safety standards.	10	15	12	3	1-3
To live in a humane and tolerant society that respects individual and property rights.	19	28	12	11	1-2, 1-3

\* note: Only those pairs of compared groups are indicated, between which a significant level of contingency was found according to Pearson's chi-squared test ( $p < 0,05$ ).

Analyzing the results presented in Table 3, it can be noted that in all presented groups of subjects, the three most preferred elements of personal safety strategies are the same: the most preferable is "to be smart, strong, healthy, have the knowledge and skills to ensure safety", then "to surround oneself with people a person can trust", and further "to be self-sufficient and mobile". Significant differences were found in the degree of representation of these preferences. Thus, subjects who are not involved in sports are significantly more likely to choose the strategy "to surround oneself with people a person can trust" (81%) than athletes with moderate (55%), average (60%) and high (63%) involvement in sports. There are also significant differences between the groups of athletes; for example, athletes with moderate involvement in sports are significantly less likely to choose the strategy "to be smart, strong and healthy ..." (75%) than athletes with average involvement are (90%).

The elements of strategies prevailing in the choice of the subject define the type of the preferred strategy for ensuring personal safety, or, in the absence of a predominance of any type, are classified as mixed (undefined). The results for the types of personal safety strategies by groups of subjects with different involvement in sports are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Preferred strategies for ensuring personal safety among subjects with different involvement in sports (in %)

Strategies for ensuring personal safety	Not involved in sports (n=21)	Moderate involvement in sports (n=67)	Average involvement in sports (n=58)	High involvement in sports (n=38)
Adaptation strategy	33.3	17.9	15.5	5.3
Socialization strategy	23.8	10.4	22.4	15.8
Individualization strategy	9.5	11.9	5.1	5.3
Mixed (undefined) strategy	33.3	59.7	56.9	73.7

The presented results allow stating the peculiarities in the preferences of personal security strategies in each of the groups. Thus, in the group of those who do not go in for sports, there are fewer subjects with mixed (undefined) strategies (33.3%) than in other groups, and more subjects than in other groups who prefer an adaptation strategy (33.3%). In the group of athletes with moderate involvement, more subjects than in other groups prefer the strategy of individualization (11.9%). In the group of athletes with high involvement, the overwhelming majority of subjects are characterized by a mixed strategy of personal safety (73.7%).

## Discussion

The most generalized result of the research is that athletes differ from non-athletes in terms of their fears for their future and their preferred personal safety strategies. The results that were obtained in this research concerning a control group of subjects who do not go in for sports – let us call them “ordinary people” – correspond to the results of our previous studies on different samples (Ivanov, Seryy & Yanitskiy, 2018). Ordinary people are really afraid of strangers around them and of psychological problems. The results obtained on a sample of athletes, in this sense, are not typical. Their average group fears are heterogeneous. In relation to psychological systems, it often indicates, rather, not the uniqueness of each subject, but the insufficient development and diffuseness of the corresponding formations. The same is true for personal safety strategies – the higher the level of involvement in sports is, the more athletes have mixed (vague) strategies. According to this indicator, those who do not go in for sports are again closer to the average person from our other studies – the majority indeed more often prefer adaptation or socialization strategies (Ivanov, 2015).

The difficulties found during this study concerning the formation of ideas about the future among students-athletes are consistent with the data of other studies, the authors of which also indicate that the formation of the image of the future among students who combine education at a university with intense sports activity depends on the degree of involvement in sports (Kuznetsov, 2009).

The most alarming group make students-athletes with moderate involvement in sports, who spend a significant amount of time on training, but have not achieved any significant results in sports. They go in for sports “to enjoy themselves” and do not participate in competitions. Such students show the lowest indicators in terms of the formation of ideas about their professional future, while their fears for the future are very diffuse, and among the preferred life strategies, more than in other groups, the strategy of individualization is presented. This is the most effective strategy and it involves ensuring personal safety by transforming the environment and creating a living space that does not require safety. At the same time, some of our previous studies show that the preference for the strategy of individualization by young people often indicates immaturity and a demonstration of “wisdom”, but not a real understanding of the meaning of this strategy and a real willingness to implement it (Ivanov, 2015).

Among athletes, the most stable in terms of the combination of the studied characteristics are students with average involvement in sports. In our sample, this level of involvement is classified as “average” to distinguish the athletes involved in high-performance sports. However, this group also includes quite professional athletes – they have a sports category, participate in competitions, many are fully involved in sports activities being members of sports organizations. These athletes demonstrate a fairly high level of formation of ideas about the professional future, they, like other athletes, have very diffuse fears for the future, but their preferences for safe life strategies are closer to ordinary people – adaptation and socialization. Studying the image of the professional future among the cadets of a military university, who are involved in sports, A.A. Utyuganov and A.V. Kuznetsov obtained similar results on the most optimal formation of the image of the future among cadets involved in sports with an average intensity (Kuznetsov & Utyuganov, 2018).

Athletes with high involvement in sports (in our sample, these are candidates for masters of sports and masters of sports with high-level athletic achievements) less than others think about the safety of life strategies. The overwhelming majority of such athletes are characterized by mixed strategies, fears are also blurred, but the professional and sports future looks clear and achievable to them. It is possible to assume that the level of their involvement in sports activity can be a determining factor in the development of their ideas about their sports future. In general, the results presented in the article are consistent with the general trend of research on double careers in athletes. This trend notes both the benefits and possible psychological problems associated with the combination of different areas of professionalization. The dual career benefit is seen when a student-athlete achieves significant success in both sports and academic activities, as shown by the results in a group of athletes with moderate sports involvement, which is consistent with other available research (Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selanne, 2015; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Otherwise, the obtained results indicate the presence of problems with the formation of the image of the future and life strategies for ensuring personal safety, which is consistent with the data on identity crises in athletes with dual careers (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Killeya-Jones, 2005).

At the same time, the obtained results allow identifying the problem of athletes’ perception of the risks of sports activity, which is considered in this study as a problem of fears for their future. Despite numerous studies on the risks of sports activities (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; MacNamara & Collins, 2010), the attitude of athletes themselves to these risks is not studied enough. The conducted research shows that the problem of fears for their future among athletes is directly related to the relevant problem of double careers, is in the general trend of research on this phenomenon, and can be studied within the framework of the psychology of personal safety.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be stated that, despite the objectively high risks of professionalization in sports activities, the results obtained in the study show that students-athletes do not differ in any special or especially pronounced fears for their future. On the contrary, the research indicates that athletes are not very worried about their future and personal safety in general. This is possibly due to the “double careers” they are pursuing –

obtaining the main specialty degree simultaneously with sports professionalization, when one of the future professions is viewed as "a backup one", contributing to a sense of safe future.

On the one hand, this is a positive fact, because it is known that the absence of anxiety and fear allows a person to live more fully in the present. On the other hand, if the absence of fears concerning objectively existing threats is a consequence of an insufficiently serious attitude towards life, this can become a problem. Such an attitude to the future and personal safety does not allow a person to prepare for possible dangers, makes a person more vulnerable to threats, which, if implemented, will obviously cause more damage to an unprepared person. All this strengthens the conviction of the need for further research into the problem of attitudes towards personal safety, fears as part of the image of the world and the image of the future, the problem of forming strategies for ensuring personal safety and determining safe behavior. With regard to such characteristics of the ideas of athletes about their future such as the subjective clarity of their goals in sports, the idea of the connection between their work in the future with sports and the clarity of understanding the need to combine education at a university and sports, the research has revealed linear trends towards an increase in the indicators depending on the level of sports achievements, which may indirectly indicate the likelihood of the existence of their cause-and-effect relationship.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. All subjects of the institutional survey gave consent for anonymized data to be used for publication purposes.

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