Психологические технологии в образовании

УДК 159.9.072

EDN QXYVVC
https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2686-9527-2025-7-4-546-555

Research article

Students as a vulnerable group in psychological research: Ethical considerations

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For citation: Antonova, N. A., Dubinina, E. A., Kruglova, N. E. (2025) Students as a vulnerable group in psychological research: Ethical considerations. Psychology in Education, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 645–555. https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2686-9527-2025-7-4-546-555 EDN QXYVVC

Received 8 July 2025; reviewed 14 August 2025; accepted 14 August 2025.

Funding: The research was supported by an internal grant from Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia (project No. 67-VG).

Abstract

Introduction. Issues of research ethics in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in psychology, are becoming increasingly prominent on both international and Russian scientific agendas. The participation of students in research is especially relevant, given their vulnerability as a distinct social group. This article aims to analyze the ethical risks associated with involving students in psychological research (and, more broadly, in social sciences and humanities research), and to discuss possible strategies for mitigating these risks.

Materials and Methods. This study focuses on university students as potential research participants. The article reviews Russian and, primarily, international publications on research-related vulnerability. Particular attention is given to the typology of vulnerability proposed by K. Kipnis, as applicable to student samples, and to the key aspects of organizing ethically appropriate interactions with this group.

Results. The analysis identified four primary areas of ethical risks: (1) the possibility of coercion and undue influence; (2) insufficient educational benefit from participation in the study; (3) risks of breaches of anonymity and confidentiality; and (4) the dual role of the teacher-researcher. Student participation in research may entail risks related to limited voluntariness and ethical ambiguity if clear conditions are not established to protect students as a vulnerable group. Emphasis is placed on the importance of considering both external conditions and students' subjective perceptions of ethical aspects.

Conclusions. The authors propose several recommendations aimed at minimizing ethical risks: establishing institutional norms for research ethics, ensuring voluntary participation, providing alternatives, and increasing the educational benefit of research participation. Particular emphasis is placed on the necessity of adhering to the informed consent procedure as a fundamental condition for the ethically permissible involvement of students in research. Attention is also drawn to the importance of further studying both applicable norms and actual practices of research ethics in the Russian educational context, with a focus on how ethical risks are perceived by both students and researchers. Special consideration should be given to the implementation of research ethics guidelines and to accounting for the specific forms of vulnerability of students as research participants.

Keywords: research ethics, vulnerable groups, university students, informed consent, research vulnerability, educational value, ethical risks

Научная статья

Студенты как уязвимая группа в психологических исследованиях: к проблеме исследовательской этики

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Для цитирования: Антонова, Н. А., Дубинина, Е. А., Круглова, Н. Е. (2025) Студенты как уязвимая группа в психологических исследованиях: к проблеме исследовательской этики. Психология человека в образовании, т. 7, № 4, с. 546–555. https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2686-9527-2025-7-4-546-555 EDN QXYVVC

Получена 8 июля 2025; прошла рецензирование 14 августа 2025; принята 14 августа 2025.

Финансирование: Исследование выполнено за счет внутреннего гранта РГПУ им. А. И. Герцена (проект № 67-ВГ).

Аннотация

Введение. Вопросы исследовательской этики в социогуманитарных науках, в частности, в психологии, приобретают все большее значение в международной и отечественной научной повестке. Особую актуальность представляет участие студентов в исследованиях с учетом их уязвимости как специфической социальной группы. Целью статьи является анализ этических рисков, связанных с привлечением студентов к участию в психологических (и шире — социогуманитарных) исследованиях, и обсуждение возможных подходов к их предотвращению.

Материалы и методы. В центре рассмотрения — студенты вузов как потенциальные участники исследований. Методологической основой статьи стал обзор отечественных и преимущественно зарубежных публикаций, посвященных вопросам исследовательской уязвимости. Особое внимание уделено типологии уязвимости (по К. Кипнису (K. Kipnis)), применимой к студенческой выборке, и ключевым аспектам организации этически корректного взаимодействия с данной группой.

Результаты исследования. Проведенный анализ позволил выделить четыре основные области этических рисков: (1) возможность принуждения и злоупотребления влиянием; (2) недостаточная образовательная ценность участия в исследовании; (3) риски нарушения анонимности и конфиденциальности; (4) двойственная роль преподавателя-исследователя. Участие студентов в исследованиях может сопровождаться рисками ограниченной добровольности и этической неоднозначности, если не предусмотрены четкие условия, обеспечивающие их защищенность как уязвимой группы. Подчеркивается важность учета как внешних условий, так и субъективного восприятия этических аспектов студентами.

Заключение. Авторами предложен ряд рекомендаций, направленных на минимизацию этических рисков: внедрение институциональных норм исследовательской этики, обеспечение добровольности участия, формирование альтернатив и повышение образовательной ценности участия в исследованиях. Особо подчеркивается необходимость соблюдения процедуры информированного согласия как неотъемлемого условия этически допустимого включения студентов в исследовательскую деятельность. Также подчеркивается значимость дальнейшего изучения как норм, так и реальных практик исследовательской этики в российском образовательном контексте — с акцентом на восприятие этических рисков как студентами, так и самими исследователями. Отдельное внимание следует уделить вопросам внедрения норм исследовательской этики и учета специфических форм уязвимости студентов как участников исследований.

Ключевые слова: исследовательская этика, уязвимые группы, студенты вузов, информированное согласие, исследовательская уязвимость, образовательная ценность, этические риски

Introduction

Today, considerable attention is being devoted within both Russian and international scientific communities to the ethical dimensions of research in the social sciences and humanities, and in psychology in particular. Significant strides have been made toward formalizing ethical standards, whether through institutional practices or by means of professional codes of conduct.

The Ethical Code of Psychologists (*Eticheskij kodeks psikhologa…* 2012), adopted by the Russian Psychological Society, underscores the foundational principles guiding research: voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, respect for participants regardless of their social standing, the use of valid methods and sound interpretation of data, respect for the rights and freedoms of research participants irrespective of their social status, researcher impartiality.

It must be acknowledged that within the humanities, ethical frameworks are still undergoing active development, and despite the existence of professional codes, they are often applied in a less than systematic manner. Unlike the humanities disciplines, ethical oversight in medical research enjoys a longer tradition and rests upon clearly articulated international standards. This foundation affords a higher degree of procedural formalization with regard to informed consent, the protection of subjects' rights, and ethical review. Specifically, research involving human participants is governed by the International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects, adopted by the World Health Organization in Geneva in 1993, and the Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association, which sets forth recommendations for physicians engaged in biomedical research involving human subjects.

Research vulnerability: Concept and typology

Since the late 1970s, ethical codes governing biomedical and behavioural research have included specific provisions addressing so-called vulnerable groups — populations requiring special consideration and additional protective measures (Bracken-Roche 2017). Such groups include, in particular, children, individuals with mental and somatic illnesses or developmental conditions, prisoners, military personnel, persons of low socioeconomic status, and pregnant women. While approaches to the conceptualization and definition of vulnerability remain a subject of ongoing debate within the scientific community, the need to establish specific rules for the application of ethical principles to vulnerable populations is widely acknowledged.

In this regard, K. Kipnis (Kipnis 2001) has sought to systematize the types of vulnerability applicable within a research context. He identifies six distinct types of vulnerability: (1) cognitive, (2) juridic, (3) deferential (rooted in hierarchical relationships), (4) medical, (5) allocational, and (6) infrastructural. The author underscores the importance of timely recognition of the potential risks associated with the unethical involvement of research participants. Each type of vulnerability is linked to specific constraints that affect an individual's capacity to make a free and informed decision regarding research participation. For instance, cognitive vulnerability implies a limited ability to comprehend the risks, aims, and procedures of a study due to mental state, cognitive dysfunction, age, or related factors; juridic vulnerability refers to the legal incapacity to provide consent for participation (as is the case with children or legally incompetent persons); deferential vulnerability involves a perceived pressure 'from above' and a psychological inability to refuse a request made by an authority figure; medical vulnerability denotes a dependence on medical care that the researcher may be in a position to provide; allocational vulnerability pertains to a deficiency in material, social, or informational resources on the part of the subject that influences the decision-making process regarding participation; infrastructural vulnerability concerns the inadequacy or unreliability of socio-organizational, technical, or institutional resources (such as communication networks, power supply, staff qualifications, and the like).

Specifics of research vulnerability among students

The focus of the present review is university students, who, on a number of grounds, are regarded as a vulnerable group. The issue of the ethical vulnerability of students as research participants has a long history and is linked, among other things, to the tradition of preferentially recruiting learners as a convenient sample. More than seventy years ago, the American psychologist Q. McNemar (McNemar 1946) wryly observed that the science of human behaviour risked becoming 'largely a science of the behaviour of sophomores', pointing to an overreliance on student samples within the humanities disciplines. In a 2008 publication problematizing the insufficient sociocultural representativeness of psychological research, J. Arnett (Arnett 2008) noted that American

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samples predominated in US scientific publications, and that the vast majority — up to 80 percent — of these samples consisted precisely of students. While more recent work indicates a weakening of this trend, a considerable overrepresentation of student samples nonetheless persists (Rad et al. 2018).

The frequent use of student samples entails, on the one hand, limitations on the generalizability of findings to broader populations (Hanel, Vione 2016), and, on the other, dictates the need to develop specific rules ensuring compliance with ethical standards that pertain to the vulnerable position of students within the research situation (Clark, McCann 2005; Dalziel 1996).

Thus, the routine use of students as respondents raises not only methodological but also ethical concerns.

The importance of ethically reflecting upon student participation in research is underscored by the high likelihood that ethical risks will be overlooked precisely because involving students in studies may be a routine practice and because the student body itself tends to be viewed as a sociodemographic group distinguished not by deficits but, on the contrary, by particular intellectual and social potential (Tuzikov, Zinurova 2019).

Materials and methods

The present review analyses the principal trends in examining the ethical dimensions of student participation in psychological research and, more broadly, in social sciences and humanities research. Within the scope of this review, we focus exclusively on those ethical issues that are specific to or particularly salient for studies involving students, while leaving aside the broader ethical context reflected in the ethical codes of psychologists (*Eticheskij kodeks psikhologa…* 2012). The review draws primarily on international sources, as the number of Russian publications addressing this problematic is extremely limited.

The majority of the materials employed data from the early 2000s — a period during which the practice of recruiting students for research was subjected to critical scrutiny and active efforts were underway to identify optimal approaches for resolving ethical questions in this domain.

Results

The analysis revealed that scholarly attention has concentrated on the following aspects reflecting the ethical problematic of recruiting learners for non-medical research: (1) the possibility of coercion and undue influence; (2) insufficient educational benefit of participation in the study; (3) risks of breaches of anonymity and confidentiality; and (4) the dual role of the teacher-researcher.

Coercion and undue influence

Coercion to participate in research is understood as conduct on the part of the researcher whereby the subject feels unable to decline participation: in the subject's view, refusal may result in significant negative consequences, or participation is not, in actual fact, voluntary (Scott-Jones 2000).

A distinction is drawn between coercion as the result of direct pressure — for instance, the threat of punishment, harm, or the loss of something significant as a consequence of refusing to participate — and indirect pressure, that is, undue influence, which involves psychological manipulation of the prospective participant, including through excessive inducements and other forms of recruitment that affect the emotional state of participants and their capacity to adequately assess benefits and risks (Office of Human Research Protections 2018). Here it is appropriate to speak of vulnerability rooted in hierarchical relationships, or deferential vulnerability. This may be accompanied by an internal conflict between an unwillingness to participate and a sense of compulsion, arising, for example, from fear of possible negative repercussions of refusal or from the excessive attractiveness of the offered compensation.

It is evident that, within this context, the problem of coercion and undue influence proves highly salient when the research participants are students and the organizers are faculty members, university administrators, or individuals affiliated with them (Walker 2020). This is determined, above all, by the following: (1) the limited autonomy and dependent position of the student in interactions with university representative; and (2) prospective supplementary material support — in cases where monetary compensation is offered for research participation — as well as incentives tied to academic performance, such as grades or course credits.

It is presumed that, owing to the particularities of their status within the educational institution, a student may find themselves subject to both overt and implicit pressure upon receiving an invitation to participate in a study. Such pressure may manifest as direct influence on the part of the instructor or university administration, or as an internal sense of obligation stemming from the researcher's authority, a feeling of duty, or gratitude. Furthermore, a learner may anticipate — even in the absence of formal grounds for doing so —

negative consequences for declining to participate, including altered relations with the instructor, restrictions on academic opportunities, or an impact on educational outcomes (Leentjens, Levenson 2013). Refusal may be perceived as a demonstration of disinterest, insufficient engagement, and low motivation. In certain instances, a possible influence on academic results — the receipt of credit for a given discipline or practicum — is even presumed.

Thus, the mere invitation to participate in research may possess a potentially coercive force, even if the instructor undertakes no deliberate actions aimed at exerting pressure.

Moreover, the use of various forms of 'academic compensation' for student participation in research appears ethically contentious: the granting of additional course credits, bonus points, reduced examination requirements, a decrease in the volume of homework assignments, and the like. Such a practice may distort the principle of voluntariness, insofar as participation in research begins to be perceived as a means of improving academic outcomes rather than as a conscious choice.

Despite the fact that requiring research participation as a non-negotiable component of an educational program is expressly prohibited by a number of ethical codes — for example, the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct developed by the American Psychological Association states: 'When research participation is a course requirement or an opportunity for extra credit, the prospective participant is given the choice of equitable alternative activities' (Item 8.04(b) (American Psychological Association 2002)) — such forms of incentive continue to provoke discussion regarding the boundaries of permissible influence on student decision-making (Foot, Sanford 2004; Kimmel 1996; Leentjens, Levenson 2013; Walker 2020). The first systematic studies addressing the problem of coercing students into research participation date to the late 1980s. In 1989, J. E. Sieber and M. J. Saks (Sieber, Saks 1989) presented findings from an analysis of student subject pool recruitment practices across 366 psychology departments at American universities. According to their assessments, the majority of institutions did not include information regarding the requirement to participate in research or the availability of alternative activities in the descriptions of relevant courses. Consequently, students learned of the obligation only after enrolling in the course, which substantially limited their capacity to make an informed decision. Furthermore, in more than 70 percent of cases, the proposed alternatives were perfunctory or relatively unattractive in nature — for instance, writing an essay or completing a test — and might be perceived by students as a 'punishment' or even a sanction for declining research participation. According to data from an Australian study conducted in 1992, 43 percent of psychology departments compelled students to take part in research (Diamond, Reidpath 1994).

At the same time, surveys of students regarding their experiences of research participation point to a predominance of positive appraisals (Daugherty, Lawrence 1996; Flagel et al. 2007). The majority of students assess such experience as useful and not associated with stress, although individual participants report pronounced emotional reactions — anxiety, upset, vexation — linked to the anticipation, process, or outcomes of participation, as well as a measure of concern regarding the necessity of disclosing personal information or the results of testing.

Studies assessing students' subjective perceptions of recruitment practices for research participation are few in number. According to surveys conducted several decades ago, 86 percent of students regarded the inclusion of research participation as a course requirement without accessible alternatives to be a questionable or unethical practice (Keith-Spiegel et al. 1993). Between one-third and one-half of students would assess a request from their instructor to take part in their research as coercive (Keith-Spiegel et al. 1993; Miller, Kreiner 2008), and approximately 45 percent perceive inducement to participate in research in exchange for course credits as coercion (Leak 1981; Miller, Kreiner 2008). At the same time, the overwhelming majority of students (98 percent) do not consider participation in research for course credits to be unacceptable (Leak 1981). It is noteworthy that the opportunity to obtain extra points or course credits is cited by the majority of students (98 percent) as the primary reason for participating in research (Flagel et al. 2007). The work of Midzinski (Midzinski 2010) demonstrates that material or academic forms of compensation for research participation are not perceived by students as a coercive factor: the majority of respondents noted that the presence of compensation indeed increases the likelihood of consent but does not constrain freedom of choice. These data point to a possible divergence between the external assessment of the degree of pressure exerted and the subjective perception of the students themselves. Perhaps a key role is played by differences in the understanding of the very concept of 'coercion', as well as by individual particularities in the appraisal of one's own capacity to resist. This underscores the necessity of taking into account both

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formal and subjective dimensions of voluntariness when conducting ethical review of research involving vulnerable groups.

Educational benefit of participation in the study

A distinct focus of ethical discussion is the question of whether student participation in research possesses educational benefit — that is, whether it contributes to the formation of academic and professional competencies aligned with the aims of their education (de Liaño et al. 2012; Elliott et al. 2010; Kimmel 1996; Leentjens, Levenson 2013; Moyer, Franklin 2011). This question assumes particular significance when research participation is integrated into the educational process, is conducted within instructional time, or is accompanied by compensation, even in the presence of alternatives. Research findings indicate that many students regard participation in research as a positive experience and, in the majority of cases, prefer it to the alternative assignments (Bowman, Waite 2003; Rosell et al. 2005; Trafimow et al. 2006). Moreover, there is evidence that participation in research possesses considerable educational potential and enhances knowledge of the subject no less than attending a lecture (de Liaño et al. 2012; Elliott et al. 2010). Participation in research also fosters the development of research competencies, insofar as it affords an opportunity to observe the research procedure from within (Bowman, Waite 2003; Brewer, Robinson 2017; Darling et al. 2007). Nevertheless, the educational benefit of participation must not supplant the necessity of adhering to fundamental ethical principles — voluntariness, informed consent, and the avoidance of pressure.

It is likewise evident that not every instance of research participation possesses educational benefit. Genuine utility for a student's professional development can be derived only from those research initiatives that are directly related to their field of study and incorporate specific educational components, such as debriefing, discussions, or specialized assignments (Leentjens, Levenson 2013). In practice, however, such conditions are not always ensured, which raises doubts regarding the soundness of integrating student research participation into the educational process as a systematic measure.

Anonymity and confidentiality

A number of authors note the particular vulnerability of students within the research context with respect to the preservation of confidentiality and anonymity. Insofar as the sample is drawn from a bounded educational community, the possibility remains of identifying participants by indirect indicators, such as age, year of study, field of training, or the nature of their responses (Leentjens, Levenson 2013). The situation becomes especially vulnerable when employing qualitative methods — for instance, interviews or focus groups — which entail detailed personal information. Furthermore, recruitment for research not infrequently occurs in a group format, which, on the one hand, heightens the likelihood of group influence on a student's decision to participate or not to participate, amplifies social pressure, and constrains freedom of decision-making, while, on the other hand, it may compromise the privacy of the very fact of participation (Goldenberg 2007). Under these conditions, the task of the researcher is to adopt additional measures for data protection: the use of de-identified codes, the storage of information in encrypted form, and the separation of contact information from research data. Contemporary conditions permit a reduction in the risk of identification through the use of remote electronic formats; however, not every study can be conducted anonymously and remotely. It is also necessary to take into account that formal technical measures do not always guarantee the perception of confidentiality on the part of the participants themselves. This calls for particular attention to the wording of the informed consent document, the transparency of the conditions of participation, and the clarification of data protection mechanisms.

The dual role of the teacher-researcher

Closely related to the problematic of coercion is the issue of maintaining an ethical balance in situations where one and the same university employee simultaneously fulfils both the role of instructor and the role of researcher (Al-Hinai 2018; MRU Human Research Ethics Board 2012; Nolen, Vander Putten 2007). Such a combination is regarded as a particular instance of occupying a dual social role (Gottlieb 1993) — a position that is ethically ambiguous. A dual role in research activity is understood as a situation in which the researcher acts simultaneously in two different capacities in relation to the participants, above all when they investigate those toward whom they exercise other professional functions extending beyond the bounds of scientific interaction. The combining of roles may give rise to a latent conflict of interest, insofar as the instructor's position presupposes the possession of authority, whereas the researcher's position entails the necessity of voluntary and independent consent on the part

of participants. Under such conditions, the risk of implicit pressure on students increases, even in the absence of deliberate influence on the part of the teacher-researcher. Such cases are fraught with internal conflicts for both the researcher and the participants. Analogous ethically sensitive situations arise when a physician acts in the capacity of researcher with respect to their own patients (Hay-Smith et al. 2016). The source of greatest ethical ambiguity in the combining of roles lies in the researcher's parallel exploitation of the affordances of the other role — typically the dominant, supervisory one — the blurring of the functional obligations and possibilities of the two roles, as well as the difficulty participants experience in clearly differentiating between these roles. Beyond the potential pressure exerted by the instructor's authority, role confusion may engender internal tension and psychological disorientation for both parties. This is especially pronounced in situations where, for example, the research involves an interview or the discussion of personal topics. Role blurring creates risks of boundary violations and the erosion of trust, which renders the need for transparent informed consent procedures and a clear delineation of professional functions within the research process particularly salient.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion directs attention to the vulnerability of students as research participants and renders necessary not only compliance with established ethical norms when conducting research but also the development of specific rules for the application of these norms within the university setting. At the same time, without disputing the importance of adhering to ethical standards, some authors maintain that the ethical problematicity of research involving students has been overstated (Dalziel 1996). Data on the prevalence of direct coercion to participate in research are sparse and contradictory. The use of a subjective criterion in assessing coercion to participate in research leads to discrepancies in its interpretation by participants. Consequently, studies indicate that certain practices which arouse concern among specialists in the field of research ethics are not perceived by students themselves as questionable or unacceptable (Flagel et al. 2007; Leak 1981).

The problematization of the instructor's influence over the student within the research context runs counter to the general proposition that influence — 'coercion' — is an inherent and necessary component of education. Students are regularly 'coerced' by the instructor into completing academic assignments, attending classes, and adhering to academic discipline, and it is in this 'coercion', whether by means of assessment or personal authority, that the possibility of professional development for the student resides. Accordingly, if research participation possesses educational benefit, the problem of coercion loses its acuity, and the matter reduces simply to ensuring that the research genuinely enables students to develop the requisite competencies.

Furthermore, the requirement to eliminate the influence of the educator's authority on a student's decision regarding research participation — in essence, the requirement to abstract from the significance of the relationship and to secure a 'temporary suspension of authority' on the part of the instructor — is capable of distorting the psychological context of the teacher-student relationship, which plays a vital role in the educational process (Flagel et al. 2007; Khajrullina 2021).

On the whole, as the majority of researchers note, the ethical difficulties arising in research employing student samples can be surmounted through judicious planning and the consistent implementation of ethical principles.

The most frequently cited approaches to resolving ethical problems when conducting research involving students include: (1) restrictions on conducting research in the direct presence of the instructor; (2) the exclusion of situations wherein an instructor conducts research involving students with whom they interact in an educational context, whether as teacher or advisor; (3) particular attention to the clarification of rights and options — specifically, the possibility of refusal and withdrawal from participation without negative consequences — within the framework of informed consent, the provision of opportunities for the advance review of the informed consent template, and mandatory prior notification regarding the anticipated participation of students in research within the context of a course and the available alternatives; (4) dedicated efforts to enhance the educational benefit of student participation in research and the incorporation of educational components into the study; (5) and special measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, including procedures for data anonymization, the secure storage of data along with the specification of data retention and destruction timelines, access to aggregated research findings, and the communication of the right to withdraw from participation at any time without adverse consequences.

We assume that these measures may be adapted within Russian educational practice provided that norms of research ethics are implemented and the

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specific forms of vulnerability of students as research participants are taken into account. However, this calls for further comprehensive investigations that will make it possible to elucidate, on the one hand, the particularities of the organization of educational and research processes within the context of Russian universities, and, on the other, the sociocultural specificity and the distinctive features of how ethical aspects and research practices are perceived by Russian students and faculty. The literature on this question is at present extremely limited, which hampers the formulation of optimal approaches to organizing scientific research involving students while taking into account the interests and rights of all participants in the research process within the university setting.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest, either existing or potential.

Конфликт интересов

Авторы заявляют об отсутствии потенциального или явного конфликта интересов.

Author Contributions

N. A. Antonova — project administration, conceptualization, review and editing.

E. A. Dubinina — writing original draft, review and editing.

N. A. Kruglova — writing original draft, review and editing.

Вклад авторов

Антонова Н. А. — руководство исследованием, концептуализация, редактирование.

Дубинина Е. А. — создание черновика рукописи, редактирование.

Круглова Н. А. — создание черновика рукописи, редактирование

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