



Concept of Synchronized Individuation Based on the Characters in a Movie and a Fairy Tale

Duk-Soo Moon¹ and Geon Ho Bahn²

¹Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, Jeju National University, Jeju, Korea

²Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea

Objectives: Among adolescent development tasks, being independent of parents is an essential process for emotional and physical separation. There are many conflicts of separation and individuation between parents and adolescents; however, most clinicians explore the process of separation and individuation only from adolescents' perspective. Whether simultaneously or sequentially, separation-individuation occurs between adolescents and parents, respectively. The authors have already introduced the theory of synchronized individuation in a clinical case to explain the concept of this intersubjective phenomena. This study also attempts to prove the synchronized individuation theory through the interaction of characters in a movie and a fairy tale.

Methods: The authors present the basis for the theory of synchronized individuation of adolescence through the growing process of Mason Junior, the main character of the movie "Boyhood," and from the process of the separation of a hen, Sprout, and an orphaned duckling in "The hen who dreamed she could fly."

Results: Synchronized individuation was developed and observed from Mason, the son's perspective in "Boyhood," and Sprout, the mother's subjective perspective in the story of the hen.

Conclusion: Increasing conflict and mutual impact in the relationship between adolescents and parents, ambivalent feelings for separation, selective identification of each other, mutual respect through mutual recognition, and role changes in relationship position were confirmed. Sons and mothers were individualized with synchronization.

Keywords: Synchronized individuation; Intersubjectivity; Adolescent; Parents; Media; Boyhood; Fairy tale.

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Address for correspondence: Geon Ho Bahn, Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine, Kyung Hee University, 23 Kyungheedaero, Dongdaemoongu, Seoul 02447, Korea

Tel: +82-2-858-8556, Fax: +82-2-957-1997, E-mail: mompeian@khu.ac.kr

INTRODUCTION

Mahler [1,2] defined infants' experiences of separation from their mothers in the early three years of life as a 'psychological birth,' and established the concept of separation individuation. Blos [3,4] had proposed the theory of secondary separation-individuation in adolescence. The period of secondary individuation coincides with the middle adulthood of the parents, who are the opposite party in the separation. Colarusso [5-7] argued that parents and adults also have developmental tasks to be achieved. Therefore, the third, fourth, and fifth individuation theories were introduced in early adulthood, mid-adulthood, and old age, respectively. Adults experience marriage and parenthood, separation from grown-ups, the death of grandparents, and acceptance of their upcoming deaths at the stage of individuation [6].

In the existing separation-individuation theory, the subject of individuation is usually biased toward one individual rather than both sides—child and parents. Therefore, to comprehensively understand the individuation process within a relationship, a new perspective is needed to explain the emotions and interactions of parents and children and their effects on each other's individuation process. Moon and Bahn [8] first introduced the concept of synchronized individuation between parents and children in the case of a father suffering from depression due to his adolescent son engaging in deviant behavior. In that case report, the authors suggested further research because there are several limitations in applying this new synchronized separation individuation theory in the clinical field [8].

Therefore, the authors attempted to find separation-individuation with synchronization in the developmental process of the characters in a movie and the protagonists of a literary work.

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METHODS

Participants

This study was conducted on the movie “Boyhood” [9] and the fairy tale “The hen who dreamed she could fly” [10]. The reason for choosing the two works is that the process of separation and individuation of the main characters from childhood to adulthood is vividly expressed.

A movie: *Boyhood*

Director Richard Linklater filmed family changes and growth processes from 2002 to 2014 until a six-year-old boy turned 18 in the U.S., without replacing actors and staff. The U.S. public education system and the mother’s remarriages were a big plot, and the scenario was not written until filming was imminent every year.

The movie contains ordinary and everyday life rather than interest-oriented events. In this respect, “Boyhood” provides realistic data on the development process of adolescents and family members, which is difficult to confirm in clinical research. It is the only movie that has been tracked for more than 10 years for adolescent development.

Story

Six-year-old boy Mason Junior lives with his divorced mother, Olivia, and sister, Samantha. Olivia is registered to college for a better life even as she is the head of the family and a mother. Mason’s biological father, Mason Senior, wants to reunite with Olivia, but she does not trust him without a proper job. Meanwhile, Olivia attended a class offered by the professor Bill. Later, Olivia married Bill. However, Bill has a drinking problem, and Olivia left Bill’s house with her children to escape his coercive control and violence. The siblings, who suddenly left everything behind and went to a new school, were anxious and upset about this situation. Olivia divorced Bill.

Time goes by, and Mason talks about the lives of adults with his biological father, Mason Senior, on weekends. Olivia, who has completed her doctoral degree in psychology, invites her college students to her home. Mason experiences alcohol, cigarettes, and women with his friends, encounters a new culture, receives a camera as a gift from Olivia’s new husband, Jim, and falls into taking pictures.

Meanwhile, Mason Senior remarries and becomes a father again. He sells his sports car to drive a minivan for his baby. A year before graduating from high school, Mason Junior goes on a special trip with his girlfriend Sheena, sharing concerns about how to build their future. After graduating from high school, Mason feels depressed as he breaks up with Sheena. At the graduation celebration, his biological father advis-

es Mason to take responsibility for his life. Olivia declares: “I’m gently pushing you out of the nest.” However, Olivia feels disappointed and whines too: “My life is just gonna go.” Mason begins his adult life by meeting new friends in college.

A fairy tale: ‘the hen who dreamed she could fly’

‘The hen who dreamed she could fly’ takes the form of children’s literature as a fairy tale, but the style and content, described from the perspective of parents who raise and leave their children, elicit the sympathy of readers [10]. It was also made into an animation movie in 2011 and surpassed 2 million viewers for the first time in domestic animation history [11]. This popularity and reliability are because the story of a hen leaving the yard has drawn an empathic response to the hearts of the majority while dealing with in-depth and universal conflicts within humans [11]. In this study, we cite the English version published in 2013 by Penguin Books in the U.S. [10].

Story

Sprout, an egg-type chicken, has laid eggs in a narrow chicken cage for more than a year but has never sit on top of her eggs to hatch. When seeing the leaves that have the vitality of blooming flowers, she names herself “Sprout.” She was abandoned in the pit when her body was too weak to lay eggs. With the help of a straggler, the mallard, she saves her life and leaves the yard to be free.

One day, Sprout finds the lost egg and incubate it with all her heart and love. The next morning, when the mallard gave his life to a weasel seeking an egg to eat, Sprout finally greets ‘Baby’ who came out of the world. Sprout, who took the baby to the yard, finds out that the baby is a mallard’s young one through the stories of the yard family, and leaves the unsafe yard and heads to the reservoir with the baby.

The baby grows up and learns to swim on his own, and Sprout is proud of him. She names him “Greentop.” As Greentop grows up, he sees dissimilarities between his mother and wants to be with a group that resembles him. While avoiding an attack from the weasel, Greentop finds himself capable of flying. Looking at the safe and free Greentop, Sprout feels lonely and envious. Meanwhile, Greentop is tied to the pillar of the yard by the owner of the yard. She pecks the string tied to the leg of Greentop with her beak and they run away from the yard together.

One day, a herd of mallards comes to the reservoir. Greentop comes around and confesses his difficulties in living as a loner in the crowd. Sprout acknowledges Greentop’s desire to leave and live with his own group. Sprout lived lonely in the cave, cheering for Greentop with her heart. Spring comes, and Greentop leaves for the north with a group.

While Sprout feels sadness and desperation to fly, she also sees a weasel approaching her (Recently, Sprout, looking for food, finds the weasel baby, and realizes that the weasel is also a mother). Sprout is willing to give up her life thinking of a weasel's baby. She feels herself flying lightly and gains complete freedom.

Methods

The analytical methods of the subjects, movie and fairy tale, were chosen respectively because the two genres have different characteristics. After reviewing the background knowledge of the "Boyhood" film production, the authors investigated the development of Mason Junior and Olivia for 12 years as a growth timeline and analyzed it. Focusing on Mason Junior's growth, his individuation process was proved by analyzing interactions among characters, and changes before and after each episode.

In the case of 'The hen who dreamed she could fly,' we applied psychoanalysis methods from Baudry's paper [12] in this study. Treating the text as a case history; considering the text in its own right and carrying out a thematic analysis identifying traces or derivatives of mental contents. In the fairy tale content, scenes related to the individuation of adolescent and parent were selected and analyzed.

In each sample, the assessment of the individuation process of adolescent children and parents was confirmed based on their increased mutual impact, affect and drives, status in the relationship, and changes before and after the psychological reorganization process. This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Seoul Metropolitan Children's Hospital.

RESULTS

Synchronized individuation in "Boyhood" by age group

6–12 years old, Mason as an observer

Judgment and choice are made by the parents, and Mason observes the changing environment in a passive position. He tries to understand the situation through his parents' behavior. When mother Olivia fights with her boyfriend late at night for the responsibility for her child, Mason observes it through the door gap. Mason, 8 years old, enjoys time with his biological father and his father wants to reunite with his mother. However, when his parents argue, he has no choice but to watch the situation through the window. When Olivia attends a lecture with Mason and chats with Bill, a professor, Mason nods and observes to grasp the meaning. Even when Bill, who became a stepfather, began to take firm con-

trol, for example, cutting Mason's long hair by Bill regardless of Mason's agreement, Mason could not express his complaints. Despite being annoyed with his mother's decision to move, transfer and remarry, Mason could not do anything; instead, he chose to adapt to the changing environment.

13–18 years old, Mason as an active participant:

Mason actively participates in relationships with people and begins to ask and exchange thoughts. The scene of a 13-year-old Mason Junior campaigning for the presidential election with his father, Mason Senior, shows identification between the father and the son. On the day he goes camping with his father, he confirms that his father has a new girlfriend, and asks for relationship advice with his girlfriend. The morning after camping, his father urinates on a campfire and asks Mason to do the same. The close-up scene of peeing in the same place in turn shows Mason and his father identifying with each other by sharing regression behavior.

As Mason turns 14, the family reconstructs and expands their respective social relationships. Although it does not appear as a scene in the movie, his father remarries during this period. Olivia becomes a university professor and asks students over to her home. Mason naturally hangs out with Olivia's college students. When one of them asked about the graffiti 'KEZJO' drawn in his room, Mason answered, "it's my tag. It doesn't really mean anything, though." The tag "KEZJO," which was created to represent oneself, not Mason Junior, represents his desire to individualize. However, he consciously denies it because of the guilt caused by the unconscious rejection of their parents.

On his 15th birthday, Mason drinks and smokes with his friends and older students and returns home late after enjoying kisses with his girlfriend. Late at night, Olivia is also having a party at home with her colleagues. She asks Mason: "have you been drinking?" Mason smiles and replies, "have you?" She said: "Yeah, a little." And Mason also answered: "A little bit." Olivia smiles, surprised, and replies: "Talk in the morning." As Mason returned Olivia's query and showed a relaxed response, Olivia also produced a scene corresponding to it. It is a moment of mutual recognition of achieving equality between mother and son.

Father and son also show individualized scenes as their conditions change. Mason's father promised to give him a car when he was ten years old. However, after his remarriage, when the baby is born, he sells a sports car and buys a minivan that can carry baby seats. When Mason complained that his father sold the sports car Pontiac that he had promised Mason to give later, his father drew the line: "You can save up and buy a car of your own." The father, who was less responsible and seemed like a friend, now fulfills his duty to-

ward his new family. At the age of 16, Mason tells Sheena, his girlfriend, at a party with his peers, "I find myself so furious at all these people that I'm in contact with just for controlling me. I just wanna be able to do anything I want, as opposed to giving me the appearance of normality." He expresses his thoughts on narcissistic achievement to be special. Nevertheless, he immediately retracts on the statement: "I don't think it means much." This oscillation reflects the dialectical tension of achievement and regression in the process of individuation. When entering the house late that day, Jim, the second stepfather, attempts coercive control while drunk. Now, Mason, no longer a young boy and a passive observer, makes his opinion clear, "you're not my dad," and enters the house ignoring Jim.

At the age of 17–18, while on a date with Sheena, Mason talks about expectations for the future and worries about becoming a college student. "I'm not counting on it being some big, transformative experience. I don't think it's the key to my life." He cited his mother Olivia as an example. She got her degree and landed a pretty good job, and she can pay her bills. "I like my mom, too. I just mean, basically, [that] she's still just as fuckin' confused as I am." Through the ability to change perspectives acquired in adolescence, they can better understand each other's positions, although Mason and Olivia were wandering, sharing emptiness in life and relationships. Olivia prepares for a situation where she will remain alone: "I'm gonna spend the second half of my life getting rid of all this stuff." Olivia tells Mason, who has just graduated from high school: "You guys are adults. You need to take some responsibility."

However, when Mason leaves for college, Olivia bursts into tears. "I knew this day was coming. I didn't know you were gonna be so fuckin' happy to be leaving. I just thought there would be more. You know what's next? It's my fucking funeral!" The moment when Olivia, who firmly overcame all kinds of adversity, shed tears of loss, emptiness, and despair was when her son left home. Olivia's responsibility does not fall on Mason, who has become an adult. She must endure the loss she never experienced before and live with a new responsibility for her changed life. The individuation processes of Mason and Olivia occur simultaneously and respectively.

Synchronized individuation in 'The hen who dreamed she could fly'

The baby duck recognizes Sprout as a mother and reacts only to her, and the mother–baby relationship begins to solidify. The baby and Sprout seek and maintain proximity to each other and want to feel stable. Sprout feels powerful in the relationship when the Baby follows her, and she thinks that the idealized self-object, the Baby, will not leave her. This

idealization is also an attempt not to face the upcoming separation anxiety through the process of individuation in the future.

When Greentop begins to fly, Sprout overcomes her narcissistic injury through achievement, which is the object identification. Greentop acquires the ability to explore and master the surrounding environment in a stable attachment to Sprout. Simultaneously, being able to fly means that dependence on parents can turn into something more important. Now, he has acquired the ability to leave Sprout. Therefore, the maturity of Greentop causes ambivalence in Sprout. She gives the physically mature baby the name Greentop and recognizes the progress of individuation, but still wants to call him "Baby." This behavior seems to be a romantic pursuit of early childhood dependence and a denial of the upcoming separation anxiety.

As awareness of the object expands, realizing that it is no longer an idealized object promotes separation through de-idealization [4]. Greentop learns that Sprout is no longer an ideal object, and the resulting narcissistic rage is projected onto Sprout and himself. Faced with Greentop's cool attitude, Sprout suffers from narcissistic injury. Greentop also suffers from depression caused by the inner projection of narcissistic rage and shows a regressive desire due to guilt and anxiety about separation, and the burden of taking responsibility for his life. He expresses the desire to refuse individuation and wants to settle down.

Recognizing that it is time for Greentop to leave, Sprout does not want her son to go. Both Sprout and Greentop are experiencing ambivalent tension in relation to a dialectical process due to conflicting desires for separation and dependence.

The string tied to the feet of Greentop prevents him from matching the group of mallards, which are alternatively dependent on. On the other hand, it plays a role in delaying separation from Sprout. It is a factor that prevents the progression of individuation, and Sprout can use it as a means of control to hold Greentop. However, Sprout recognized that it was time for Greentop to let go of the experience of sharing and enduring painful ambivalent emotions with him. She then pecks the string all night so that Greentop can go away. Greentop feels guilty and anxious about separation even as he desires individuation. Then, she validates, contains, and integrates his desire for individuation with empathetic mirroring. Her role is an important factor that enables Greentop to achieve individuation with a sense of stability.

DISCUSSION

In terms of the existing theory of separation–individuation, the chronological changes of Mason, biological parents,

and stepfathers in the movie “Boyhood,” correspond to secondary individuation in adolescence [4], and third and fourth individuation in adulthood [5,6]. The same is true of the changes in the relationship between Greentop and Sprout in the fairy tale. Mason in “Boyhood” observed the progress of separation from the son’s perspective and the subjective perspective of a mother, Sprout, in ‘The hen who dreamed she could fly’. In the previously published clinical case [8], separation-individuation was observed from the objective perspective of the psychiatrist. As such, the phenomenon of separation and individuation may appear differently depending on age, environment, background event, and target person, but there is something in common in that it proceeds with synchronization (Table 1). The authors confirmed increased conflict and mutual impact in the relationship between adolescents and parents, ambivalent feelings for separation, selective identification of each other, mutual respect through mutual recognition, and changes in position in relationships and proved synchronized individuation from both sons and parents in movie and fairy tale.

The theory of separation-individuation has been inherited and developed by Mahler’s disciples and psychoanalysts. Benjamin [13] emphasized that Mahler’s separation and individuation process, which was described from a child-centered perspective, and was reinstated as a process of binding availability to recognize other person’s subjectivity. He also asserted that mutual recognition is an essential element for the growth process of the ego.

In psychoanalysis, an atmosphere containing unconscious meanings between patients and therapists can be referred to by the term ‘analytic third’ [14]. During the analytic process, patients and therapists continue to gain dialectically new subjectivity. Through the subtle atmosphere of the ‘analytic third,’ therapists get a glimpse of the emotions, mental state, and unconsciousness of patients and themselves [15]. In this context, the concept of ‘relational third,’ an intersubjectivity formed by the two subjects, such as lovers and family relationships, emerged [16]. Conversely, the relational third formed by the two subjects gives a new meaning to their respective subjectivity. It is because they recognize and change their

Table 1. Assessments of film, literature, and clinical case in the process of synchronized individuation

Items	Boyhood*	The hen who dreamed she could fly [†]	Clinical case: a father and a son [‡]
Type	Film	Literature	Clinical case
Background	United States of America, 2002–2014	Published in Korea, 2000, in U.S., 2013	Treatment in a clinic, Korea
Family	Son, older sister, mother, father, two step-fathers, father’s girlfriend	Adopted son, mother (personified story)	Son, mother, father
Core relations	Son-mother Son-biological father and step fathers	Adopted son-mother	Son-father
Perspective	Son	Mother	Clinician (3rd person)
Main issues	Simultaneous growing and individuation of family members	Adopted son’s growing and separation, Self-realization and individuation	Conflict between father and son, Acceptance with new identity
Processes of synchronized individuation	Seeking secureness, Mutual recognition of equality, Selective identification, Getting responsibility, Ambivalence about separation, Son’s college entrance	Mutual recognition from discrepancy, Selective identification, Loneliness and anxiety, Ambivalence about separation, Adopted son’s leaving with same kind	Loss of idealized self-object and aggression, Family psychotherapy, Mutual recognition from ambivalence, Drive for change and selective identification, Son’s college entrance
Results of synchronized individuation	Coping with emptiness, mutual respect of socialization	Tolerating the separation anxiety, Mutual respect of new identity	Acceptance of their new position, Getting responsibility, Mutual respect of their opinion

*movie, Boyhood: a 2014 American film, directed by Richard Linklater; [†]fairy tale, author Sun-Mi Hwang, 2000 Korean, 2013 English; [‡]clinical case reported by Moon DS and Bahn GH in J Korean Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry 2022;33(2):41-47

existence anew through relationships. In this process, they find out that the opponent is another independent subject [17]. The two persons who form a relationship, such as analysts and patients, parents and children, and lovers, create mutual subjectivity (intersubjectivity) together. They share their perceptions and experiences of the relational third, and the two persons are affected simultaneously. This concept of relational third provides a framework for a deep understanding of the interaction and relationship between parents and children.

The relational third, created by intersubjectivity, exists between parents and children, changing into the form of observing ego and participating ego [16]. The relational third explores the meaning of the atmosphere surrounding the relationship for the choice and judgment of every moment inevitable to the relationship. The audience and readers sympathize with the emotions and thoughts of the main characters, and they also have feelings and thoughts as relational thirds. In another study applying synchronized individuation, readers can observe the relational third through the feelings between a father who does not want to marry his daughter and a guy who wants to marry her [18]. It analyzed a traditional folktale of Korea, "The man who becomes the son-in-law by three lies," in which becoming a son-in-law means recognizing his position as an adult. From the standpoint of a father whose daughter marries, it means separation from a daughter. The establishment of healthy individuation of son-in-law and father-in-law in this marriage relationship means the achievement of each adult's development task.

As parents and children jointly participate in all phenomena that have occurred in the relationship, they unknowingly influence and engage in the process of individuation themselves. This influence leads to mutual recognition, which proceeds to mutual respect for oneself and objects. This process is a key factor in the healthy synchronized individuation process. Adolescents develop physically, cognitively, and psychologically and have equality with their parents [7]. Parents who sometimes cannot handle changes in adolescent children may resist or show aggression to overcome anxiety, anger, and depression caused by children [8]. It would be 'parental psychological control,' which represents characteristics of parents who are nonresponsive to their children's needs and who instead use intrusive and manipulative tactics (e.g., guilt induction, shaming, and love withdrawal) to pressure their child to meet the parents' standards [19]. An example is the strong control attempt of stepfather Bill and Jim in the movie "Boyhood." However, Mason responds differently to parents' psychological control in childhood and adolescence. Unlike the boy Mason, who was passive in front of his stepfather Bill, the adolescent Mason confidently con-

fronted another stepfather Jim, who scolded him for coming in late. It shows his acquisition of a sense of control.

Selective identification is necessary to modify self-image in adolescence more realistically and to proceed with individuation through psychological restructuring [8,20]. It can be seen in Mason's growth process. Mason selectively identifies the part that can accommodate each parents' character from four parents, including his mother and three fathers. From Olivia, the growth and responsibility of her social relationship are identified, but the judgment of remarriage or sensitive personality is not identified. The flexibility, political orientation, and careful concerns of a baby from his biological father, Mason Senior, are shared and identified. However, Mason does not accept less prepared improvisation in creating a family and lacks of responsibility for his father's own family. His first stepfather, Bill, had alcohol dependence, domestic violence, and a desire to control others, and then Mason judged Bill's life was unacceptable and completely rejected it. The camera as a gift from second stepfather Jim and photographic technology were accepted as a part of his identity, but he did not accept Jim's selfish attitude and attempts at control. Mason's own identity is built from selective identification and it is a characteristic of the individuation process in adolescence.

Selective identification can also be investigated in Sprout's behaviors and thoughts. Looking at the 'Baby' duck who can fly, the mother Sprout gives the name Greentop. Sprout shares the "green color" that her name conveys. Sprout knows that the growing Greentop is different from her; nonetheless, selective identification of 'green' shows her willingness to maintain a connection between the two. Although Sprout recognizes the progress of individuation, she still wants to call him 'Baby.'

In "The hen who dreamed she could fly," the growth and departure of Greentop and Sprout's decision to let him go is a process in which adolescent children and parents experience separation and individuation in human life. It is not only a process of Greentop to achieve individuation with a sense of stability, but also the role of Sprout that reassures and sends anxious Greentop away. Greentop leaves Sprout in search of his identity. The pain experienced in separating from Greentop proceeds with the individuation of Sprout. She finds and redefines a new meaning by looking at the relationship that had ambivalent feelings from an integrated perspective. As Sprout watches Greentop leave, she finds out what she wants him to leave. This realization denotes a moment when Greentop and Sprout are simultaneously individualized while recognizing intersubjectivity in a relationship.

This study has limitations in characteristics of research topics and research methods. First, the individuation of each

character could not be evaluated according to objective criteria, which is a common limitation of psychoanalytic research and developmental theory research. Second, as the subject of this study is movie and literature, it is difficult to say that it is an exact evaluation of development in real life. However, since these works of art can be repeatedly evaluated and reproduced, they also have the advantage of supplementing the weaknesses of actual youth research, which is difficult to control variables. Third, the concept of ‘synchronized individuation’ cannot be generalized only with the results of this study. This new theory should be discussed further.

Despite these limitations, this study is significant in that it presents synchronized individuation between adolescents and parents through character analysis in a movie and literature.

CONCLUSION

In the theory of separation and individuation proposed by Mahler, the emotional exchange patterns of infants and mothers were summarized sequentially. Subsequently, Blos and Colarusso expanded the theory of individuation into adolescence, youth, middle age, and old age. The authors thought that this individuation process would be recognized by both sides, respectively, sequentially and/or simultaneously; hence, the name “synchronized individuation.” This study confirmed synchronized separation and individuation between parents and children through the main characters of the movie and fairy tale.

The synchronized individuation process is complementary to the existing separation-individuation theory. It will help understand and intervene in youths and their families suffering from individuation-related conflicts in actual life.

Availability of Data and Material

The datasets generated or analyzed during the study are not publicly available due to the copyright, but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Duk-Soo Moon, Geon Ho Bahn. Data curation: Duk-Soo Moon. Formal analysis: Duk-Soo Moon, Geon Ho Bahn. Investigation: Duk-Soo Moon, Geon Ho Bahn. Methodology: Geon Ho Bahn. Project administration: Duk-Soo Moon. Supervision: Geon Ho Bahn. Writing—original draft: Duk-Soo Moon. Writing—review and editing: Geon Ho Bahn.

ORCID iDs

Duk-Soo Moon <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7878-3410>

Geon Ho Bahn <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3550-0422>

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