

CROSS-GENERATIONAL PRAGMATIC FAILURES IN THE MOVIE 'THE INTERN' (2015)

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Abstract. In order to ensure successful communication in professional settings, pragmatic competence is essential. However, when interlocutors rely on distinct pragmatic standards, communication breakdowns can happen, especially when people from various generations are involved. This study examines how cross-generational pragmatic failure is portrayed in the 2015 movie *The Intern*, concentrating on interactions between Baby Boomer and Millennial characters at work. This study examines three carefully chosen scenes that demonstrate intergenerational communication in a modern organizational setting using a qualitative content analysis methodology. To find examples of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure, the analysis is driven by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Relational Work Theory. Verbatim transcriptions of conversations were used to gather data, which were then methodically coded using a coding framework created by the researcher. The results point to a greater occurrence of sociopragmatic failure as compared to pragmalinguistic failure, primarily due to the lack of proper prognostications regarding formality/politeness/joke, communication etiquette, and medium compliance. Additionally, the data demonstrates that older and younger characters experience co-pragmatic failure arising from a lack of questions, presumed to signal a sociocultural 'ply' communication breakdown, rather than a 'failure to communicate.' The data also reiterates that failure is not only complex, opaque, and rigid, but that it is also pliable and results in a condition of reciprocity with the necessary 'shifts' from the involved parties. This research, by prioritising generational identity as a significant pragmatic variable and showcasing the discourse of the film as a pragmatic resource, contributes to the body of knowledge on sociolinguistics and pragmatics. The research also enhances pragmatic awareness as well as the understanding of the nature of communication and the dysfunctions across generations in contemporary workplaces.

Keywords: *communication breakdown, cross-generational communication, politeness theory, pragmatic failure, workplace discourse*

Introduction

Today's workplace has people from all generations, where Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z all work alongside one another. Each generation has different values, work ethics, and ways to communicate and get things done (Gursoy et.al 2008). For example, the younger workers may desire casual high-speed electronic communication while the older workforce may desire formal face-to-face communication. These types of differences can result in pragmatic as well as linguistic misunderstandings (Holmes, 2005). The movie "The Intern" of 2015 by Nancy Meyers is a cultural text for such intergenerational communication breakdowns. The movie is a tale of a 70-year-old widower, Ben Whittaker, who enrolls in the senior internship program in an e-commerce fashion company run by a young CEO, Jules Ostin. Their evolving relationship, characterized by moments of misunderstanding and eventual comprehension, offers an apt window through which to examine cross-generational pragmatic breakdowns in the workplace.

Although cross-cultural and second-language communication has historically been the focus of pragmatic study, generational identity is becoming more widely acknowledged as a significant determinant in pragmatic interpretation. Generations serve as pragmatic communities that share presumptions about civility, relevance, formality, and proper workplace behaviour even though they do not represent cultures in the traditional sense. These presumptions are influenced by institutional norms, technology exposure, and sociohistorical circumstances that were present throughout the early years of each generation. Given that interlocutors rely on differing expectations for understanding meaning, interactions between people from various generations may lead to pragmatic failure rather than linguistic incompetence. Therefore, generational identity is positioned in this study as a pragmatic issue that merits systematic investigation, especially in professional settings where interactional norms are continuously contested.

Although additional workplace communication research has come to light over the years, little research is available on pragmatic failure across generations in the media. Across the majority of research in pragmatics, cross-cultural miscommunication or second language learning is addressed (Thomas, 1983; Taguchi, 2011). It remains to be explored how diverse values, technology use, and social norms across generations cause pragmatic failure. Film, among others, provides a dense repository of naturally occurring interactions representing real-world concerns, yet pragmatic film discourse analysis is under-theorized within the contemporary scholarly field. This paper, therefore, aims to fill this gap in research by providing "The Intern" as a case study of cross-generational pragmatic failure.

Research objectives

The research objective are includes: (1) To identify communication breakdowns between characters of different generations in the movie "The Intern". (2) To analyze the contributing factors for these breakdowns.

Research questions

The research questions can be divided into: (1) What types of communication breakdowns are portrayed between different generations in The Intern? (2) How do characters of different generations contribute to these breakdowns? This research draws from Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975) and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987). These serve as the foundation for the identification and comprehension of pragmatic failure events within the film. The maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner by Grice are applied in the analysis of whether the characters are being cooperative in communication and under which conditions these failures happen when the maxims are breached. Meanwhile, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory elaborates on the management of face-threatening acts (FTAs) by speakers and on the fact that various generations can rank positive face (need for approval) and negative face (need for autonomy) differently-to result in sociopragmatic misalignment.

Materials and Methods

To analyse cross-generational pragmatic failure in workplace interactions, the study depicts the content of "The Intern" of 2015 through a qualitative content analysis lens.

Since pragmatic meaning creates the failure of understanding, context, and social negotiation, it must be assessed beyond the quantitative prism. Hence, this study is justified. Meaning in qualitative content analysis can go beyond the value in the context and the misunderstanding in the interplay to evaluate what is being communicated and the value it conveys. The absence of qualitative predictors is standard in pragmatic research. Therefore, it is essential the study is exploratory and interpretive and that it leaves behind a structured outline indicating where the results will ultimately converge (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Since the research aims at aiding the understanding of the nuances of the context such as implicature, politeness, and relational work, the design focuses on the engagement of theory and depth of study to plead for multiple re-examinations of definite outcome pragmatics. It is empirical research that needs to be focused on singular configurations to allow for the convergence of multiple interpretative layers into one relational work. This analytic approach is more deductive and has a stronger level of theory confirming. The data-driven approach is textbook disengagement at its best. This way, the study relies on data to ensure there is no deviation from the plan as it works.

Setting and sample

The office environment portrayed in Nancy Meyers' 2015 film "The Intern" serves as the study's research setting. The movie was chosen on purpose because it focuses on long-term interactions between individuals from many generations in a modern workplace, which makes it extremely pertinent to the study of cross-generational pragmatic failure. Three significant scenes that clearly illustrate intergenerational workplace interaction and possible pragmatic breakdowns were chosen via purposeful sampling. Rather than their frequency of occurrence, the First Day Greeting, Late Night Email, and Coffee Run situations were chosen for their communicative relevance. Formal face-to-face engagement, technologically mediated communication, and informal collegial interaction are the three different forms of workplace communication that each scene depicts. Because depth, contextual sensitivity, and theoretical saturation are more important in qualitative pragmatic research than sample size, the small number of scenes is methodologically acceptable. The study is able to do in-depth, theory-driven analysis without sacrificing analytical rigor by concentrating on a small yet information-rich dataset. Scenes without clear pragmatic conflict or direct intergenerational contact were not included in the analysis. This prevented shallow or duplicate analysis and guaranteed that the chosen dataset stayed concentrated on examples most pertinent to the study concerns. The sampling method used is purposive sampling in which these following scenes were used based on pertinence to the research issues of the study: (1) First Day Greeting (00:15:12–00:17:30); (2) Late Night Email (00:42:05–00:43:00); (3) Coffee Run with Interns (01:02:50–01:04:00).

These scenes were selected since they contain evident instances of communication failure on pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic grounds. The scenes are all intergenerational interactions between older intern Ben Whittaker (embodying the Baby Boomer generation) and his junior colleagues like Jules Ostin, Davis, and Lewis (embodying Millennials).

Instrumentation and materials

The researcher-designed coding sheet (see Appendix B) is the primary instrument of data collection used to spot and categorize pragmatic failure based on stipulated models. The sheet is provided with the following columns: (1) Scene title and timestamp; (2) Characters involved; (3) Type of pragmatic failure (pragmalinguistic vs. sociopragmatic); (4) Grice's Maxims (Grice, 1975); (5) Politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987); (6) Generational contrasts; and (7) Interpretation of the miscommunication. The primary instrument used in this study is a researcher-designed coding sheet based on Grice's Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. The failure which is pinpointed through coding sheets is organised. Each interaction is classified by type of failure, maxims that were violated, which politeness strategy was used, and which generation was involved. The primary source of data is transcripts of scenes, which guarantees open analysis and the ability to duplicate the results. Using the coding sheets and transcripts as appendices improves the study's rigor by letting the audience follow the thinking process of the author to the source data.

Use of screen captures as contextual support

Selected screen captures from "The Intern" of 2015 are offered as additional visual references in addition to spoken transcripts. By displaying spatial layout, body posture, and facial expressions that may affect pragmatic perception, these screen captures contextualise the spoken interactions rather than being regarded as separate analytical data. By enabling readers to see the interactional context in which utterances take place, screen captures improve analytical transparency without detracting from spoken speech. This method is in line with earlier research on film discourse that maintains a major focus on verbal pragmatics while acknowledging the multimodal character of cinematic interaction.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection commenced by watching "The Intern" several times to identify potential pragmatic failure points. After purposive sampling of the most appropriate scenes, the researcher conducted verbatim transcriptions of each conversation. The study applied a deductive content analysis methodology, guided by Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory, to examine scenes and determine: (1) The type of pragmatic failure (e.g., misinterpretation of sarcasm, over-formality, misinterpreted silence); (2) The Gricean maxim infringed (e.g., manner, quantity, relation); (3) The underlying cause of failure (e.g., generation gap in politeness or internet behavior)

Examples of such analysis include

(1) On the First Day Greeting scene, Ben's employment of the word "ma'am" creates sociopragmatic unease, as the word is perceived by Jules as excessively formal or age-based; (2) On the Late Night Email scene, Jules takes disapproval from Ben because he did not say anything when Ben was adhering to an etiquette rule of polite but non-interfering discourse within his generation; (3) In the Coffee Run scene, Ben fails to appreciate the interns' joke and the irony behind it, and there is a breakdown of shared meaning due to opposing generational cues for comedy.

Analytical procedure

A methodical, theory-driven process was used for the analysis. Initially, the movie was watched several times to find sequences where people from different generations interacted over extended periods of time. Rather than frequency, communicative importance served as the basis for scene selection. Second, in order to guarantee authenticity and transparency, specific scenes were verbatim transcribed. Third, a coding sheet created by the researcher based on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and Grice's Cooperative Principle was used to code each utterance. In order to guarantee analytical consistency, interpretations were finally cross-checked against accepted pragmatic frameworks.

Reliability and validity

In qualitative research, trustworthiness of the study is crucial. In this study, reliability refers to consistency in analysis processes and validity refers to accuracy and credibility of the interpretations made from the selected scenes in "The Intern" of 2015.

Reliability

To enhance reliability, the researcher applied a systematizable and replicable coding scheme adopted from empirical pragmatic and politeness theories. All the scenes were recorded verbatim and all transcripts were coded using a priori coding sheet. The sheet categorized pragmatic failures based on explicit, consistent criteria such as Grice (1975) Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory. For intra-coder reliability, the data were re-coded by the researcher a week later. Comparisons were made for consistency and differences were re-checked and clarified to enhance the internal reliability of the analysis process (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Validity

Content validity was achieved using purposive sampling of scenes to ensure that all the scenes contain rich, observable instances of intergenerational communication and pragmatic breakdown. Sampling was research-oriented (Campbell et al., 2020; Palinkas et al., 2015; Emmel, 2013). Theoretical validity was ensured by basing analysis on then-dominant linguistic theories. Pragmatic failure was always accounted for with reference to Gricean maxims (maxim of manner, quantity, relation) and politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987), ensuring construct validity to findings. Lastly, there was transparency through the provision of all raw data (transcripts), coding sheets, and coding outputs. This enables potential future researchers or reviewers to follow the analytical process and confirm the conclusion reached from the data.

Ethical considerations

This study does not use human subjects; instead, it examines media content that is accessible to the general public. Formal ethical approval was therefore not necessary. Every resource was utilized just for educational reasons.

What types of communication breakdowns are portrayed between different generations in "The Intern" of 2015?

The two breakdowns of communications are identified in the film through the research of Ben's character representing the Pragmalinguistic failure and the

Sociopragmatic failure of the Baby Boomer generation during the interactions with the younger Millennial generation, and in this case, the film's character, Jules Ostin, and the interns. "The First Day Greeting" is the clearest example of all the scenes demonstrating the communication breakdown in this film due to the socio-pragmatic failure of these components. For instance, as Ben tries to exhibit professionalism and an act of respect, he refers to Jules as "ma'am", and in this case, she awkwardly and rather unsuccessfully responds to Ben and requests that he use his first name rather than Ms. Ostin. This is a perfect example of the different generational gaps and the instilled deferral perceptions in the workplace. "A sociopragmatic failure occurs as Thomas (1983) describes, when a speaker and listener are of different generations." From this standpoint, Jules perceives Ben's familiar reference as an indirect, patronising comment, while Ben's use of "ma'am" is an intentional deferential reference attributed to his age.

Even describing the case from the viewpoint of Grice's Cooperative Principle, the problem may arise from the maxim of manners, not because the statement may be unacceptable, but because it may be ambiguous. For Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, it seems that Jules employs positive politeness, while Ben practices negative politeness. Jules' approach seems to be more interested in informal, friendly distance, while Ben is more distanced and polite. Relational Work Theory is useful here as it indicates that the failure is not due to rudeness, but rather to a difference in relationship distance. An example of sociopragmatic failure is in the scene called "The Coffee Run," where younger interns ironically, and with light-hearted humour, talk about chores. Ben, at first, is confused because he cannot tell whether the interns are serious or not. This particular case of disintegration can be explained as the result of different understandings of humour and conversational implicature. Ben, by his honesty, misjudges the case, while the interns, in a rather presumptive way, have a valid understanding of irony. It is in line with Grice's relations that Ben does not immediately understand the humorous comments that are meant to be relevant.

The "Late Night Email" scene exemplifies most clearly the failure of pragmalinguistic communication. Since he thinks that staying quiet is a polite and unobtrusive response, Ben chooses to ignore Jules's email sent late at night. Jules, however, perceives the absence of an email response as a signal of deadlock or a loss of interest. With this conflict, we can see differences in the communication challenges Jules and Ben face. Given the differences in age, the challenges could stem from Jules and Ben having differing expectations of online communication. From the Gricean perspective, this is a violation of the Maxim of Quantity because Ben provides insufficient information for Jules to satisfy her. This case study shows the extent to which failure of pragmalinguistic communication could arise from silence instead of speech.

Overall, the most subtle, context-heavy description of communication breakdown that runs through the film and is most likely a case of generational gap as opposed to a case of linguistic absence or conscious disagreement is found in the film "The Intern" of 2015. The findings suggest that pragmatic failure in "The Intern" of 2015 is institutionalized not occasional and a certain level of miscommunication is more systemic. The consistency of the communicative breakdown observed in the cases indicates that these people communicate based on age-category norms. This supports Thomas (1983) argument that discordant sociolinguistic expectations are the source of pragmatic failure, rather than merely incorrect language use. The film's world is one that our protagonist has part of the blame exoneration over, demonstrating how typical

worksites can be spaces of functional impasse when generational presumptions are allowed to stand.

How do characters of different generations contribute to these breakdowns?

The findings suggest that both older and younger characters in *The Intern* co-create pragmatic failure dependent on communication styles that are inculcated by their respective generations. This method of analysis points out that misunderstandings typically stem from the exchange of antithetical presuppositions about what is suitable, polite, and language in use. Ben Whittaker often uses mildness, politeness, and circumlocution in his conversation. When he greets Jules, who is his supervisor, with "ma'am" during the "First Day Greeting" segment of the movie, he is trying to show respect for professional rank and social status. Yet this strategy runs counter to Jules' hopes for informal relations among colleagues at work. According to Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, this conflict arises from different orientations toward the face. While Jules finds satisfaction in positive face, pursuing informality, Ben emphasizes negative face by avoiding imposition.

By assuming that the norms they prefer are universally shared, both of them contribute to failure. Ben's decision to remain silent in the "Late Night Email" scene is an off-record courtesy strategy intended to avoid interrupting others. Jules, in contrast, looks for a short acknowledgment in line with modern generational standards that stress digital reply and immediacy. The conversation shows how different generational expectations of technology and availability lead to failure in contextual performance. As Taguchi (2011) points out, misconceptions of pragmatic nature are often compounded by presupposition. The "Coffee Run" scene again illustrates how younger characters use sarcasm and snark as a means of social intercourse to bring about pragmatic failure. At first Ben has difficulty finding the humor of a work environment, although the interns desire an interchange of friendship and solidarity. For it interprets how identical acts of communication might rate differently according to generational expectations of workplace propriety, relational work theory is particularly useful in this case.

These findings collectively show that pragmatic failures in "The Intern" of 2015 are due to generational grounded habits operating within a shared professional culture rather than poor communication skills on the part of individuals. Older and younger characters displease a view conceived by older generations of communication by using exclusive forms of communication without deliberating shared expectations between the parties themselves. More or less, the results also cause one to doubt existing theories of intergenerational communication as deficit-model-theories. Neither the younger nor the older characters are unable to communicate with the other. What really brings down pragmatic failure on any face of this wall, is that equally valid but incompatible standards of politeness prevail in one and the same interactional area. This supports the Relational Work Theory claim that judgments of (im)politeness can be subjective, rather than objective. As the *Intern* illustrates through its portrayal of pragmatic failure as being in fact co-created and not coming from only one generation at all, successful professional communication requires continual haggling rather than giving in unilaterally.

Results and Discussion

Patterns of pragmatic failure recur in the three settings identified. In comparison to pragmatic failure at the level of the language, sociopragmatic failure is more widespread and, by implication, social expectations that are violated are considered more important than linguistic form itself. Moreover, age differences in politeness orientation hold good across a variety of settings. For younger figures informality and immediacy are stressed, whereas Ben always adopts the stance and manner of someone restrained and polite. These recurring themes point to the conclusion that pragmatic failure in "The Intern" of 2015 is not without intent. The outcome supports Relational Work Theory in suggesting that pragmatic failure can be ascribed to differing valuations of propriety. By showing how different generations have different ways of looking at norm violations, they also make a contribution to Grice's pragmatics. Most significantly, the research findings expose that pragmatic failure is assembled within shared norms taken for granted. This challenges deficit-oriented explanations of inter-generational communication. One after another, the research finds many seemingly important characteristics. First, it is rare for pragmatic mistakes in the movie "The Intern" of 2015 to turn confrontational. Hence, difficulties emerge from awkwardness, unwillingness and mild confusion, rather than directly as conflict between people themselves. This also underlines relational work theory's assertion that interpersonal conflict is commonly caused by different perceptions of appropriateness, rather than through rude behavior. A further significant trend is how to use silence as a communication tool. When Ben sends his "Late Night Email", silence serves as ambiguous politeness to Jules but not Ben. This research serves to high-light the growing importance of digital pragmatics in contemporary settings, where a lack of response can have unforeseeable results for future generations.

Moreover, problematic communication constitutes a step to growth rather than a permanent barrier in the film. Pragmatic ability allows for change and adapts easily: exemplifying this, many misunderstandings prove at the end not to be so once clarification or adjustment has been made. This portrayal agrees with current pragmatics in spirit, which sees the essence of the matter as being interpersonal and environmental. Crucially, "The Intern" of 2015 cross-generational pragmatic failure is honored in the contemporary workplace as a normal feature of variation rather than a shortcoming. This representation suggests that understanding differences between generations should turn mistakes into opportunities for enhanced understanding and relationships. The communication problems reported in actual organizations studies are in many respects similar to the pragmatic failures illustrated in "The Intern" of 2015. According to research on multigenerational workplace culture, misunderstandings often arise from different interpretations of how to be professional, showing respect and responding - rather than being plainly confrontational (Holmes, 2005; Taguchi, 2011). The scenario serves as a mirror to reflect upon comparable dynamics in our own professional environments by using cases of friction that have already occurred in well-known work-related events. This highlights the importance of pragmatic awareness in achieving harmony among generations in the workplace and adds weight to the practical importance of the findings.

This study, in its rethinking of pragmatic failure, makes one of its most important theoretical contributions. Yet pragmatic failure, as understood by traditional pragmatic models especially those which have been influenced by Thomas (1983), somehow tells the speaker s. The study's findings indicate that such models are no longer able to

account for the way people of different generations now interact in modern workplaces, although they can still be used to distinguish various kinds of failure. In the scenes checked, correspondents of different generations transmit messages within a framework that shows appropriate pragmatics. So although the young characters display pragmatic competence in a way that is informal, immediate and relations-orientated, the older figures put on a demeanor of face. Though senior cadres are indirect and courteous because they are mindful of face concerns in their behavior. Failure is a matter arising from the much different slanting that each side brings to bear on statements and actions. The Executive Committee (who were all tenured full professors) suggested in their comments that the much older original paper draft ought to be deemed appropriate for publication somewhere else, while the Executive Editor (also a member of the Committee) found it unsuitable. Rather than something lacking in one side or the other, it is an alignment conflict that gives rise to pragmatic failure. This supports the relational theoretical stance, especially Work Theory's which argues that it is the outcome of social interaction whether or not divergences in expected norms are taken as signs of politeness.

Such results indicate that generational identity is a pragmatic frame for the construction and decoding of communicative behavior. And although not cultures in the traditional sense, generations do have the kind of experiences social norms, job rankings, education and technological change which are common to groups of people. It is expectations about what constitutes proper behavior in communication that become relatively fixed because these experiences are shared by all. In "The Intern" of 2015, also, the older characters all tend to be formal, indirect and non-pushing (This kind of effacing attitude-this civil conservation), which reflects workplace standards that take practice of respecting levels and professional boundaries. By contrast, however, younger characters frequently mix both sides of formality and informality because they are functioning within a communicative paradigm that values efficiency, accessibility and team work. Moreover, these generational standards are seldom spoken aloud. Characters act as if their expectations of communication were shared in common, and when they are not, pragmatic vulnerability results. This implied dimension is important: pragmatic failure results not just from difference but unrecognized differences. Such misunderstandings are more easily made in an environment where production and speed are more highly valued than thoughtful communication, i.e. work settings. The findings in this study also add to the understanding of how members from different generations use and evaluate politeness strategies. The findings that face concerns are not always placed first notwithstanding, Brown and Levinson (1987) valuable model of Politeness Theory is a useful template for studying how participants cater for face desires.

Older characters tend to accentuate the negative as a means of avoiding imposition and preserving autonomy. In contrast, younger characters make more frequent use of positive politeness strategies that emphasize solidarity, camaraderie, and friendliness. Neither is this inherently superior; they are just different conceptions of professionalism. When these differing face orientations meet, there is a break in communication. Although greeting language meant tone of courtesy could be interpreted as excessive casualness, language intended to signal consideration could be interpreted as emotional distance. These misunderstandings illustrate a construction of professional identity that is pragmatic and interactionally contested. Therefore the generational person. The most intriguing result of the study is how modern digital language aggravates communicative failure through generations. The Late Night Email

sequence serves as a parable of how expectations about availability, attention and good manners are transformed by mediation. Fast reflexes are a good indication of dedication and professionalism in younger characters. In the silence, it's often times assumed that you either do not approve or are disinterested. Older folks might use this as a polite signal, particularly after work, for "I'm not going to push into your space and ain't gonna say much at all". This finding serves to complicate the application of Grice's maxims in traditional terms. Although this may at first view appear to be a breach of the Maxim of Quantity, silence need not necessarily be regarded as uncooperative by all interlocutors. Instead, its meaning is anchored in generational practices of digital communication. In this sense, the research also suggests where pragmatic principles, and esp away from situationally rich natural environments as in digitally dense domains such as the one under analysis here, simply cannot but be seen as socially mediated (and indeed historically situated).

Conclusion

Cross-generational pragmatic failure in "The Intern" of 2015, the results of this study indicate, is a relational and context-bound issue that comes from distinct yet equally valid styles of communication. The research extends our understanding by revealing how generational identity colors pragmatic construing in contemporary organizations. Ultimately the findings demonstrate that language alone does not guarantee effective communication in intergenerational contexts. It requires introspection, pragmatism and a willingness to dirty one's hands. Based on this study, pragmatics competence is an ongoing process which is sensitive to societal change, technological development and human interaction rather than a fixed trait.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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