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## Understanding the psychological appeal of populism

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| <b>Abstract:</b>                           | Psychology can play an important role in expanding our understanding of the demand-side of populism by revealing its underlying relational logic. Social psychological perspectives on populism are beginning to show how: 1) the division between us ('the good people') and them ('the corrupt elites'/'foreign others') taps into core intergroup dynamics, 2) economic and cultural processes are construed in terms of basic status concerns, and 3) collective emotions become mobilised through political communication. Taking these insights into consideration, we reflect on psychology's contribution to the study of populism thus far, and chart out an ambitious role for it at the heart of this interdisciplinary field. |
| <b>Author Comments:</b>                    |   |

## Understanding the psychological appeal of populism

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### **Abstract:**

Psychology can play an important role in expanding our understanding of the demand-side of populism by revealing its underlying relational logic. Social psychological perspectives on populism are beginning to show how: 1) the division between us ('the good people') and them ('the corrupt elites'/'foreign others') taps into core intergroup dynamics, 2) economic and cultural processes are construed in terms of basic status concerns, and 3) collective emotions become mobilised through political communication. Taking these insights into consideration, we reflect on psychology's contribution to the study of populism thus far, and chart out an ambitious role for it at the heart of this interdisciplinary field.

### **Highlights:**

- Populist movements tap into key psychological needs for belonging and status
- Intergroup dynamics are at the core of how voters categorise the political world
- Relative deprivation is a key driver of populist support among voters
- Heightened expressions of both negative and positive affect are found in populist rhetoric as compared to mainstream political communication
- A deeper consideration of the rhetorical mobilisation of psychological needs will allow for a more contextually-sensitive approach to populist research

**Keywords:** Affect; intergroup relations; political mobilisation; populism; rhetoric; status

### **1. Introduction**

The re-emergence of populist politics is one striking manifestation of contemporary demands for social change. It has considerable reach, as the election of populist leaders in the Philippines, Brazil, and India coincided with increased support for parties with an expressly populist agenda in Europe and the United States. Whereas political science and communication studies research on populism has predominantly considered supply side questions concerning the successes and failures of populist leaders and parties, this review highlights the contribution of psychological research to understanding its demand side, shedding light on the nature of its enduring appeal among voters and how changing historical, social and economic processes are interpreted through a psychological lens.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (1,2) define populism as a 'thin-centred ideology', a set of ideas that constructs society as divided between 'us' the pure people, and 'them' the corrupt and self-serving elites, and a belief system that emphasises the importance of popular sovereignty for politics. By virtue of being 'thin-centred', populist rhetoric is shaped by the 'host' ideology within which it becomes anchored. Host ideologies can originate from the political right or left, generally manifesting through forms of ethnonationalism in the former case, and socialism in the latter case. While expressions of populism are context-sensitive, these movements commonly emerge when existing socio-political orders become weakened, and the legitimacy and representativeness of institutions become questioned (2).

Psychology has an important role to play in explaining the rise of populism because it provides the theoretical tools for examining the three key facets of its appeal, showing how: 1) the division between 'us' and 'them' taps into core intergroup dynamics, 2) economic and cultural processes are construed in terms of basic status concerns, and 3) collective emotions become mobilised in political communication. The psychological dynamics discussed are found in contexts of both left- and right-wing populism, manifesting differently depending on the cultural and political history of the nation and its contemporary socioeconomic challenges. Indeed, populist leaders and parties succeed by directing voters' attention to a particular set of national issues, and by framing how these issues should be subjectively construed in ways that trigger a core set of psychological processes.

## **2. The psychology of intergroup relations is at the core of populism**

Decades of research in psychology has shown how humans have a basic tendency to form identities in relation to groups and to construct the social world in terms of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' (3,4). Indeed, both left-wing and right-wing populist rhetoric features a division between 'us' and 'them' (1,2). One prominent framework for understanding populism presents the core group, 'the people', as being defined through both a vertical and horizontal opposition (5,6). Vertical opposition contrasts the people against the elite or the political establishment, whereas horizontal opposition contrasts the people against different socio-cultural groups within (and outside of) society. In taking this approach, we are able to incorporate an understanding of how people both at the top and at the bottom of society become perceived as threats to the notionally decent and hard-working common citizen. Furthermore, defining populism in this way allows us to consider how key features of populism manifest differently across socio-political contexts and how different intergroup relations are mobilised.

### **Constructing a crisis and identifying a scapegoat**

Crucial for the success of populist parties is the ability to categorise the social world in ways that cut across existing social cleavages in order to unite citizens under a common identity. This common identity is often defined by the shared grievances perceived to be facing the

in-group and the ability to identify and scapegoat others claimed to be responsible for these grievances (7–9).

When anchored in right-wing ideologies, populism is often coupled with nativism and authoritarianism (1,8,10–13) where an exclusive version of the national in-group becomes mobilised against key others who threaten ‘our’ system (14–17). These ‘others’ are both the elites (usually defined in terms of education; vertical opposition) and foreigners or migrants (horizontal opposition) (5). By defining the ‘good people’ according to both planes, right-wing populist movements succeed in uniting both high- and low-income earners through conceptualising the in-group as a moral majority (9,10) that cuts across socio-economic divides (18). Right-wing populist leaders in places as disparate as Europe, the United States, and India have honed in on Muslims as the key horizontal ‘other’ against which ‘the people’ become defined (19,20). Characteristic of populist rhetoric, this out-group is framed as having been favoured by cultural and political elites, over and above the ‘local’ and ethno-national population (21–23). For example, the decision by German police in 2017 to tweet a New Year’s greeting in Arabic (in addition to other languages) led Beatrix von Storch, Deputy Leader of the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) party, to respond in a tweet that denigrated Muslims while implying they were receiving special treatment: “What the hell is wrong with this country? Are [we] now appeasing the barbaric, Muslim [...] hordes of men?” (24).

Intergroup dynamics matter just as much for left-wing populists, though they take on a different form. While right-wing populism tends to focus on a cultural or ethnic other, left-wing populism usually defines intergroup relations in economic or political terms (5). Coupled with a form of socialism (25,26), left-wing populism has a long-standing history in Latin America, where critiques of a privileged minority in power frame politics as run by corrupt oligarchies (25). As such, populism in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela has been characterised as more ‘inclusive’, mobilising diverse sectors of society to challenge social and racial hierarchies (25,27). Because of this, we see a stronger focus on the vertical plane of opposition. Here, an anti-elite stance can be coupled with an opposition to threatening high power ‘others’ outside of the group, such as those benefiting the most from globalisation, international institutions imposing austerity, and those perceived to be advancing foreign interests (5). For example in Venezuela, Hugo Chavez often referred to oligarchs as ‘Little Yankees’ (28), implying local elites are in some way agents of the United States—an external, high power actor perceived as having imperialist intentions. Here there is an attempt to cut across cultural divides in uniting groups perceived to be low in power against those who are high in power either at the national or international level.

Considering the crucial role played by blaming others, it is not surprising to find populist support fuelled by anti-establishment sentiments (29,30), opposition to minority groups and their rights (19,31), and negative party identification (1,32). Similarly, research in right-wing populist contexts has found that increases in the political power of a populist party lead

mainstream voters to strengthen their support for the key ‘other’ against which populism mobilises, namely, immigrants (33).

### **Constructing a leader as ‘one of us’**

The psychology of intergroup relations sheds light on how populist leaders become successful by equate themselves with the voice of the people defined as part of the in-group (‘vox populi’ (1)). They do this by becoming ‘entrepreneurs’ of social identity (34), aligning themselves with ordinary voters (22) and embodying the prototypical average citizen. This is achieved through the strategic use of style, rhetoric, and performance, the effectiveness of which is ripe for analysis with the tools of discursive psychology (35,36).

The notion of identity entrepreneurship allows us to better understand conflicting findings on the links between economic conditions and the rise of populism, where research shows support for populism both among high- and low-income earners (5,37) and in times of both economic decline and prosperity (18,22). Just as economic hardship can easily be blamed on perceived out-groups, objective economic prosperity can be perceived as problematic when this prosperity is constructed as benefiting only a small group in society from which most voters are excluded (22), a construal that will gain traction if advanced by a leader seen to embody the wider in-group (34).

### **3. The psychology of status shapes responses to socioeconomic change**

The particular potency of the populist distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ lies in how it intersects with notions of hierarchy, the former referring to the ‘average’ citizen, and the latter to a corrupt and self-serving elite perceived to be at the top of society. This rhetoric resonates with humans’ universal concern for status (38) and sensitivity to signs of potential abuses of power (39), both argued to underlie a range of socio-political attitudes (40).

One way in which status concerns manifest is in reactions toward a perceived lowering, or potential lowering, in one’s position in the societal hierarchy. Drops in hierarchy position are experienced as threatening, triggering an aversive sense of low power or control. As groups are one route through which a sense of control can be restored (41–43), populist rhetoric that engages with intergroup dynamics, especially discourse that highlights explicit routes toward greater control, should be particularly attractive to those experiencing status threats (44). Indeed, subjective loss of status position within a social hierarchy is linked with support for right-wing populist parties (45), and relative deprivation has been found to be a key trigger for the rise of populist movements (1,9,11,16,22,39,46,47). It may be no coincidence that the most memorable slogan from the British campaign to leave the European Union, which received disproportionate support from those low in socioeconomic status, centred on a promise that leaving the EU would enable British people to ‘Take Back Control’ (48).

Status concerns mobilise people across political ideologies, with left-wing populism attempting to mobilise those who are both poor and ethnically marginalised (25), and right-

wing populism appealing strongly to those low in SES but high status in other domains of social life (i.e., ethnic majority). The latter is exemplified in Trump's campaign slogan promise to 'Make America Great Again', emphasising a return to a time of heightened status for his overwhelmingly White supporters (11). This echoes themes from the Indian Hindutva movement that underpins much of the support base of the right-wing populist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which promises a return to the dominance of majority Hindus after centuries of 'illegitimate domination' by Muslim and Christian 'outsiders' who are claimed to have been given special privileges by the secular leadership of past governments led by the Congress party (49). Social dominance orientation (SDO), a construct which measures the extent to which one supports inequality between social groups, has emerged as one of the most important predictors of who is most affected by claims of a loss in position in the ethno/national hierarchy (37), and most likely to blame outsider groups for this loss in status (13,50). Likewise, authoritarianism, assessing individual concern about the importance of hierarchy within the group, is another important predictor of the attractiveness of right-wing populist ideas (50).

In shedding light on how subjective construal of access to resources is viewed through the lens of intergroup hierarchy, the psychology of status reframes the debate around whether populism is caused by economic or cultural factors (8,50), showing how the former in fact operate *through* the latter (see also (45)). This shift in focus toward intergroup relations and their accompanying hierarchies also sheds light on how divergent manifestations of one particularly strong group identity—the nation – shapes responses to politics (51). Countries in which national identity is associated with a historically high status position in the international hierarchy (such as the UK and US) seem to exhibit a particularly strong link between nationalism (specifically, an inflated sense of the grandeur of one's nation) and right-wing expressions of populism that are exclusive in terms of who is accepted as part of the national group (47). An open question is whether countries that have historically held lower status positions in the global hierarchy (e.g., those that were colonised for long periods) might exhibit a more inclusive form of civic nationalism, as is exemplified by left-wing populist parties resurgent in Scotland and Ireland (52). Consequently, future research should focus more directly on the nuanced ways in which status concerns manifest themselves in different contexts, thereby laying a fertile ground among voters for the sowing of populist support.

#### **4. Populist communication mobilises collective emotions**

Considering the psychological impact of perceived loss brings to the fore the third set of processes we argue underlies populist appeal: the mobilisation of emotion related to one's social group.

The appeal to emotions has been acknowledged in the literature on populism (1,10,53), with research showing how feelings of collective resentment (15), anger (7,53,54), threat

(37,44,55), and fear (36,53) can mobilise voters to join a populist movement. But this literature also brings attention to the role of populist leaders in offering to a group optimistic alternatives to a status quo framed as problematic. By constructing a crisis narrative and then providing solutions, populist rhetoric mobilises feelings of collective hope (34,56,57), thereby positioning its politics as positive in contrast to the apparently negative wider socio-political climate. Populist leaders are thus able to foster an affirming in-group identity for voters (16) who may be feeling marginalised and estranged from their socio-political environment (7,58). For example, Hochschild (7) explains that among ethnic majority Americans of low socio-economic status who “have been mourning for a lost way of life”, the politics of Trump has allowed them to “feel hopeful, joyous, elated.”

Thus the study of populist rhetoric, and the emotional appeal it has for mobilising voters (59), should focus on the role not only of negative affect, but also of positive affect, which has in fact been found to be more common within populist discourse compared to more mainstream parties (60). This positive affect is relational in nature, channelled toward the prospect of improving conditions not just for the individual, but also for the social group. This decoupling of populist platforms from the assumption that they are always hostile in nature also sheds light on why populist support is linked in inconsistent ways with the personality trait of agreeableness (61,62). It further finds support in research showing that when society is perceived to be breaking down, strong leaders become more desirable (63). Seen through this lens, voting for a populist platform, whether left- or right-wing, is driven by a parochial desire to help one’s community when it is perceived to be under threat. Thus, though recent findings give a prominent role to anger in fuelling support for populism, such anger may be underpinned in part by high internal political efficacy of a pro-social form, making people feel more capable of making the right political choices for the in-group (54).

## **5. Conclusion and future directions**

We have reviewed evidence for the psychological appeal of populism in terms of three key sets of processes commonly found in the political domain; the mobilisation of intergroup relations through boundaries that distinguish the ‘people’ from the ‘corrupt elites’ or ‘malevolent outsiders’, the triggering of status concerns through construals of perceived loss of hierarchy position, and the resonance of the affective content of political rhetoric with emotional responses to these perceived identity threats. In doing so, we have fleshed out the demand side of populism as a complement to the extensive focus on the supply side in extant social science literature on the topic. From this, we conclude by offering three propositions for how to develop future research on the topic.

First, to better understand how the psychology of intergroup relations, status, and collective emotion permeates populist politics, an integration of supply- and demand-side appeals in research would be beneficial. This could be done by examining, through both discursive and experimental methods (see 64), the mobilising effects among voters of different types of populist rhetoric over time (see 65). We would expect to find a stronger presence of identity-mobilising language, specifically that which intersects with notions of hierarchy, in populist

rather than in mainstream party rhetoric. This integration would also require taking an interdisciplinary approach to the study of populism, where insights from communication studies, political science, sociology, and psychology, are drawn on in a complementary manner.

Second, research has pointed to the role of nostalgic discourse (66,67) and reaction to changing values over generations (8,10) in explaining the appeal of populist rhetoric among voters. This longing for the past is used alongside an implicit message that one's group has lost its 'rightful' place in the national hierarchy, a status loss that populist parties promise to correct. There is thus ample opportunity to develop insights on how the psychology of status shapes responses to socioeconomic change. This could be done by considering how temporality, and the emotions it evokes, permeates both the discourse of populist leaders and the concerns of citizens, who might be moved to action by a sense that things will continue to get worse unless the establishment is shaken up.

Finally, a more holistic analysis of rhetoric that encompasses both positive and negative affective messages is necessary. Evidence that populist communication tends to feature more emotive language compared to non-populist communication shows the importance of affective appeal in mobilising voters [53]. One particularly fruitful avenue would be to explore how emotions are mobilised toward serving group-related ends, though often at the cost of other groups. Considering the social-affective dimension of populism enables scholars to move beyond a presumed dichotomy between 'positive' versus 'negative' forms of political communication or social movement, to consider the relational function of seemingly anti-social political sentiments.

In this spirit, we hope that understanding the psychological appeal of populism helps shed light on its underlying relational logic. This holds promise to move public discourse on the phenomenon beyond presumptions concerning a threat to liberal values grounded in irrationality or xenophobia, and instead to consider how it is based in the same set of social psychological concerns that engage non-populists; a rhetoric that presents its own kind of answer to a widespread yearning for social change.



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Pettigrew draws on literature regarding authoritarianism, social dominance, prejudice, relative deprivation, and intergroup contact to develop a holistic psychological account of supporters of the populist US president, Donald Trump. Accounting for both demand-side factors and broader socio-cultural events that created the ‘spark’ for populism, the paper examines empirical evidence within each domain of research, highlighting how these are interconnected and create an environment in which citizens become susceptible to increased perceptions of threat to society and its stability. Pettigrew, like others, emphasizes the importance of relative deprivation as a key driver of populist support, such that it matters what voters think is true, rather than what is objectively the case, when it comes to socioeconomic status. While focusing more on individual differences, Pettigrew also argues for the need to examine psychological and political factors in tandem in order to more fully understand their mobilizing role in current affairs.

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The study uses a multinational experiment (15 countries, N=7,286) to examine if identity frames in populist messaging can persuade voters to agree more with the message, and mobilize them take action on the basis of the message (through either reproducing the information or supporting the cause of the article). The article finds support for the role of anti-elitist framings but not exclusionary identity (anti-immigrant) frames. Interestingly, the study finds that the latter tend to backfire, creating less issue agreement and demobilising participants compared to the control group. This study thus supports the importance of taking an identity approach towards populist messaging, but also highlights that the key ‘other’ against which the group comes together seems to be elites more than other minority groups in society. However, as the paper primes threat through a focus on economic concerns, there is space to consider whether an alternative cultural or status-threat framing would elicit stronger resonance with the exclusionary identity framing, as we would anticipate from the review of the empirical evidence on intergroup relations and status.

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This study examines how exposure to populist messaging through campaign ads can elicit negative attitudes towards out-groups (Muslims) on both an explicit and implicit level. The findings reveal that explicit attitudes towards Muslims can change due to a shift in implicit attitudes, emphasizing the importance of considering more subtle psychological mechanisms that might shape voting preferences. It thus shows the value of considering the impact of implicit attitudes in mobilizing support for populist parties, particularly in light of recent findings [see Reference 26] that show that these implicit attitudes seem to have a greater effect on moderate voters compared to those who already express more extreme political views.

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This paper analyses the relative strength of two possibilities that might underlie the swing in support for one of the most prominent contemporary right-wing populists, Donald Trump, which enabled his election victory in 2016: grievances of voters experiencing economic hardship (the 'left behind' hypothesis), and concerns by members of dominant social groups that they are losing their position at the top of a hierarchy (the 'status threat' hypothesis). Longitudinal analysis of data from a representative panel of American voters (n = 793-1,088) surveyed just before the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, paired with cross-sectional analysis of a representative sample of voters (n = 3,214) surveyed just before the 2016 election, revealed no support for the 'left behind' hypothesis,

as Trump supporters (or those shifting from voting Obama to voting Trump) were no more likely to have experienced personal or community economic hardship, nor (in the cross-sectional analysis) to anticipate doing so. In contrast, the biggest predictors of support for Trump were indicators of threat to the dominant status of Whites and of Americans, as reflected by greater closeness of the Republican (vs. Democratic) candidate on issues of trade, immigration and China, and individual-level increases in social dominance orientation. This paper thus demonstrates the importance of status concerns, and in particular, concern over the loss of dominant status position, in enhancing the appeal of populist leaders, particularly those whose rhetoric explicitly addresses notions of rightful hierarchy position.

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Using large scale, cross-national survey data from 20 countries, this paper shows how decline in subjective social status over time leads to heightened support for populist right parties among the white working class. By focusing on subjective social status, which reflects peoples' own feelings about the level of social esteem or respect that is bestowed on them within the social order, the authors treat status as an inherently relational phenomenon, which aligns with the importance of considering how intergroup relations and the psychology of status form a lens through which people make sense of their socio-political environments. The authors use the findings to argue that subjective social status provides an important pathway through which economic and cultural factors meet and together shape partisan choice. The findings lend support to existing ethnographic work within white working class communities on the links between status, anxiety and voting preferences [see reference 8] and sheds light on how and why we might study economic and cultural factors in an intersecting and interactive manner.

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Across two studies, using experimental and comparative observational data, the authors find support for the argument that people’s self-perceived political competence (‘internal political efficacy’) has a direct effect on their support for populist attitudes, with individuals who perceive themselves to be more competent expressing more support for populism. This relationship was partially mediated by feelings of anger, where increased anger led to stronger populist support. The findings of this study are important for two reasons; firstly, they challenge the common assumption that populist voters are less politically competent citizens, and instead illustrates how those who perceive themselves to be more competent are thereby more critical towards politicians, and consider themselves better than them at getting the job done. Secondly, the findings show that collective emotions also plays a crucial role, as internal efficacy increased the likelihood of a negative emotional reaction, anger, which in turn fuelled populist attitudes. The implications of these findings question the value of oversimplifying how we conceptualize who the 'populist voter' is, and instead place emphasis on tackling how to address populism without reducing political efficacy and fostering political disengagement.

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Using a mixed-methods approach based on the principles of corpus-assisted discourse analysis, the author finds that the discourse of populist parties is more emotionally-laden than mainstream parties. Comparing UKIP and the Labour party in the UK, the study finds that both positive and negative emotions are mobilized in populist discourse more frequently and with a clearer tone than mainstream parties. This thus highlights the affective appeal of populist communication, and the potential for discursive methods to shed light on it.

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Drawing on samples from the UK and Germany, this study examines the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and populist attitudes. The findings from the study yield contradictory evidence concerning the assumption that particular personality characteristics make individuals more or less prone to support populist politics, and point to the importance of the specific role of the socio-cultural context in shaping the relationship. Namely, different traits were significantly related to more populist attitudes within the two samples, with conscientiousness and extraversion only significant in the German sample, while openness was only significant in the UK sample. Another interesting finding is the relationship between agreeableness and greater populist support, which was found in both samples, yet runs counter to previous research (see Reference [54]). It highlights the point that populist appeal is not always negative and aligned with 'problematic' personality traits.

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**Declaration of interests**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Cover letter

Dear Editor and Reviewer, thank you for your comments on our submission for the issue on 'Social Change (Rallies, Riots and Revolutions)', guest edited by Seamus Power. We have made changes throughout the manuscript to address these, including:

- 1) Adding a definition of populism and explanation of when it tends to be activated (p. 2 – para 1),
- 2) We have added additional examples throughout the manuscript
  - a. p. 3 – AfD; p. 3 – Hugo Chavez;
  - b. p. 4 – UK Leave campaign slogan;
  - c. p. 5 – Trump campaign slogan;
  - d. p. 5 – reference to Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India;
  - e. p. 6 – Reference to Hochschild's participants)
- 3) We have revised the conclusion to offer propositions for how to develop future research on the topic (p. 6-7).

We consider the revised version of the manuscript clearer and making a stronger contribution to Current Opinion in Psychology.

**Submission to:** Current Opinion in Psychology: Social Change (Rallies, Riots and Revolutions) issue.

**Title:** Understanding the psychological appeal of populism

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**Abstract:**

Psychology can play an important role in expanding our understanding of the demand-side of populism by revealing its underlying relational logic. Social psychological perspectives on populism are beginning to show how: 1) the division between us ('the good people') and them ('the corrupt elites'/'foreign others') taps into core intergroup dynamics, 2) economic and cultural processes are construed in terms of basic status concerns, and 3) collective emotions become mobilised through political communication. Taking these insights into consideration, we reflect on psychology's contribution to the study of populism thus far, and chart out an ambitious role for it at the heart of this interdisciplinary field.



**Sandra Obradović:** Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing - Reviewing and Editing. **Séamus A. Power;** Conceptualization, Writing - Reviewing and Editing. **Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington:** Conceptualization, Writing - Reviewing and Editing.